

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OFFERINGS

By The Right Rev. S. Okano

The candle offering has a profound meaning in our daily worship. The light from the candle dispels the darkness of night. Darkness symbolizes evil and death, but it is the single ray of light that instantly transforms darkness into light. Several years ago, a mine disaster occurred, and many men who were given up for dead were dug out from the mine pit and saved. The thing that saved them was the light from a single lantern which gave them courage and hope and which dispelled fear and despair.

In Buddhism light is the symbol of wisdom, and darkness is the symbol of delusion. When light illuminates darkness, it means that wisdom which is the realization of truth eradicates delusion which confuses men, and creates agitations in their hearts.

The light of wisdom, however, is not a power which destroys or extinguishes darkness. A very subtle change occurs in which light embraces darkness to make darkness part of light itself. A Buddhist parable best explains this subtle transformation. A sutra relates the parable as follows:

“O Kasyapa, let us assume that here is a dark room containing the darkness of 100,000 years. This dark room has neither door nor window nor even a hole the size of a needle-head. In the past not even a single ray of light has ever entered this room. Let us assume that a candle is lit in this room. Will the darkness then argue, “I have been living in this room for 100,000 years; and I cannot simply leave it now!” But regardless of what darkness says, when the candle is lit, darkness will disappear. In the same way, the evil karma created during the span of 100,000 kalpas will disappear immediately when one believes in the words of the Buddha, practises his teachings, and perfects wisdom. No matter how deep the darkness of delusion, when the light of wisdom is lit, it cannot remain for even one instant.”

The important point is that this room does not have any hole, not even the size of a needle-head. Where then did the darkness accumulate for 100,000 years ago when the candle was lit? It could not have gone outside, because there is not outlet for escape. And yet the darkness has disappeared. How did this happen?

This, of course, does not mean that the darkness first disappeared and then the light came in, nor that the light chased the darkness out. The entire space of darkness was transformed into the entire space of light. That is, the essence of darkness is none other than the essence of light, or the substance of darkness

and of light is one and the same. In the same sense, when the delusion within us becomes illuminated by the light of Buddha's wisdom, then delusion itself is transformed into enlightenment, and this being of delusion becomes the being of Buddhahood.

Buddhism teaches that delusion is transformed into enlightenment and that the goal of bodhisattva practice is to effect this transformation in all beings. The **Avatamsaka Sutra** states:

‘The light of enlightenment realized by the bodhisattva is like the candle in the darkness. It enters the darkness of delusion in the hearts of sentient beings, dissolves all the evil karmas accumulated for billions and billions of years, and produces the illumination of all-knowing wisdom,’

When we are illuminated by the light of wisdom, all of our blindness, ignorance and delusion become transformed into the contents of enlightenment. Another Buddhist sutra states:

‘Wherever the light of King Sumeru illuminates, all things are turned into one golden colour, so likewise the light of wisdom illuminates all delusions and transforms them into a single colour. That colour is the colour of truth of the Buddha.’

In other words, this final realization is the “true nature of reality” taught in the **Lotus Sutra**, and it is the idea of the “union of defilement and enlightenment” which forms the basis of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy.

Thus, the candle light, likened to wisdom, illuminates the delusion in man and transforms delusion into enlightenment itself. The candle light we offer to the Buddha is the vow to transform delusion into wisdom and to light the candle of truth in the hearts of all beings.

The story of the single lamp offered to Sakyamuni Buddha by a destitute, old woman is well known to all Buddhists. Once when the king of a certain principality invited the Buddha to his city, he offered countless lanterns to light his way into the city. An old woman also wished to donate one lantern, so she searched all over the city to buy an inexpensive lantern with the small savings she had. When she made the offering of a single lamp, she made a vow: “By virtue of this humble offering, may I realise wisdom and may the delusion in all beings be dissolved.”

When the night had passed, all the lanterns, except one, had died out. The single lamp offered by the poor, old woman continued to glow. It would not go out, even when Moggallana, the Buddha's disciple tried to extinguish it. The Buddha, looking at the lamp, said: ‘This lamp glows by virtue of all the Buddhas; the light will never die, no matter how much you try to extinguish it.’

The candle light we offer to the family shrine (or at the Vihara – **Ed.**) must be offered with the same spirit as this old woman. The light is the light of wisdom, the light of truth (this is the meaning of **Dhammapadipa** – **Ed.**), the light which dissolves the darkness of delusion in man. When illuminated by this light, man realizes truth and happiness.

When we light the candle, we light it with our hands. Symbolically, this means that we light the candle of truth in our own hearts, then we proceed to transfer this light to as many people as possible.

(The Buddhist Path)

