



Preparing A Tibetan Altar

by Ven. ZaChoeje Rinpoche

Why have an altar? A proper altar holds images or representations of the Buddha's enlightened body, speech and mind which serve as reminders of the goal of Buddhist practice -- to develop these qualities in oneself so as to be able to fully benefit all sentient beings. The reason for setting up an altar is not for fame, for showing off wealth, or to increase pride, but rather it is to reduce one's mental afflictions and to seek the ability to help all sentient beings.

Where to Place the Altar

The best place for an altar is in a separate shrine room, but if you live in a small place and cannot set aside a separate room for worship, any room can be used. The size of the altar is not important, but it should be in a clean and respectful place, higher than the level of your head as you sit facing it. If it is in your bedroom, the altar should be placed near the head of your bed, never at the foot, and it should be higher than the bed. The altar should be either on a separate shelf or on a table set aside for this purpose that does not double as a coffee table or night stand.

The Objects and What They Represent

A proper Buddhist altar holds symbols of enlightened body, speech and mind, traditionally represented by displaying a statue or photo of Buddha Shakyamuni, a scripture, and a stupa. At the very least, the altar should hold an image of Buddha Shakyamuni, the founder and the source of the teachings in our time. The scripture representing the speech of the Buddha does not need to be written in Tibetan or Sanskrit, but can be in any language. The mind of the Buddha is traditionally represented by a stupa of enlightenment.

Making Offerings

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition it is customary to offer seven bowls of water, which represent the seven limbs of prayer and seven limbs of offering. Flowers, candles, and incense are also commonly offered. It is best to offer things that you already have or can obtain without difficulty. Don't think that you have to deceive others in order to get offering materials -- they should not come from stealing, cheating or hurting others in any way. Rather, they should be honestly obtained. In fact, it is better not to offer things that were obtained in even a slightly negative way. Think that by making these offerings all beings are purified of their negative edge and the ultimate nature of reality is satisfied.

Placing Offerings on the Altar

If you have the space, place the offerings a little lower than the objects of refuge on your altar. When you awaken in the morning, it is customary to wash at least your face before approaching the altar to offer prostration and then offerings-this is a sign of respect for the

object represented there. One is making offerings as if one is accepting a dignitary or a great being into one's home, and it is important to be gracious and respectful.

To offer water on your altar, you should have a minimum of seven bowls. Start with fresh water every day. The bowls should be clean. Pour a little water into each bowl before placing it on the altar. Place the bowls in a straight line, close together but not touching. The distance between the bowls is traditionally measured by the width of a grain of wheat. The bowls should be filled up to the space of a grain's width from the top- neither too little nor too much. Pour water like the shape of a wheat grain- in a thin stream at first, then gradually more, then tapering off at the end. Try not to breathe on the offerings.

You can place a candle on your altar between the third and fourth water bowls. Lamps or candles symbolize wisdom, eliminating the darkness of ignorance. In Tibetan monasteries hundreds of lamps are lit as offerings. There is really no limit to the quantity of either water bowls or lamps.

Blessing the Offerings

After pouring the water, lighting candles and offering incense, bless the offerings by reciting three times Om Ah Hum (the seed syllables of the Buddha's body, speech and mind). Visualize that the offerings are blessed.

Dedication

Dedication is crucial. It will not exhaust or limit one's store of merit but will multiply and increase it. It is excellent to dedicate the merit of making offerings to the elimination of suffering and its causes from all beings, to their achievement of lasting happiness, and to world peace.

Removing the Offerings

At the end of the day, before or at sunset, empty the bowls one by one, dry them with a clean cloth and stack them upside down or put them away. Never leave empty bowls right side up on the altar. The water is not simply thrown away but offered to the plants in your house or in the garden. Food and flowers should also be put in a clean place outside where birds and animals can eat them.