PUSHAPA-PŪJĀ, FLOWER OFFERING IN BUDDHISM

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In honor of Leonardo Olschki

"On the occasion of the Buddha’s birth, heaven and earth trembled and flowers rained from the skies" describes Lalitavistra (Taishō Shōwa Tripitaka, abbreviated henceforth as TST, v. 16, p. 493). It also mentions "Indra and the Four Deva Kings descended and bathed Him with perfumed water and sprinkled flowers over Him".

Such are very familiar scenes in the many stone carvings of Amaravati preserved in the Calcutta Museum and elsewhere in paintings.

Pushapa-pūjā, flower offerings, is but one of the numerous homages that His disciples paid honoring the Buddha whenever they appeared in His presence as we read in the Smaller Sukhāvatī-vyūha (TST, v. 12, p. 347a), "Heavenly beings, or devas, showered Him with heavenly flowers in token of esteem and gratitude".

Or, from a discourse from Mahāprajā-pāramita Śāstra (TST, v. 25, p. 123b):

Question: Why are flowers showered upon the Buddha?
Answer: To honor Him with homage in token of reverence and esteem.

After His enlightenment it became a custom for the faithful to circumambulate around Him three times and offer a garland of flowers before listening to His sermon (S.W. Nakamura, “Pradakshiṇā, a Buddhist Form of Obeisance”, Semitic and Oriental Studies, Vol. XI (1951), University of California, pp. 345-359).

The word pūjā, whose root, puj, means honoring the superior beings by gestures or particularly by the offering of material goods.

The flower offering, an adaptation of the Vedic customs and observances by the followers of the Buddha along with many other rituals into Buddhism, follows the usual religio-cultural pattern of Hindu civilization of the time. The homage such as that observed already in pre-Buddhistic times in India and paid in similar manner to Hindu deities
and kinds appears in a passage describing the offering of celestial flowers to Krishna. In the Bhagavad-Gita, Chap. IX, 32: *(Sacred Books of the East* V. 8, p. 85):

"Whoever with devotion offers me leaf, flower, fruit, water; that, presented with devotion, I accept from him whose self is pure".

From the Swayamvara of the Mahābhārata:

"Shouts of joy and loud applauses did the mighty feast declare, Heavenly blossoms soft-descended, Heavenly music thrilled the air."

(Romesh C. Dutt's translation, London 1898, p. 189).

Also from the Pativrata-mahātmya of the Mahābhārata:

"And she bowed to him in silence, sacred flowers beside him laid, And her hands she folded meekly, sweetly her obeisance made."

(p. 219).

After the Buddha entered Nirvāṇa, offerings were made to His relics with zeal and devotion as if they were performed in His very presence with the belief that those who observed the oblations of incense and flowers purified their thoughts and received invisible rewards and did so for the accumulation of their own religious merits (I-Ching, Nanhai Chikuei Neifa-Ch'uan, TST, v. 54, p. 226b).

Frequently, offering of flowers to the Triratna-Buddha, dharma, and saṅgha—is made in order to receive protection enabling the ācārin to realize the dana-pāramita, the charity "perfection", the first of the six stages to the perfect enlightenment (Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra: TST, v. 25, p. 451a).

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, offerings added considerably to its permanent liturgy as it gradually was elaborated in many ways into a very complicated procedure. Numerous patterns of arrangement evolved based on different texts. Basically, the flower offering comes under the category of offerings known as satkāra-pūjā—offerings of reverence. This is known in Lamaism as bkur-hstir-byed-pa and in Japanese Buddhism as kukei kuyō and is essentially the offerings made to the Honored One who is to be rightly reverenced, venerated, and held sacred or revered with various formal acts of oblations by the offering of things which bring joy in the eyes of the Honored One. (Das'abhūmi-vibhushaṇa Śāstra: TST, v. 26, p. 306). All the offerings are made and received in the name of the Buddha. The participants in the ritual who wish to be purified of the triṇikarmāṇī—actions of body, speech, and mind—must reverently hold in their hands beautiful, fragrant flowers during the ceremony (Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra: TST, v. 25, pp. 276-77. Also cf. M. W. De Visser, *Ancient Buddhism in Japan*, Leiden 1935, p. 165).

The Esoteric School of Buddhism regards the flower as a symbol