

Question 29: What is the purpose of offering flowers, water and food on a Buddhist shrine?

Answer: The usual explanation regarding flowers is that they remind us of impermanence – the flower withers away, symbolizing the demise and cessation of everything, including our bodies, and encourages us to be unattached. But there is also another reason for offering flowers. Their color, fragrance, symmetry, freshness, and delicate and soft appearance are very appealing and give peace and joy to all who look at them. They represent the heart opening to love. Of course, that is why they are given to comfort the bereaved, to express love at weddings, and to cheer up those who are hospitalized. But in the spiritual context, the flower generates a reaction of innocent spontaneous joy, elevating the mind to a peaceful, contented state which is conducive to meditation and dharmic thoughts. The flower symbolizes the beauty and joy of enlightenment. Temples attract not only humans, but also beings in the unseen subtle world such as devas and nagas, to feel the temple's tranquility and spiritual vibration. Even some yakshas, bhutas, and pretas (ghosts) come to temples to get peace of mind and merit. Fresh flowers help to create the serene, joyful atmosphere that all of these beings seek. Silk or other man-made flowers are not quite as effective, but may be used in addition to fresh flowers. In Tibetan Buddhism, flowers also represent the practice of generosity.

Water is offered as a symbol of a pure, clear mind, without any substance. Water purifies the shrine area. It also symbolizes cleaning, washing impurity away, soothing and cooling. Water on the shrine should always be fresh. If it is in a cup, it should be covered with a clean cloth.

Offering fruit on the shrine is that it symbolizes abundance, satisfaction, absence of craving, health, and therefore a calm mind, samadhi. It represents the "fruit" or result of dharma practice. It is generally eaten later by the Sangha (monks and nuns) or given to temple visitors.

The food offered in small bowls on a plate on the shrine is called the "Buddha Puja." It is offered to represent giving the first and best to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and helps to eliminate greed. However, it is not actually received by the Buddha, who has passed into Nirvana. Nor is it eaten by the Sangha. Instead, it is either placed outside to be enjoyed by animals, birds and insects, or it is shared by the congregation as "Prasad" (blessed food) similar to the Hindu tradition.

In addition, the subtle essence of the food offerings satisfies the craving of spirits who are seeking merit and satisfaction. They may partake of the essence of the food after it is removed from the shrine, if they are not pure enough to receive it at the shrine. At some temples, there is a special area for making offerings to the departed spirits.

When making offerings of flowers or food at a Theravada Buddhist shrine, the offering is carried to all people present so they can gently touch it to represent that everyone is making the offering, which prevents an egoistic feeling of "my" offering and indicates that everyone makes the offering and shares the merit.