This family’s devotion is reflected in the careful selection of ritual objects contained in and surrounding the altar.

Most traditional Bhutanese homes set aside an entire room for an altar and other ritual objects. Such rooms often include many of the ritual furnishings and decorations found in temples and monasteries. Photos by Walter Roder

As a parasol offers protection from the scorching sun, the Precious Umbrella (duk) offers symbolic protection from illness and negative forces.

Virtually all Bhutanese homes include space for a religious altar or shrine. In large farmhouses, an entire room is usually set aside for religious purposes. Even residents of smaller, contemporary apartments devote space to an altar.

Home altars often include niches where statues of Sakyamuni, Guru Rinpoche, and others may be placed, sometimes wrapped in white, silk scarves. The altar is usually colorfully painted and decorated with photographs, flowers, beads, rice, cakes, and other items of ritual or symbolic importance to the family. Small butter lamps are kept lit, and ritual offerings of water are refreshed daily. Such simple offerings symbolize purity and humility.

On occasion, monks are invited to home altars to celebrate special events in the life of the family. They also officiate at annual celebrations organized by many households.