



*Myohoji Temple*

## *Did You Know? #4*

### **The Altar of Myohoji Temple**

There are many components to the Altar (Japan. *Naijin*) of Enichizan Myohoji Temple. Each component has a special significance, manifesting the profound principles of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism.

#### **The Main Altar**

At the top level is the main cabinet housing the Temple *Joju* Gohonzon. It is called the *Ozushi*. As an extra adornment to the altar, in some temples, including Myohoji, the *Ozushi* sits on a matching elevated platform with gates around it. This platform is called the *shumidan*. Inside the *Ozushi* cabinet, directly in front of the base of the Gohonzon is a gold box. This box, called the sutra box (Japan. *kyobako*) contains the “Threefold Lotus Sutra” (“The Sutra of Infinite Meaning,” “The Lotus Sutra,” and the “Fugen Sutra”).

In front of the *Ozushi* is the six-cup offering tray. Individual believers offer a single cup of water to the Gohonzon every day before morning Gongyo. On the temple altar, a six-cup offering tray is used instead. The two middle cups each contain fresh water with the top piece of a shikimi evergreen leaf in them. The two cups to the outside of the middle cups each contain powdered incense and the middle section of a cut shikimi leaf. The two outer cups each contain a three leaf piece of shikimi. Each of these offerings in the six-cup tray has a significance relating to the doctrines of True Buddhism, such as the Three Enlightened Properties of the Buddha’s life, the Middle Way (Japn. *chudo*), the Buddha’s Wisdom, etc. The six-cup tray is offered to the Gohonzon each day before morning Gongyo, and is removed before evening Gongyo.

On the top level, at each side of the *Ozushi* is a large lantern. There are two additional lanterns, one on each side of the main offering table. These traditionally symbolize the principle of illuminating the path to the Buddha. The top level also has a shikimi evergreen vase on each side. The evergreens signify the Buddha’s Property of Compassionate Action.

On the second level is the burner for stick incense and the trays for food offered by the believers. It is also where the Gokuyo is placed when the priest offers it to the Gohonzon. During special ceremonies in which powdered incense is offered to the Gohonzon, the portable powdered incense burner is also placed on this second level.

The main offering table holds the traditional offerings of candles, the ceremonial incense burner and golden lotus flowers. The candles signify the Property of Wisdom of the Buddha, and the Lotus Flowers signify cause and effect and the Property of Compassionate Action of the Buddha. The incense burner signifies the Property of the Law of the life of the Buddha.

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In front of the main offering table is a smaller table located directly in front of the priest's chair. On this table is another sutra box containing the "Threefold Lotus Sutra." In some temples, a silk cloth is placed on top of this sutra box. To the left of the priest's chair is the Memorial Book stand with the temple's Memorial Book. To the right of the Priest's chair is the golden gong. This gong can only be rung by the High Priest, or his appointed representative, the Chief Priest of the local Temple. The assistant priest may only ring this golden gong when he is designated to conduct a ceremony in place of the Chief Priest. The Chief Priest's seat, which may be a chair or a kneeling platform is called the "Seat of the Master."

To the left of the Priest's Chair and Memorial Book stand, is a large bowl style bell and a small desk. This is the table and bell used by the assistant priest or visiting priest. To the far left of the assistant priest's table is the taiko drum.

To the far right of the Priest's Chair, next to the lantern is the large, free standing *jo-koro* incense burner. Underneath the top grate is a large, square tray on which incense is burned end to end. The *jo-koro* is used on certain occasions, when incense is offered to the Gohonzon for many hours at a time.

### **The Memorial Altar**

To the far right of the main altar is the Memorial Altar. The back section of the Memorial Altar contains slots for Toba tablets. The smaller slots on the far right are for Toba offerings for deceased pets. In front of the Toba slots stands a permanent memorial tablet called the *Ihai*. In front of the *Ihai* is the water cup. One level down are the evergreen vase and candle. Finally, on the bottom level of the altar is the powdered incense burner.

### **The Canopy and Banners**

Hanging from the ceiling above the "Seat of the Master" is the golden canopy (Japan. *Tengai*). This canopy gives shade to the Buddha when He preaches the Law. The dragons symbolically protect those who practice the Lotus Sutra. The golden streamers coming down from the top are shaped like ancient musical instruments, symbolizing the manifestation of beautiful sounds when the True Law is preached. The streamers also symbolize the bountiful benefits that rain down when the True Law is preached.

To the right and left of the canopy are the two hanging golden banners (Japan. *Doban*). They are shaped like a ray of sunlight to symbolize heavenly rays of light beaming down and illuminating the land when the True Law is preached by the Buddha, transforming the *saha* world into the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light. An inscription by the High Priest is on the top panels of the banners. The center panels are inscribed with the Daimoku. On the side panels are passages from the *Jigage* section of the *Juryo* Chapter of the Lotus Sutra such as "This, my land remains safe and unharmed," and "The people there are happy and at ease." The dragons and golden streamers have the same meaning as the ones on the center canopy.

Bearing in mind the profound significance of the Altar at Myohoji Temple, let us practice with deep gratitude to the Three Treasures of True Buddhism.