

Question: What is the meaning of serving?

Serving means to prepare meals and do errands, always standing by for someone. For our daily practice, this signifies making offerings to the Gohonzon, such as serving fruit or sweets and cleaning the Butsudan. We call this “serving the Gohonzon.” Nikko Shonin and Nichimoku Shonin never left the Daishonin, no matter how difficult their circumstances became. Everyday, they learned important doctrines from their master. They came to learn true Buddhism not only intellectually, but also with their bodies. This is called “*jozui kyuji*.” We must learn from their examples. When you serve the Gohonzon at home, it is exactly the same as serving the Daishonin. Therefore, it is important always to serve sincerely. We offer candles, incense, and evergreens to the Gohonzon. In many sutras, it is written that the benefit we receive from making offerings to the Buddha is tremendous. We truly are fortunate, because we are able to make offerings and serve the Gohonzon every day when we do Gongyo and chant Daimoku.

The Butsudan (Altar)

The Butsudan is where the Buddha (the Gohonzon) resides. Therefore, we should never put any personal decorations around it, such as pictures. We also should not put pictures of the deceased on the altar. Let’s clean the Butsudan every day.

Offerings

The water we offer to the Gohonzon is called *aka*. This is an old Sanskrit word, and it means “benefit water.” In India where Shakyamuni Buddha was born, water was an extremely precious commodity. Humans and animals are not able to live without water. Therefore, we offer this precious water, which keeps us alive, to the Buddha.

In his writing, *On Formalities (Kegi-sho)*, the Ninth High Priest Nichiu Shonin states, “Tea should not be offered.” Therefore, we place only pure water on the altar. Every morning, we offer water to the Gohonzon in a water-offering cup before morning Gongyo. The water remains on the altar during the day, and then we remove it before evening Gongyo.

Those who eat rice may offer it to the Gohonzon. This is called *Buppan* (the Buddha’s rice). Do not place uncooked rice on the altar. This, unlike water, should not be left all day. After the rice is cooked, the first portion should be offered to the Gohonzon. When offering the rice, observe this silent prayer:

I offer deepest gratitude to the three treasures of the Buddhism of sowing.
Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo. (*Namu geshu sampo goho on shatoku Gokuyo no tame. Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo.*)

Ring the bell three times and chant Daimoku three times. Ringing the bell three times signifies appreciation for the three treasures. Then, remove the rice from the altar. The rice may then be eaten.

Other offerings to the Gohonzon include items such as wine or sake, cakes, candy, fruits, and vegetables. We do not offer any fish or meat, and we avoid offering foods with a strong odor, such as garlic, ginger, and onions.

The Memorial Book (*Kakocho*)

In some Japanese Buddhist sects, followers may place ashes or memorial tablets on their altars. But this is not done in Nichiren Shoshu. The ashes of the deceased may be brought to the temple when the priest conducts the Memorial Service. Believers may request a memorial book (Jpn. *Kakocho*) from their local temple, which is placed at the left side of the altar. The priest will inscribe the names of our deceased family members in our memorial book. Every morning and evening during Gongyo, we offer prayers for the deceased while reading the names that have been inscribed for that particular day of the month. The memorial book also contains the dates of the passing of each of the successive High Priests. If you do not have a memorial book, please submit a request at your local temple.

Our faith and practice to the Gohonzon and our sincerity will be reflected by how we serve the Gohonzon. Therefore, we should always serve the Gohonzon wholeheartedly.