

## Creation of the Buddhist Altar in the Mahajrya Tradition

The altar provides a sacred space, a physical representation of devotion to our evolution experience. It's so wonderful that as our ongoing practice affects the consciousness of the altar, the altar in turn raises our consciousness—we can get a great feeling just sitting in front of it.

This manual provides a guide for the conscious creation of a meaningful altar. *But please keep in mind that it's just a way to get started. Respect the basic rules, but know that the lists are not all-inclusive and examples are just examples.* Be creative, and make it your own.

### The Altar Cabinet

The altar is traditionally a cabinet with two doors or opaque curtains which open from the center. Door or curtains should be closed to hide the altar if common people are susceptible to see it. We try to keep it available only for spiritual seekers. The altar can be permanently shown, but conceal it from visitors if they would judge it. Avoid places with heavy traffic, such as a hallway.

It can be made of any material—wood, plastic, etc. It has legs to raise it off the floor, or it may be fixed on the wall. It has one shelf at eye level or higher when seated in meditation—cross legged, on the knees, or on a meditation cushion or seated in a chair. There should be enough space between the shelf and the top of the cabinet that your main piece has its own height in clearance—if your Buddha is one foot tall, the space should be two feet. Thus the Buddha is not “sealed”.

It can be simple or painted. Pizza altar or not, it should inspire you. The more you advance, the more you'll like it simple. Tons of symbols are good when it's a texture in the background.

## Examples of Altar Objects

### Main Pieces

- The Buddha (statue)
- Other enlightened beings or deities of any tradition that touch you
  - Other Buddhas (Medicine Buddha, Kwan Yin)
  - Jesus
  - Hindu deities, such as Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesh
  - Divine Mother (Sri Yantra)
  - Virgin Mary
  - Angels

### Guidance from Your Tradition (photo of embodied person as secondary pieces)

- Sacred Scroll (Dai Kon Gou)
- Master (photograph of Maha Vajra)

### Offerings of the Elements

*Offerings should be smaller than the main piece, and should be fresh.*

| Element | Nature    | Characteristics   | Examples   |
|---------|-----------|---|--|
| Earth   | Yang      | Creation, regeneration, protection, grounding               | Garden soil, plants, rice, fruit (especially oranges), flowers. Always keep fresh. Use dry uncooked rice to avoid changing regularly                                       |
| Fire    | Yang, Yin | Fluid, shining, radiant, transforming, elevating, purifying | Candle*  |
| Water   | Yin       | Cohesion, flexibility, transparency, purity, life enhancing | Water, essential oils**, or both   |
| Air     | Yin       | Communication, fluidity, movement, travel, balance          | Incense does not always need to be lit, or can be lit for short periods of time. Do not fill area with incense smoke that is not immediately filtered. Keep your air pure. |

\*you may add color variety by using white devotional candles placed in colored glass holders (Inserta lights)

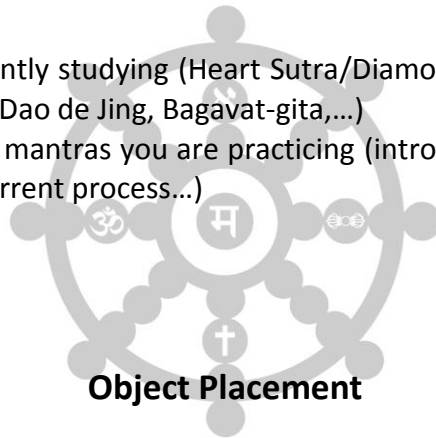
\*\* placed in a feminine, small vessel, such as an Asian tea cup. If not changed regularly, leave the vessel empty, and it acts as a symbol of the liquid.

### **Symbols of Enlightenment, Wisdom, Compassion, Protection**

|                         |                        |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Om                      | Cross                  |
| Lotus                   | Heart                  |
| The Beholding Eye       | Crystals               |
| Serpent (dragon, snake) | Kanji or Other Symbols |
| Yin/Yang                | Vajra                  |

### **Tools for Prayer and Study**

- Your mala
- Sutras you are currently studying (Heart Sutra/Diamond Sutra/Lotus Sutra<sup>QBA</sup>, the Bible, the Kabbalah, Dao de Jing, Bagavat-gita,...)
- Copies of prayers or mantras you are practicing (introductory/healing mantras<sup>QBA</sup>, the Lord's Prayer, current process...)



### **Object Placement**

#### **General Rules and Suggestions**

- The altar should be uncluttered so that just a few pieces draw your focus—you should be able to grasp all the aspects of your altar in a single thought form (as per the rules of majutsu). However, you can change out altar objects and move them around as often as you like.
- The main item should be placed in the center of the altar.
- The Buddha should always be present, but is not required to be the main object of focus.
- A main item, not the major focus, may be placed just behind and to the right or left of the item of major focus (see perspective section below).
- The sacred scroll (Dai Kon Gou) may be placed behind the main piece, or hung on the wall and centered over the altar.
- A photo of the guru (Maha Vajra) may be placed to the left of the main piece.
- Study tools may be stored inside the altar, but must remain on the bottom shelf.
- You may place objects on top of the altar, but they may not be symbolic contradictions, such as weapons. Speakers for holy music are appropriate, if they don't draw too much attention.

### Perspective

- View the altar from a perspective of non-action. It is the altar that is being observed, rather than us observing the altar.
- Tangible, or yang, objects sit to the right of main object, from the perspective of the altar (as you face the altar you will see them to your left). Soft, or yin, objects sit to the left of the main object (or to your right when you look at the altar).
- If you have a photo of the master to the left of the main object, place an equivalent-sized object on the right to balance, such as the Dai Kon Gou.

### Balance

- A tangible object placed to the altar's right should have a balancing soft object to the altars left, and vice versa.
- An item that exhibits both yin and yang properties may be placed in the center behind the main item, and/or to each side of the main item. Any type of flame or devotional inserted candle is a good example.

## Purification or Blessing with Pooja

A pooja is a ritual performed in front of the altar to open a celebration or spiritual practice session.

- Prior to performing the pooja, remove offerings you plan to replace for freshness or which are obsolete, or major objects you plan to rearrange or replace.
- With lit incense, draw your choice of shapes, symbols or kanji in front of the altar. You may use three sticks of incense in your hand, or cones or charcoal and powdered incense in an appropriate container (bowl or plate). (If making no changes to the altar, simply use one stick of incense.)
- Following the ritual, the sticks may be planted upwards in sand or soil, separate from the earth offering, or laid in an incense stick holder.
- Rearrange major objects, or refresh offerings if you wish.
- At this point, if your altar area does not have proper air circulation, or if smoke could become too dense for you to breathe freely, extinguish your incense. **DO NOT KEEP YOUR INCENSE BURNING IN A CLOSED ROOM, TO AVOID IT BEING DETRIMENTAL TO YOUR HEALTH.** To extinguish incense sticks, plant them upside down in your soil of your incense container. If you don't have soil, hold the incense in your right hand, wet the tips of the thumb and index fingers of the left hand with water or saliva, and use them to extinguish the incense. Do not use your offering water. For cones, let it burn. For charcoal, manage the quantity of powdered incense to last just the few minutes you need.

## Initial Pooja for Creation of an Altar

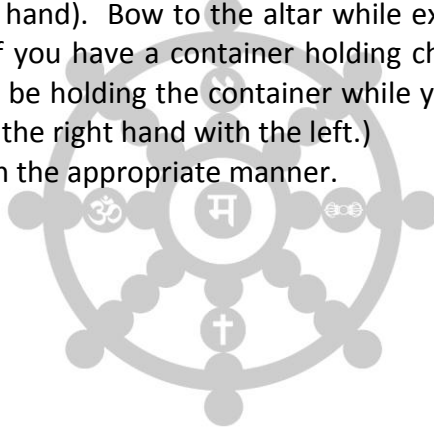
Once you're done with the setup of your altar (other than offerings), and you have a good feeling about it, you will perform the initial pooja with this altar. Prior to performing this ritual, choose an appropriate prayer for each of the deities represented. It is ok to research on the internet. Jesus—Lord's Prayer; Avalokiteshwara—Mahakaruna; etc.

- Pooja, per your preference
- Set up the offerings
- One simple prayer to summon each of the deities represented on your altar (the Buddha, Jesus, Shiva, etc.) asking them to inhabit your altar
- Perform the pooja again
- Perform a prayer for deity represented in main object
- Perform the pooja again
- Perform a prayer for an additional deity represented on altar
- (repeat the pooja and prayer for each deity represented on altar)
- Perform one last pooja, and bow, to close the ceremony

## Typical Mahajrya Pooja

- Left hand will be held comfortably up at your left side, elbow bent, palm about shoulder height and facing the altar. The left hand will remain in this position, while the right hand holds stick incense and draws the shapes. (If using cone or powdered incense, both hands will hold the incense and draw the shapes).
- This pooja is composed of six movements. The first two movements will describe a crescent moon shape, representing a bowl or receptacle.
  - The first, second, and sixth movements start with your hand at the right side, shoulder height, holding the incense. Swing your right hand down and to the left, following through up to the level of your left hand. Then swing the right hand down and to the right, returning up to its original position next to the right shoulder.
  - The third, fourth and fifth movements are done by drawing a full circle clockwise—down and to the left and up to the left hand, continuing the circle to the right, up and above the head, ending at the original position next to the right shoulder.
- During the first movement, while you swing your incense to the left, say “om namah”. Bringing it back to its original position, recite the name of your preferred deity, usually the central piece of your altar, such as “Shakyamuni Buddha”, “Shiva”, “Avalokiteshwara”, etc.
- During the second movement, while you swing your incense to the left, say “om namah”. Bringing it back to its original position, recite the name of your human master, a guide, or your inspiration, such as “MahaVajra”. If you don't have one, mention another divinity or master on your altar.

- The third, fourth and fifth movements are uninterrupted and continuous, and represent three suns.
  - While drawing the first sun, say “Om”, slowly, throughout the drawing of the circle.
  - While drawing the second sun, say “Vajra”, in the same extended fashion.
  - While drawing the third sun, say “Agni”, in the same extended fashion.
  - While drawing the three suns, imagine your altar glowing with the power of the three suns, which radiates everywhere.
- The sixth movement is performed similar to the first and second. While you swing your incense to the left, say “om namah”. Bringing it back to its original position, recite your soul name. If a master did not reveal to you your soul name in Sanskrit, you’ll use the name “Paramatma”, referring to the highest level of yourself, or the divine soul that you are.
- To complete the ritual, join your hands together in front of you (left hand enveloping the right hand). Bow to the altar while extending both hands forward toward the altar. (If you have a container holding charcoal or a cone of incense, both your hands will be holding the container while you draw the symbols with it, so you won’t encase the right hand with the left.)
- Settle your incense in the appropriate manner.



MAHAJRYA  
buddhist tradition