

The Shrine as Field of Merit and Support for Practice

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The Shrine as Field of Merit and Support for Practice

*Know that the shrine is the field of merit—
and the field of merit is the most important support for your path of practice.*

The most important aspect of *any* practice is the mind. It is not necessary to set up a shrine to practice meditation or to tame the mind. But the vajrayana path of practice is a very gentle and skillful way to train the mind through very precise and disciplined methods. In vajrayana every recitation, ritual, or symbol must be seen as a way to train the mind's essential mindfulness and awareness.

Therefore prior to beginning the vajrayana preliminary practices, it is important to set up a proper shrine. Knowing that, yes, what you are generating is essentially mind's projection; nevertheless while relative experiences still have the power to hinder or inspire you, the field of merit and objects of support are still important.

From that perspective, the importance of relative references must be understood. Your generosity, for example, still depends on the references of something to give and sentient beings to give *to*. You, yourself, are still an important reference in transforming self-attachment through generosity. Where three-fold purity has not completely arisen, the references of subject, object, and action are very relevant. Therefore the disciplines of the form practices—correct recitation and visualization, correct ways of holding the mind and its reference—are still very important. Your practice environment and the field of merit, with the correct representations, are still important.

Preparing the Shrine

There seems to be much left to learn about preparing the shrine. Doing things your own way, although nice, may not be the correct way. Some shrines, even in the best of homes, are quite poor: a shrine under the bed; a picture, offering bowl, and prayer wheel on a small stool; the little plastic ketchup bowls from Burger King made into offering bowls. How poverty-stricken is your life when *you* use crystal glasses, but put plastic offering bowls on the shrine? Unfortunately, when it comes to making offerings, your minds seem to become stingy. Think about that and really try to change that attitude.

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The shrine represents the epitome of your devotion. It should be the most central thing in your home. Your best piece of furniture should be the shrine, and the most significant place in your home should be the shrine. Some family members may object; that's a very real situation. But most of you don't have that problem. Children move out, parents grow old and die, spouses separate: this is the time to restructure your own environment to include a shrine that is a source of refuge and field of merit.

Every shrine should be as beautiful as you can make it. Usually a shrine has two or three levels. The first level or base is the offering level. Then traditionally, there is the statue level. The highest level is the text level; in the absence of the Buddha, the texts represent the Buddha. So make sure the levels, if you have them, are correct.

Even the simplest shrine can have levels. There are wonderful monks and nuns who go into retreat in caves in very remote regions; they make their shrines very beautifully using planks and bricks and nice wrapping papers. They don't have money to buy brocades or beautiful cloth, so they wrap the planks and stones in colored papers to look like gold blocks on the shrine. They pick up coke cans, wash them, and cut them up to use as offering bowls. They may not have expensive materials, but they have much sincerity. It is through sincerity that offerings are expressed. Even with few materials, you can exert that kind of effort.

Representations on the Shrine

On the shrine there should be representations of the body, speech, and mind of the Three Jewels. A statue of Shakyamuni Buddha, one or more volumes of a text, and a Kadam stupa* are the basic representations on the shrine—and they must always be kept clean.

Basically there are two kinds of shrine. One is a general shrine: a sacred spot in your home that holds representations of the Three Jewels. This could be a bookshelf, a raised table, or a traditional shrine. With or without levels, a general shrine is always in a high place, the base being at least chest level. On this level offerings are usually made. Any representations would be on higher levels, which could be made out of covered boxes. On a shrine with only two levels, the representations of body, speech, and mind would all go on the second, or highest, level.

The minimum representation on any shrine would be a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha. No matter who your yidam is or what other statues you might have, it is important for a meditator to acquire the form of Shakyamuni, the first teacher.

For those of us who practice Tibetan Buddhism, the second statue you would place on your shrine would be Padmasambhava, the second Buddha. If you have no statues, use framed photos or thangkas to represent the main two figures: the Buddha and Padmasambhava. On a vajrayana shrine, there could be representations of your yidam deity or any other deities you feel connected with.

The Importance of Filling a Statue

No statue should be on a shrine if it is not “filled.” There is a right and wrong way to fill a statue. In brief, five main points of the statue must be taken into consideration. It is very important that the filling, itself, comprises relics and *dharani*. Relics are not antiques—and they are not little bits of the possessions of every nice teacher you've known, or the dead hummingbird you found. Relics are substances from the physical presence of the enlightened ones: those who have accomplished the bhumis.

Most important are the dharani, or mantras. These must be rolled in the correct way, while abstaining from certain foods and not speaking—in other words, while practicing kriya yoga. The liturgies for filling a stature and the ceremony, itself, require the dispelling of negativity and the invoking of the deity's eyes to “open”—or to be painted at that time. Only then may a statue be placed on the shrine.

A disfigured statue should never be placed on a shrine. The head of a Buddha, for instance, is not a relic or representation; it's an artifact. The representations on the shrine are not emotional or playful. Everything on the shrine is an object of refuge.

The volumes of wrapped texts on the shrine represent the speech element. If possible, try to obtain a root text: a traditional sutra, a text belonging to the *Tripitaka*, or a volume of complete teachings. Books such as *This Precious Life* are not classical texts. If you have no such texts, at least make a copy of the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* in 8000 verses, wrap it up and place it on the shrine.

If the body, speech, and mind representations were on the same level, the dharma text and the stupa would be placed on either side of the central Buddha. Now the shrine, itself, has a right and left side, and we always observe the shrine's right and left sides. So, the dharma text is placed shrine right and the stupa is shrine left of the central Buddha.

The Seven Offering Bowls and What They Represent

The offerings are, from the very beginning, the whole purpose of a shrine.

On a shrine with representations of the Three Jewels, one must dedicatedly and with great joyfulness make offerings. The offerings are made from shrine right to shrine left. On the shrine's right, the first of the seven offerings is the drinking water. Music, the last offering, would be on the shrine's far left. Only the so-called wrathful offerings would go in the opposite direction, but generally all shrine offerings are the "peaceful offerings."

On the front edge of the shrine, one places the traditional offerings of drinking water (Skt. *argham*), bathing water (*padyam*), flowers (*pushpe*), incense (*dhupe*), lamp (*aloke*), perfume (*gandhe*), food (*naivedya*), and music (*shabda*). Seven—or eight—bowls of water can be used to symbolize these eight offerings. It is essential to be mindful and diligent when making these offerings, and to offer with a deepened sense of what each bowl symbolizes.

The first bowl of water (*argham*) is the drinking water. Pour the first bowl of water with a sense of invoking all the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and offering them pure water to drink. The drinking water symbolizes opening your life to all sentient beings:

May I open myself to all sentient beings and welcome them.

The second bowl of water (*padyam*) is water for washing the feet. This offering is taken from one of the most beautiful Indian traditions, even today. When guests arrive, as soon as they enter, their feet are washed and smeared with perfume. Then they may be welcomed with flowers, rose petals, or garlands and a butter lamp. Taking that tradition into the vajrayana rituals, the offering of foot-washing water is another way to invoke the buddhas and bodhisattvas. It also symbolizes the purification of habitual tendencies and the generation of humility. Without invoking this view when pouring the second bowl of water, it would just be a cultural tradition. So, while offering water to wash the feet of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, think:

May I truly practice purification and generate humility.

The third offering (*pushpe*) is the offering of flowers. If the flowers are artificial, place them in a bowl of rice. The flower offering symbolizes a generous mind.

May my mind always be generous.

The fourth bowl is the offering of incense (*dhupe*). Place the incense in a container that has been washed, dried, and filled with rice. The Mindrolling tradition uses two sticks of fragrance for the two truths. The offering of incense symbolizes the fragrance of ethics.

*May my body, speech, and mind be adorned
with the fragrance of ethics.*

The fifth bowl is the lamp offering, or *aloke*. The offering of a butter lamp or tea light placed in rice or on a stand symbolizes the clarity and patience to dispel ignorance.

*With clarity and patience, may I dispel
the darkness of ignorance.*

The sixth offering is perfumed water, or *gandhe*. The best perfume is fresh water with some rose water in it; or, you can place a bottle of perfume in a bowl of rice, symbolizing joyous effort.

*May I generate joyous effort that inspires all,
like the fragrance of perfume.*

The seventh bowl is the offering of food (*naivedya*). This offering can be a specific tormā [Tib. *shelẓe*] or a bowl heaped with cookies or chocolate. Through the offering of food:

May my mind constantly be fed with knowledge.

The eighth offering is the offering of music (*shabda*). The music offering can be a bowl of rice topped with a small instrument.

May the sound of truth resound in all directions.

These eight bowls represent the eight basic offerings. Beyond that, you can express your own sense of offering with bowls of fruit, fresh flowers, additional candles, and so on. The offerings are, from the very beginning, the whole purpose of a shrine.

The first approach to accomplishment is to make sure the shrine implements and offerings are complete—not, “Oh, I broke a bowl, so now there are only six.” If you broke a tooth, you would have that gap filled, wouldn’t you? This is a question of how much carelessness you bring to acquiring merit. So, see that your set of offerings is complete.

If the offering bowls are big, the distance between them should be one finger width. If they are small, the exact distance between them should be the length of a single grain of rice held horizontally. Place the bowls in a straight line. Bowls placed crookedly or haphazardly are indicative of a distracted, careless mind, not really able to exert the right effort on the path of practice. When

pouring the water, don't spill; fill the bowls to the brim, minus the length of a grain of rice held vertically. Make sure that butter lamps aren't going to melt any butter decorations on the torma, if you have one; that incense ashes won't fall into the offering bowls; and that no offering is untidy or dusty. If you have permanent offerings—bowls of rice with offerings of a small bottle of perfume, cookies, and so on—replenish them once a week or whenever they become dusty. These are all ways to maintain mindfulness in regard to making offerings.

The bowls of water offerings must be replenished every day. If possible, empty the water offerings into a jug at dusk. Of course, if your timetable doesn't let you get home before dusk, then generate a sense of being late, but pour out the water each day. The bowls are emptied starting from shrine *left* to shrine right. Clean and dry the bowls; and in the morning wipe them clean again before making the offerings—keeping in mind:

May I open my life to all sentient beings and welcome them.
May I humbly practice purification of all habits.
May my mind always be generous
May my body, speech, and mind be adorned with the fragrance of ethics.
With clarity and patience, may I dispel the darkness of ignorance.
May I generate joyous effort that inspires all, like the scent of perfume.
May my mind constantly be fed with knowledge, and
May the sound of truth resound in all ten directions.

If you can think in this way when offering the seven bowls, this is a good way to start the day.

* A Kadam stupa is so called after the 11th century Indian scholar and Buddhist master Atisha, great teacher of the second propagation of Buddhism in Tibet and founder of the Kadampa school of Tibetan Buddhism. Atisha is said to have carried with him a miniature wooden stupa as a spiritual support. The stupa, representing the mind of the Buddha, eventually became known as one of Atisha's attributes.



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