

On Performing Ritual

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Whenever you are doing deity practice or any other kind of practice, the main offering is to train in loving kindness and compassion and act for the sake of all sentient beings. More important than the technicalities of the visualization is your motivation. Merely seeing yourself as an offering goddess or yidam deity, with no regard for a compassionate intention, is no big deal. The big deal is if you are cultivating the skillful method of great compassion and serving all sentient beings. Then your practice becomes a practice leading to enlightenment!

Parents have amazing care and concern for their children. If a child falls in a fire, its mother will jump in to save it without a thought for herself. Or if the child is carried away by a river, the mother will have no consideration for her own life while trying to rescue it. That kind of caring attitude, equal for all beings, is what we must cultivate as best we can. Along with developing compassion for them, we should be careful not to dwell on others' faults, but instead concentrate on reducing our own faults.

Actually, compassion is a very great antidote. It doesn't matter whether you have anger, pride, jealousy, desire, or ignorance, compassion can conquer them all. If you need to pacify or overcome any kind of afflictive emotion, compassion will do it!

We have afflictive emotions. Through the contributing condition of our prolonged accumulation of nonvirtue, the afflictive emotions such as pride, jealousy, and so on arise; they seem powerful and wonderful to us. Due to our habituation to them, when they arise they completely control us, and by their power, countless negative concepts and faults proliferate. No matter which of the five poisons is dominant, it will make a person think, "I am something special!"

We also have the antidote to all of these passions. We have the cause for overcoming them, which is the buddha nature, and we have the methods to do so, which are the practices such as Vajrasattva and so forth. Actually, the gurus, yidams, dakinis, and dharma protectors appear only to help sentient beings with

these very problems. They have completely liberated themselves from the afflictive emotions, and they manifest to help others do the same.

If you practice the dharma correctly, relying on these objects of refuge, then slowly the afflictions in your mindstream will lessen. Slowly you will have more space, more room, more peace. Why? Because the five poisons are becoming, or manifesting, their true nature, which is the five family buddhas.

If instead you find that your five poisons are increasing with the practice of dharma, that is really embarrassing!

How should we perform the deity practices so they are effective antidotes to our poisons?

During generation stage practice, whether you are acting as the chopon (ritual master) or practicing on your cushion, either way you should mentally engage with the practice by visualizing yourself as the deity. When holding up an offering, you should see yourself as an offering goddess, emanating countless offerings. If you visualize well, then the offering goes well, doesn't it? Instead, if you don't understand what the tormas are for, you might just regard it as something small made of dough. Perhaps you like it, or don't like it; perhaps you have no interest in it, or ignore it. If you ignore the offering, you are ignoring the guru, yidam and dakini, and the vajra master as well. If you don't care, then you are just a zombie making the offerings. I have seen this done many times.

Instead, you must respect the guru, the yidam, the dakini, and the entire mandala. You must respect both the offering and the objects to whom you are offering. "Respecting them" first requires some understanding of their meaning. As you understand them better, then you will see why it is important to increase and multiply your offerings with visualization and pure view. So, please try to cultivate these. Also, since you are the offering god or goddess, your body should not be stiff or stuck, but flexible and comfortable. That way you can align body, speech, and mind to make the offering.

Many people ask, what are offering goddesses and what do they look like?

Actually, I've never seen them so I don't know.

Maybe they are American go-go ladies, showing everything?

To know them, we must look in the thangkas where they are depicted. There are offering goddesses of the vajra family, the pema family, the ratna family, the karma family, the buddha family, the dakini family, and many others. All of them appear in different colors and attitudes. When you are making offerings, whether you are acting as the chopon or simply reciting the practice, you must mentally emanate countless offering goddesses which can be peaceful, enriching, powerful, or wrathful, depending on the practice you are doing. It is also acceptable to see your own body as numberless bodies filling space, making offerings. However, it is not acceptable to merely think "I am an offering goddess" and then space out! Or if you think "I am an offering goddess" and then arrogantly jump over ritual objects or sacred texts, screwing up, hippie style, that's also no good. You must have awareness of yourself as an offering goddess, with humility and devotion.

From your heart emanate limitless clouds of Samantabhadra's offerings. These offerings are not limited or monotonous. They are myriad marvelous things, such as beautiful forms, melodious sounds, delicious tastes, enchanting smells and velvety soft textures. Whenever you place offerings on the shrine, visualize that they are not small or limited. You are not offering just one shalze (food offering) torma, but countless splendid tormas filling space. You are not offering just one small butterlamp, but numberless radiant lamps. The lamp, by the way, shouldn't have oil dripping down the sides; it should be very clean.

In order to be an offering goddess, you must be clean and you must offer clean substances in a pure way. Offering goddesses aren't dirty, they don't blather on and on, and they aren't angry, jealous, or exhibiting any of the five poisons. They have faith and pure view, and for the sake of sentient beings they have the skillful method of great compassion and prajna wisdom. They are not just female; inconceivable offering gods or dakas are also present. These gods and goddesses represent the transformation of the five poisons.

It is also acceptable to visualize yourself as the yidam deity, the deity of the practice. The yidam is the object of refuge, and it is the main focus of the practice. You see yourself as the yidam deity in order to develop pure view, in order to benefit yourself, and in order to benefit others.

Consult the practice texts and commentaries for descriptions of these things. If you follow the books, there will be no mistake. If you follow your own trip, then there will be plenty of mistakes. By making the offering according to tradition, you will accumulate merit and purify obscurations, instead of just being an actor. It says many things about this in the commentaries. Don't be lazy! Educate yourself. Don't just think, "I am this! I am that! I am! I am!" Eat shit! If you have any of the five poisons, physically or mentally, then your offering will be no good.

If we don't know how to visualize with awareness, we might grandly think, "I am an offering goddess!" and then become distracted, stuck or spaced out. Then we might spill things or bungle the activity. Instead of that, do your job! Do it cleanly, nicely, and correctly. Then, slowly you can work on the visualization.

Tashi Delek!

-Gyatral