

The Home Altar
from *Warm Smiles from Cold Mountains*
by Tenshin Reb Anderson

The home altar for a Zen student is right here. The way comes forth from here and it returns. This is the altar of nondual meditation, the altar that is not an object of thought.

When Dogen Zenji's teacher, Tientung Rujing, was being installed as abbot in a monastery, he walked into the hall, looked at the buddha on the altar, and said, "A poison dart in my eye." Then he walked on. Zen is iconoclastic: we rebel against any icons that are outside ourselves. An altar is a place where we express our nondual relationship with our true nature, not a place to make offerings to a buddha that is other than ourselves, or to an awakening that is somewhere else.

If you want to set up an altar in your house, look for a place that feels good to you - a "home within your home." Don't put it in a place where it might disturb other members of your household or visitors. Start with a place for yourself, a place that you can feel refreshed by.

When you set up an altar, it's good to have a central image. You could, like the early Buddhists, use a wheel, a footprint, or a stone pillar; it could be a statue or picture of a buddha, a being who personifies enlightenment; or it could be a statue or picture of an enlightening being, such as Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion, who hears the cries of all beings. You could even write on a card the name of a buddha or bodhisattva - "Avalokiteshvara" or "Hearer of the Cries of the World" - and put that card at the center of the altar.

The buddha or bodhisattva goes in the middle. To its left, put a candle, and to its right, a flower. Light is considered the highest of physical offerings. The light of the candle, the smell of a flower, and in the middle, right in front of the figure, put an incense bowl. Any bowl, ceramic or metal, would be suitable. You could fill it with sand, but ash from the fireplace works best, and as you use it, ash from the incense you offer will gradually build up.

In addition to offering light, flowers, and incense, offer teachings that you chant yourself. You could chant scriptures or something that you feel is dharma, truly awakened teaching. Offer it before the statue to bring the joy of the teaching to Buddha and to yourself.

Many of us Westerners entered Zen through sitting meditation, and we were shocked to see that the traditional Zen practice involves ritual activities such as bowing. I heard about a German woman who was studying Zen in Japan. Once during a ceremony, as she was bowing, she said to someone nearby, "I don't know what I'm doing down here, but the rest of me does." When bowing, you go down to the earth; you touch the earth with your feet, your knees, your hands, and your head. Bowing is Buddhism: where there is bowing, there's Buddhism, and when there's Buddhism, there's bowing. To bow is not to bow down to something. To bow is actually to crack duality. The longer I study Zen, the more I realize how deeply devotional it is.

There really isn't any buddha outside yourself. Putting buddhas on altars, and also taking buddhas off altars, is a way to encounter this most vital issue. You need some way to encounter it. I think it is a really auspicious opportunity when you put a buddha on an altar in your house: this way you can somehow deal with the issue of your buddhahood. The altar is a place you can use to return home and celebrate the intimacy of all living beings with the awakened ones. It's a place you can use to express the tender feeling of being Buddha's child as well as the bold feeling of being Buddhism.



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