



MIDDLE WAY
EDUCATION

Sacred Spaces at School and Home

In order to create a bridge between what happens at school and at home, we encourage families to develop a sacred space in or around the home. These sacred spaces do not have to be Buddhist. Rather, think about what is preeminently important to you. The Earth? Family? Creativity? Create an area that pays homage to that thing. Eventually we hope that students will cultivate a habit of identifying sacred spaces wherever they go, and that these shrines and altars will become reminders of their connection to the awesomeness all around.

Some Suggestions



- Create a boundary for your space. If it's a little table, shelf, or altar, leave it free of random objects like your keys, the mail, yesterday's toast, etc. Keep it free of dust or debris. An altar is not a place to put your collectibles, but a place to recollect ourselves.
- Your space can be outdoors or it can be an entire room. Use bits of nature to delineate your outdoor boundary. Experiment with asking the objects for permission to use them. If it's a room, try to limit the use of that room to whatever practice you do. Arrange items with a sense of deliberateness and purpose. Experiment with symmetry and order. Use fresh flowers or plants to enliven the area.
- Place pictures of teachers and spiritual guides you would like to honor, remembering their kindness is another doorway to sacred wisdom and compassion. You can also put photos of loved ones, mentors, idols, or inspiring places. Whatever makes your heartstrings sing.
- Make daily offerings. Traditionally, candles and incense are offered but even a simple offering of a bow will do. Ask your children what they would like to offer and allow for their non-traditional, heartfelt offering to make it more personal. See what it is like to place things in the same place, in the same way, day to day. Consistency and repetition allow us to turn inward. Offering bowls of water can be a profound practice. Offer in the morning, empty in the evening in a clean place, like a part of the yard that isn't walked on or in a plant. You can think: I aspire to offer a clear heart and mind.
- Consider offering the first portion of your lunch or dinner on a small plate or bowl.
- Whenever possible, spend a moment consciously recognizing the inspiration it gives you, and engage your children in the creation and reverence for it.
- The design of and interaction with your sacred space should be personally evocative of your truest aspirations and inspire recollection.

Contemplations on Sacred Spaces

By Karma and Noa

Everything is Sacred

At Middle Way, we seek to connect to the word “sacred” in a meaningful way, and to explore how it applies to our daily lives and the lives of our children.

Sacred can simply mean something that is worthy of awe and respect. From a certain point of view, the whole world is awesome, and therefore all things and situations are worthy of respect. We can also say that sacredness is a type of awareness, an immediate sense of presence, free of concepts. Ultimately there is no such thing as the sacred “over here” and the non-sacred “over there.” Sacredness is the natural and ever-present condition of things, but often this becomes obscured by our habitual ways of thinking.

The American poet and activist Wendell Berry writes, “There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places.” We all know desecration when we see it. But obvious desecration is the product and accumulation of many smaller acts of desecration, moments of forgetting that there is no separation between us and the world around us. The illusion of separation is at the root of desecration, and takes us out of connection and into the lonely world of our preconceptions. Living in a bubble, we no longer appreciate our interconnectedness with all things. The sacred is forgotten, and we are left with only the little bubble of our habits and projections. How disappointing!



Cultivating a Sense of Sacred

How do we begin to see through these habits and return to a sense of awe and interconnection? How do we cultivate a genuine respect for our surroundings? How can we step out of the stream of our speedy compulsive thinking and into the fresh and immediate space of the sacred?

We can start where we are. There is little to be gained by imposing a preconceived idea of sacredness onto our experience and our environment. Acting with empty religiosity or fetishizing “sacred moments” and “sacred spaces” is only going to create more habits and concepts. If we shed those expectations and accept the messy and chaotic inner and outer worlds we inhabit, we begin to re-enter sacred space.

From a Buddhist perspective, what obscures our awareness of ever-present sacredness is just our thoughts. Our concepts and the habits that form around them create the bubble of “me” and “my world,” and we hold on to this bubble because we are uneasy about what would happen if it popped. By stepping into a sacred space, we invite our bubble to pop. In return, we are rewarded with something far greater than a bubble, and something far more secure. We see things as they truly are without the noise of grasping and conceptualizing.

This return to sacredness can always happen on the spot, no matter how chaotic our mind may be. A single moment of awareness in the midst of the mess and hassles of daily life is all it takes to come back. The simple recognition of our mind and environment is enough to make them sacred, no matter how difficult it may be. In fact, the more chaotic things are, the more we have available to offer and release, and the more fully we can enter into sacred presence.

Setting a Boundary



There is no boundary for the sacred, it's always right here, but we often fail to notice it and end up feeling separate from it. One way to reconnect is through the technique of setting up an altar or shrine. It is a very useful artifice to establish a threshold and say “this space is special” and to create rituals and rules that apply to what happens within that space. A boundary can help remind children and adults to slow down, be present, and appreciate the beauty and stillness that come from being fully present.

Offerings

We can also make material offerings on the shrine. Although no one is receiving the things we offer, by placing things like flowers and water bowls on a shrine or altar, we can begin to work with our concepts and habits of grasping. By making offerings, we have a chance to wake up for a moment and offer our awakened mind. By arranging our shrine with precision and care, we recognize that the speed and unruly chaos of our daily life can be joyfully offered, opening the door to sacred presence.



Who are We Fooling?

And we also remember that we are not fooling anybody with all this sacredness, since there are no unsacred places. The dance between the sacred and the desecrated is nowhere but in our own mind. So when the cat knocks your offerings off the shelf, or the wet muddy dog runs tracks across your special shrine carpet, there is always room for a sense of humor.

Don't Be Shy!

If all this sounds foreign and complicated, remember that the sacred is not somewhere "out there," far away or way up above, it's all around you. You can ask yourself: "How do I use form, arrangement, beauty, space, and offerings to more intimately connect to the sacredness that is already here?" "What am I holding on to that I can offer into this sacred space, to enter it more fully?" Don't be shy!

Start where you are, but don't stop.