

Week 1 – Ritual: what why & how

Buddhism Level 2 – Buddhist Ritual

Saluting the shrine	
Becoming attuned to our presence in front of a shrine, & orientating to our ideals	
Namo Buddhaya	<i>Homage to the Buddha</i>
Namo Dharmaya	<i>Homage to the Dharma</i>
Namo Sanghaya	<i>Homage to the Sangha</i>
Namo Nama	
Om Ah Hum	

SOME ATTITUDES TO RITUAL (AND THIS MODULE)

Relaxed receptivity – less active “self-efforting” than previous modules (but not passive)

Just try it & see: approach it with open, relaxed heart/mind.

Don’t do anything you’d feel very comfortable doing; but perhaps be willing to undergo something a bit uncomfortable, or edgy - see what it’s about!

Don’t feel you must “get it”: if you don’t, you can concentrate on other practices.

WHAT IS RITUAL?

Different ways of looking at it:

- Symbolic action – ie. Not utilitarian, pointing to something deeper.
- Play action – cf. Childrens’ play, rehearsing in a light way for a world beyond our current knowledge.
- Significant action, performed with mindfulness: need to bring mindfulness to stay in touch with deeper significance – or symbolism - of the action.
- Contemplation of Buddha –holding him in mind, letting his influence perfume our mind; helps cultivate faith.
- Erich Fromm: “Shared action, expressive of common strivings, rooted in common values”: brings out communal aspect – can have strong experience of Sangha through ritual.

Rituals we know

Maybe ritual – as “symbolic action” – is already familiar to us.

Eg. Baptism, Weddings, Funerals; shaking hands, greeting kisses, waving goodbye; putting up Christmas decorations & giving presents.

WHY RITUAL?

We all know how easy it is to do what we know we oughtn’t, and not to do what we know we ought. Head-knowing what we ought/oughtn’t to do isn’t enough on its own:

If we want to put into practice what we know to be right, we have to enlist the cooperation of the emotions. This is the central problem for most people of the spiritual life: to find emotional equivalents for our intellectual understanding.

Sangharaksbitra, Right Resolve lecture 048.

Like an iceberg, the “I” that we identify with is usually just a small, conscious, rational part of our total being.

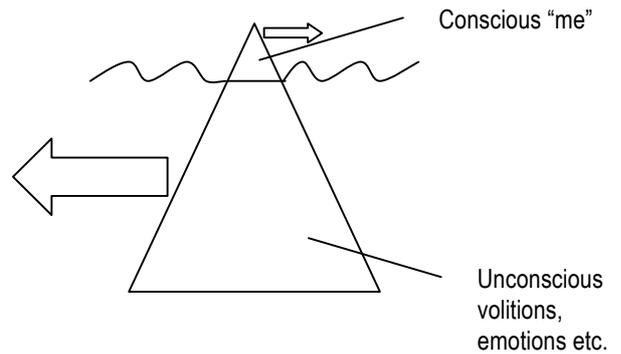
Symbolism taps into the part below the “waterline” – lets us talk to deeper parts of ourselves.

To connect to these deeper parts, we need to express them, give them an opportunity for externalisation to self & others.

Ritual – as symbolic action – appeals to the threefold division of self in terms of body, speech & mind, not just mind. We can bring whole of ourselves to it (except, sometimes, the rational side!)

Maybe we believe this or not. But it’s fine to do puja just because you enjoy it: you like the “smells & bells”, making offerings, being with others in that way; or just because you want to give it a go.

Probably the only poor reason to do puja is avoid incurring the disapproval of others!



HOW TO DO RITUAL

Some ingredients:

- People – be aware of each other – in harmony with each other.
- The ritual space & shrine – be sensitive to it.
- The aesthetic of the occasion: enjoy the beauty of the shrine, scent of the incense etc.
- Recitation text, action (eg offerings), mantra, visualisation.
- Staying present; don't have to make a tremendous effort otherwise, just stay in touch.

HOME PRACTICE

Look for one or more objects you can put on the shrine next week that symbolise your highest values, aspirations or goals. You could look for something to represent Buddha, Dharma & Sangha if that's meaningful. You don't have to explain it, and you can take it away afterwards. Bring it with you.

Perform a dedication ceremony at home where you meditate, to consecrate the space.

FURTHER READING

The Psychology of Buddhist Ritual, Sangharakshita, in Ritual & Devotion or CD036.