

Water bowl offering

To make the water bowl offering, begin by wiping each bowl with a clean cloth, imagining you are cleaning the defilements from the minds of sentient beings as you do so. After cleaning the bowls, place them upside down on the altar; just as we wouldn't invite a guest to our home and offer them nothing, we don't place empty bowls upright on the altar. Next, fill the first bowl with some water. Then pour most of the water into the second bowl but leave a little in the bottom of the first bowl. Place the first bowl on the altar. Then pour most of the water from the second bowl into the third, leaving a little water in the bottom of the second bowl, and place the second bowl to the right of the first one, near it, but not touching it—the distance of about a rice grain. Proceed to fill the rest of the bowls in this way, leaving a little water in each bowl as you fill the next one in sequence. Then go back to the first bowl and fill it nearly to the top, but not to overflow—about a rice grain's distance from the top. Fill the other bowls in the same way. Recite om ah hum, the mantra representing the Buddha's body, speech, and mind, to consecrate the offerings. You may also want to recite the long offering mantra:

*om namo bhagavate bendzay sarwaparma dana
tathagataya arhate samyaksam buddhaya tayata
om bendzay bendzay maha bendzay maha taydza
bendzay maha bidya bendzay maha bodhicitta
bendzay maha bodhi mendo pasam kramana
bendzay sarwa karma awarana bisho dana bendzay soha*

While filling the bowls, imagine that you are offering huge jeweled bowls filled with blissful wisdom nectar to all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Your offerings are luminous and fill the entire sky. The holy beings receive them and experience great bliss, as do you.

Offer water that has eight qualities, each one representing a quality that you will develop in the future as a result of offering the water with a good motivation now:

1. Your ethics will be pure because the water you offer is cool.
2. Because the water is delicious, you will come to enjoy delicious food.
3. The lightness of the water indicates that your mind and body will become fit.
4. The water's softness results in a gentle mindstream.
5. A clear mind results from the water's clearness.
6. Its being free from a bad smell will purify your karmic obscurations.
7. Because the water does not hurt the stomach, your body will be free of illness.
8. Its being easy on the throat indicates you will come to have pleasant speech.

You may want to offer bowls with the eight offerings that hosts made to their guests in ancient India. In this case, the bowls are arranged from left to right as you look at the altar, with the following offerings: water for drinking, water for washing the feet, flowers, incense, light, perfume, food, and music.

Many of these offerings have symbolic meanings. Flowers represent the qualities of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas; incense signifies the fragrance of pure ethics. Light symbolizes wisdom, and perfume represents faith and confidence in the holy beings. Offering food represents the nourishment of meditative concentration, and music reminds us of impermanence and the empty nature of all phenomena.

Instead of offering water bowls or the eight offerings, you may choose simply to place a plate with fruit or other delicious food on the altar. When you do so, offer fresh food, not leftovers. Imagine that the entire sky is filled with delicious food that satisfies the hunger and thirst of sentient beings as well as brings bliss to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Recite om ah hum or the long offering mantra as above.

You may offer electric lights; candles are not necessary. Be sensitive to others in the environment if you burn incense because some people may have allergic reactions. In this case, place the incense in a container outside to burn.

As you offer, you may also meditate on emptiness, the ultimate nature of all persons and phenomena, by contemplating:

1. You, as the one making the offering, are empty of true existence.
2. The act of offering is empty of true existence.
3. The offerings themselves are empty of true existence.
4. The Buddhas and bodhisattvas to whom you offer are empty of true existence.
5. The positive potential created by offering is empty of true existence.

Remove the seven water bowls in the evening. To empty them, start with the bowl on the right and pour it into a container. Then empty the next bowl on the right and so on until they are all emptied and placed upside down. If the bowls can air dry without staining, simply place them upside down on the shrine.

Otherwise, dry them with a clean cloth, imagining that you are eliminating sentient beings' sufferings and their causes. The water can be used to water plants, or it can be poured outside in a clean area, where people do not walk.