

Introducing a Buddhist Shrine

Overview: this sheet provides information about what is on a Buddhist shrine, the purpose of Buddhist shrines, the meaning of the different symbols and how to build a shrine. It includes questions for reflection and further classroom activities.

Introduction. A Buddhist shrine provides a focal point for Buddhists when they are meditating, practising puja (worship) and for gatherings of Buddhists studying together. Shrines can vary from a small, simple shrine in the home or garden of a Buddhist, through to the large, ornate shrines or temples found across the globe.

Buddhist shrines in varying traditions and different cultures vary a little, although most shrines will consist of a Buddha figure (a 'rupa'), fresh flowers and incense. Some Buddhist traditions have very very simple shrine rooms, with mats for sitting and a very simple Buddha figure. Other shrine rooms will be very ornately decorated, with 'thangkas' (richly embroidered wall hangings), 'rupas' (Buddhist statues) and shrines filled with candles and the air full of incense fragrance.

A shrine is likely to include the following:

- A shrine cloth
- A Buddha figure (or 'rupa')
- Seven traditional brass offering bowls
- A candle(s)
- Incense and an incense holder
- The shrine may include a 'thangka' of a particular Buddha or bodhisattva

A 'Green Tara' shrine



A step by step guide to building a Buddhist shrine...

1. Find a stable **table** and place it where you want to build your shrine, preferably against a wall or board with blue tack or a hook for hanging the thangka.
2. Arrange the **shrine cloth** on the table, or use an alternative cloth of your choice.
3. Choose which **thangka** to use and hang that on the hook or blue tack it to the wall from the cord.
4. Choose which Buddha **rupa** you wish to use and place that centrally on the table.
5. Arrange the seven traditional **offering bowls** in an arc shape around the rupa.
6. Place the **candle** near the rupa (please don't ask your teacher to light it until you've finished arranging your shrine).
7. Place your **flowers in a vase** on the shrine, not too close to the candle flame.
8. Put a stick of **incense in the incense holder** or bowl of rice, making sure it's held in place. Place it on the shrine
9. If you wish, you may also place any or all of the **ritual objects** (vajra, vajra bell and mala beads) on the shrine. Or sometimes Buddhist books are placed on the shrine.
10. Your shrine is now built! Please ask your teacher to light the candle and incense.



Photo on the left: a shrine with the earth-touching Buddha, 'Akshobhya'

What do the objects on the shrine mean?

The rupa - A Buddha figure reminds us of the Buddha's enlightenment. The backdrop to the rupa, the '**thangka**', is a beautiful painting of a Buddha or bodhisattva figure, which again reminds us of the Buddha's enlightenment. Painting the thangka can be an act of devotion for the artist

Candles - represents the light of understanding which Buddhist teachings can provide in helping us to understand life

Flowers - As well as adding beauty, flowers remind us of the truth of impermanence; everything (including ourselves), being in a process of constant change

Incense - the fragrance of a well lived and skilful life

7 traditional offerings (in little brass bowls): water for washing, water to drinking, food hard and soft, clean clothes (piece of cloth), flowers, candle and incense



A string of mala beads, a vajra bell and a vajra

Ritual objects

- **The Vajra** is sometimes called 'the diamond thunderbolt' and it destroys all kinds of ignorance in the world and is itself indestructible.
- **The Vajra Bell** is topped by a vajra and on the shoulder of the bell are eight lotus flower petals with syllables on them; the lotus leaves represent Bodhisattvas (beings who wish to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient life). The bell can be rung to remind us of our purpose and is used to mark the beginning, end and stages within meditation.
- **The Mala beads** are used to focus ones' mind on the recitation of mantras and to count how many time one has chanted a particular mantra during practice. Mantras are sacred words or syllables chanted during Buddhist meditation or worship, for example "om mani padme hum", the mantra of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion.

The reason for shrines and the three traditional offerings



Buddhists from all over the world build shrines for the following reasons: to show their appreciation of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, to remind themselves of the teachings of Buddhism and their own practise of Buddhism. A shrine is also a beautiful focal point when practising meditation, either alone or collectively in a shrine room.

Making offerings to the shrine can be an important part of Buddhist practice, perhaps during a traditional puja (a period of collective Buddhist practice which involves chanting mantras and verses, making offerings to the shrine and readings). Buddhist often make three traditional offerings to the shrine, offering: a candle, flowers and incense, each one having a particular meaning as described above.

Activities and reflections

Think about the following...

- notice which symbols and aspects of the shrine you are most drawn to and why. Find out what other people in your class think
- how does it feel to sit quietly by the shrine? How do you feel in your body, what do you notice about your thoughts and feelings?
- why do you think Buddhist from different traditions have different sorts of shrines and shrines rooms? E.g. plain and simple through to ornate and richly coloured.
- find out more about the particular symbolism of one of the parts of the shrine e.g. why there are so many different Buddha rupas or thangkas with different Buddhas on them
- imagine building a shrine to express your own spiritual or religious feelings. What would you choose to include and why?
- The Buddha figures Akshobya and Green Tara are mentioned in the text. What else can you find out about these Buddhist figures?

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