

INCENSE

Our mind and behavior are often controlled by the five senses, which are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. When we see beautiful flowers or when we hear well harmonized music, we feel good and happy. On the contrary, when we see ugly stuff or when we taste spoiled food, we become uncomfortable. Today I would like to talk about incense relating to our sense of smell.

It is said that Japanese people like to take the most baths in the world. Even in the summer, they like to soak in extremely hot water instead of taking showers. This is so that they can remove the stress of the day, sweat out the impurities and feel refreshed before going to sleep. If you do not smell clean, other people will feel discomfort. In some countries where there are not enough fresh water to take baths or in countries where it is hot, there is a problem with body odor. Some use perfume and incense to mask the smell but after awhile I am sure everyone gets used to the awful smell. Even in some European countries, they traditionally do not take baths and it is uncomfortable sitting next to them with such bad odor.

Taking a bath is only a recent phenomenon. Back in the Roman times, the citizens were able to visit public baths and enjoy a relaxing day of cleansing and refreshing in a sauna. By the medieval period this custom was

abandoned and no one bathed, except maybe once or twice a year. They used perfume and incense to mask their smell. Later when linen was available to be used as clothing, it was easier to clean and this was thought to have kept the body clean as well. It was not until the 19th century when the bathing ritual was brought back. Someone figured out the health benefits of being clean and by removing the grime; we remove the germs that cause illness. Still, baths were only taken once a week and the tub full of hot water was shared by all. It was great for the first person, usually the man of the house, but by the end, the dirty water was for the kids and babies. Still not healthy. It was not until the 20th century when indoor plumbing was made available that everyone could bath in clean water and also find a way to dispose the dirty water. Back in the day, someone had to dump the dirty water from the tub, usually outside, very manual labor intensive. We are fortunate to have such luxuries such as plumbing and being able to take baths.

In Japan, incense was used as a type of perfume and air freshener. Many people kept a small pouch filled with incense and rubbed that on their skin or burned incense when they welcomed guests into their homes.

So why do Buddhists use incense both in powder form and stick to burn? India, where Buddhism arose, is a very hot country. The people perspire a lot. So they use incense to mask the smell and produce good

fragrances. This was the same at the time of Buddha Sakyamuni. Whenever he preached, incense was burned. This equated to purification of body and mind. It symbolized the welcoming of the Buddha, the many bodhisattvas and deities to the place of learning.

Nowadays, to burn incense is to prove yourself as Buddhists, to believe in the Buddha's teaching and to practice the teachings. So when you offer incense, you are stating your belief in the Buddha's teachings and that you are creating an atmosphere conducive to meditation, where the mind can be calm.

The odor of the good incense will not only purify yourself but also others in the room. So please offer good incense to produce a good odor. Incense offering is for the sense of smell, beautiful flowers and a nice altar are for the sense of sight, harmonized chanting is for the sense of sound, and offering of fruits and other foods is the sense of taste.

In your daily life, too, please strive to see beautiful things, to listen to beautiful music, to smell good fragrances, to eat good food (not candy or sweets) and to communicate well with other people.