

## My Home Altar

*In response to one of the suggested topics from our survey, we asked the lay ministers and others for some thoughts on the use of home altars in their practice. We were delighted with the responses which show some quite different ways they play a part in training at home.*

Judy Brown OBC

—Albany, CA—USA—

**I**n the early 1970's, as I was leaving a job to relocate to Pennsylvania for my husband's schooling, my co-workers presented me with a statue of Amitabha Buddha as a farewell gift. This work of art sat on a prominent shelf in our homes as we moved here and there.

In the early 1990's, as I came to Buddhism and wished to establish my home altar, this statue became the first item I chose for what has become the spiritual center of my home. It still seems so fitting that something from my life prior to becoming a Buddhist accompanies me as I try to redirect my path and to see the Buddha nature everywhere.

Upon reflection, I realize I have selected other altar items from various places and people as if to remind myself that my practice weaves together many aspects of my life and experiences, some painful, some stubborn, into one true refuge.

For example, the candle holder is a gift from a young person with whom I have been able to share the teachings in skillful, helpful ways. My incense holder was a surprise gift from an elderly friend — it had been on the altar of her husband who had died long ago. But the pot holding a plant remains from

a friendship that ended angrily. It reminds me of the impermanence and frailties which are in our nature, but also of the opportunities we have to find compassion for ourselves when we have behaved badly.

To the left of my altar on a small wall I have selected small pictures and symbols from many religious paths. I have struggled to let go of earlier religious experiences, and compiling these representations has helped me find the place for my chosen religious path while acknowledging the beliefs from my childhood and the various expressions of the Eternal of other people everywhere.

Above all of these little items and pictures is a print of many of the World's people worshipping in their ways and the reminder "to do unto others as you would have them do unto you." With this last image and the Golden Rule my eyes turn to the plate-sized iron medallion above my altar which depicts Avalokiteshwara, Compassion itself, and which reminds me and comforts me and challenges me when I come to my altar.

My home altar is a home, a refuge where I can sit—with reminders of my own imperfections and influences, and of the search for the compassion, love and wisdom which can pervade the human experience and which comes from Our True Home.

Chris Barker OBC

—*Arundel, Sussex—UK—*

**M**y main home altar is in our study. In the room there is also a sofa bed (for extra guests), my desk, a book case, the computer, a filing cabinet and an old upright piano. Although it is a communal room, it is I who makes most use of it and it is where I sit. The altar sits on top of the piano so it is quite high up which is an advantage.

I go in and out of the room many times a day. In recent years I have made it a practice to put my hands in *gasshō* and bow down low to the Buddha on the altar every time I come into the room. I use it as a reminder that whatever else is happening in the day, in that moment, in my life, or for whatever reason I have come—maybe rushed!—into the study, the Buddha within me still sits.

I try to make this bow as full and complete as possible. To do so takes no more than several seconds but I am staggered at how much a simple act like that can reveal about me and what goes on in my mind. Sometimes I find myself crossing the room to my desk without a thought of making the bow at all. Sometimes it can be a very perfunctory bow because I need to “get on” with what I came into the room for. Sometimes I make a more conscious effort but even as my back straightens up I notice that my left leg is already turning to move on before the bow has completely finished.

Why is it that it takes effort to really complete that bow with a final look of recognition at the Buddha on the altar? Am I so embroiled in my “activities” that my mind seems not able to spare even those last couple of seconds? It shows how much

more training there is to do. Can anything be more urgent or pressing at any moment than to recognize the Buddha within oneself? The act of bowing helps to put things in perspective. It is a way of diminishing the seeming importance of me and my self-assumed competence and opening up to a wider perspective in which all our everyday, straightforward tasks, whether in front of an actual altar or not, can be an act of bowing and can be done in a way that is deeply meaningful and ultimately of benefit to all beings everywhere.



*Chris's Home Altar*

Martin Jordin OBC

—*Sheffield, S. Yorkshire—UK—*

I have always been attracted by the simplicity and iconoclasm of Zen. It was something of a shock and a puzzle therefore, to be confronted by an ornate and beautiful altar when I first visited the Throssel ceremony hall. I continue to find this apparent opposition between the simple and elaborate a fruitful one.

I began training eight years ago and some twenty-odd years into a marriage with a partner who had no particular interest in Buddhism. This created some understandable anxieties: that I had undergone a profound personality change, had been taken over by a cult, that our relationship had in some way proved inadequate... The last thing I needed to do in such circumstances was to appear to be transforming our shared home into some sort of Buddhist temple. For quite a while, then, my home altar was a four-inch high Buddha and a tiny water bowl, unobtrusively placed at the back of a table. This simple altar was fine as a focal point for me while not disturbing or imposing itself on others.

Eight years on, my family now wryly accepts the rather grander and more colourful altar which takes up a wall of the room I use as a study. And I'm happy to accept a more elaborate altar since it now seems to me an expression and a mirror of my wish to train and of the treasure-house that training gradually opens up.

And yet I feel no desire to turn the room into a zendo. Yes, there's a Buddhist wall-hanging and a picture of a lotus pond but there are also children's paintings; some Buddhist books but

many more shelves of novels; and the altar sits cheek-by-jowl with a computer and an X-box.

The altar reminds me of what is important (even if too often I ignore the reminder). But the altar is not “It”. To invest it with too much importance seems to me to risk losing the simplicity of training, the fact that “to live in this way is the same as to live an ordinary daily life”.

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Richard Potter OBC

—CAMBRIDGE—UK—



For me my home altar forms part of the place where I sit. It's a place of re-dedication. The offering of water reminds me about my training—in the same way that water evaporates and so needs topping up, so it acts as a reminder of the need to keep training.

Gill James OBC

—*Cockermouth, Cumbria—UK—*

The dictionary definition of an altar is ‘a table or flat topped block on which religious offerings are made’. An altar therefore is simply a place of offering and I have several in my home. One of these is in my meditation room and this is available for general use by anyone who wishes to meditate. Another is in my bedroom and this is solely for my own use. Another is in the guest room so that any of my Buddhist friends who come to stay can have their own private “retreat”. I also have altars in the living room, kitchen and dining room. Each of these altars has its own character. The latter three are quite discrete and tend to blend in with the furnishings of the room. This is so that my husband, non-Buddhist friends and visitors do not feel uncomfortable or even intimidated by the situation. The altar in the meditation room however is, as might be expected, the main focus of the room and I am happy for group members and others to make offerings there. Please note that I am not suggesting that it is necessary or even advisable to have a home full of altars. It has simply occurred in my case because I am very open with friends and family about my Buddhist practice and over the years, I have been given many beautiful statues as gifts. It does not seem right to me to use them as “ornaments” and so I set up an altar around them.

All of my altars have the same basic structure of statue in the centre, flowers on the left, candle on the right, water and incense offering bowl in front of the statue. Each of these components varies however on the different altars. For example, the altar in the living room has a lamp in place of a candle and the

flowers are porcelain plum blossom. The water offering cup is a small decorated Chinese cup and the incense bowl similar. The statue is a standing Buddha obtained from an oriental art shop. These stand on top of some bookshelves and so blend in with the rest of the room.

The altar in my bedroom is quite different and set up according to my own personal taste. The statue is a traditional brass sitting Buddha but it stands on a deep red “altar cloth” made from a place mat. The dried flowers stand in a vibrantly coloured Mexican small vase and the candle is in a red votive holder. I offer incense here before going to bed at night and I often keep the votive burning whilst I read in bed.



*Gill's bedroom altar*

The altar in the meditation room is very traditional with a large brass statue. The colours are discrete and the overall impression is peaceful and calm. This is the altar which is most used. It is used for group meditation and for my own sitting. I offer incense here before meditation. Also on occasions when, due to work demands, I simply cannot find the time to sit for a full session in the morning, I find it helpful to offer incense, make three bows and just be still for a few minutes.

This altar is also used for memorials and offering up of dead beings. For example, when Tess, my old dog died recently I laid her in front of the altar until her funeral which was held two days later at Throssel. During this time I kept a votive burning, made regular offerings of incense, recited scriptures and meditated with her. Many other animals have been placed in front of the altar in this way.

In the early days of training I used to offer everything up at my altar. This included thoughts, feelings and physical things such as gifts received from friends and gifts waiting to be offered to friends.

I have learned however that, as with everything else, the wish here to be compassionate and to help all beings needs to be tempered with wisdom. Many years ago, I was out walking on the fells near my home. A plane had recently crashed there and the wreckage was all around. I made *gasshō*, picked up a small piece of the wreckage and brought it home to place on my altar. My intention was to offer merit for the pilot. As I sat in front of the altar however I felt very uncomfortable. The atmosphere in the room changed and all was not well. There was lots of fear around and I felt nervous, restless and uncomfortable. After some time I felt that I must take the wreckage back. I therefore embarked on a long walk back up the fell!

I cannot explain what was going on here but neither do I feel the need to do so. Simply, a lesson was learned. Now, before putting anything on the altar I sit with the question— is it good to do so? I don't make a big issue of it but I no longer pile everything indiscriminately on the altar either physically or metaphorically. I suppose that my relationship with it has changed and it is no longer a tool which I use. Now, when I bow in front of my altar, what needs to be offered simply is offered and there is no need for me to do anything. That which needs to be done is done.

As with most things an altar can become an item of attachment. When staying with friends or on holiday it has occurred to me that this meditation is not quite right because it is not in front of an altar. I can become possessive of my altar and thoughts occur such as—this is my altar, it will be kept immaculate and everyone in the house will treat it with respect. Oh, if only it was such an ideal world! Some time ago some colleagues of my husband came to stay. After they had left I noticed that one of them, a smoker, had been putting his used matches into the water offering cup of the altar in the guest room. I was absolutely furious—how dare he desecrate my altar in this way when he was a guest in my home? Wouldn't you think he would show more consideration for my feelings? It took some time to realise how many 'me's' and 'my's' there were here. The man obviously did not realise the significance of his actions. Why should he? He was not a Buddhist so he probably did not even realise that the bowl was part of an altar. He probably thought it was there because I was safety conscious. The same person actually left an empty wine glass on the altar in the dining room! Of course the sensible and compassionate thing to do would be to quietly

remove the matches and the glass without going around angrily muttering about the poor man and his shortcomings. It would also have been wise to bear in mind that this man, a medic, worked extremely hard and long hours in order to help others. What right then did I have to judge him and think that because I meditate and take care of my altars I was somehow “better” than him.

So, as with most things in life, an altar can be a very potent teacher. Of course an altar with a candle and incense burning is very conducive to meditation. However, it is easy to get caught up in the atmosphere around the altar and to almost think that it is magical. I think that to simply say that it is an aid to training is not enough but it is easy to get attached. To me, the altar provides a wonderful daily opportunity to look at what is truly being offered here, what is it that offers and what is it that accepts the offering?

One thing which may surprise the reader, considering that I have so many altars around the house, is that one of the hardest things I found to come to terms with during my early days at Throssel was bowing, especially to what I saw as a statue. I remember a senior monk, knowing that I loved mountains, asked me if I could bow to a great mountain and when I told him that of course I could, he suggested that every time I struggled to bow, I imagined that I was bowing to a mountain. I found this really helpful and later came to realise that, in a way, it was true. I was bowing to Mount Sumeru, the mountain at the centre of the Universe where Shakyamuni Buddha sits. Now, every day when I bow in front of my altar the words which seem to automatically come to me are, “I bow to my true Master Shakyamuni Buddha, I bow to the highest Lord”.

Leroy Perkins  
My First Home Altar  
—*Shasta Lake, CA–USA*—

Shortly after I arrived in Santa Barbara, California, in the late summer, now 30 years ago, something in me felt the urge to create a devotional space in the small room I was renting. I hadn't yet started going to the priory in Santa Barbara, and I hadn't begun a meditation practice.

My landlord let me use a narrow, stained piece of wood, which someone had perhaps previously used as a bookshelf. I think I found the shelf in the garage. The landlord also let me use four bricks. I placed the bare shelf on the bricks, along one of my room's walls, a rustic expression of what I now see as my longing for the Eternal. I later put a small vase and a piece of greenery on the altar, symbolic of I didn't know what at the time.

That winter, I went to a retreat sponsored by the priory, met my teacher, took lay ordination in springtime and over the years have learned what the shelf and boards represented. I now see that first home altar as an expression of the beginner's mind, and as a call for help. My call was answered.

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Ellen Cleaver OBC  
—*Mt Shasta, CA–USA*—

My home altar has taken on a deeper meaning for me lately. Because of my sensitivity to scents, I am unable to use incense as an offering. Recently I began using water instead of

incense. I use a small pitcher and a small bowl which are placed on my altar and keep a small amount of water in the pitcher. Before meditating, performing a ceremony, reading or reciting a scripture or offering merit and prayers, I pour a small amount of water into the bowl, then lifting it to my forehead I recite the three Homages. Each morning I pour the blessed water onto one of my least healthy plants.

This process felt awkward at first, and now it seems to have deepened my gratitude and appreciation for the gift of training in the dharma, and for all those who have made it possible.

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Mark Rowan

—*Durham—UK—*

**T**he room I sleep, meditate and keep things in is only about 9 feet square, so every bit of space has to be used; but for many years I've always had one surface, wherever I am, that is kept clear of mess and can be in some way sacred—even if it's only a windowsill. This one is the top of a small bedside shelf unit (and there are usually piles of papers on the lower shelf, as well as 3 didjeridus stacked beside it!). Everything on it has some kind of special significance to me. Different objects come and go from time to time, when it feels right; but the ones in the photos are always there.

I liked the Buddha because of his energetic, uplifting pose, inspiring one to enlightened action; or at least to getting up enthusiastically in the morning.

The figure on the left looks as if it might Maori. The one on the right is a piece of stone I picked up on a beach in Greece which the sea has shaped into something like part of

a human figure—or just possibly part of a carved figure that the sea has begun to return to a natural form. In a way I can't explain, these two have resonances, for me, of Achalanatha and Avalokiteshwara in the shrines on either side of the main altar at Throssel.

The ceramic six-petalled lotus in front of the Buddha was made by a close friend. It's filled with sea-worn glass pebbles from a local beach, which hold an incense stick very well (and can be easily washed). The sea-worn objects speak to me of the way all forms are always changing—a teaching on impermanence.

On the left is an image of St Francis of Assisi in dialogue with a wolf, which has a deep personal significance for me; and on the right one of a heart in glass. Both these were gifts from people very close to me.

The prayer flags above were brought back for me by a friend who went to Nepal.



Iain Robinson OBC

—*Sanmu-shi, Chiba-ken—Japan*—

## Some differences between Japanese and British home altars

Other contributors in this issue of the Journal have reflected on many of the ways in which home altars can help to focus and support lay Buddhist practice in a European or North American setting. My present home is in Japan, and our daily routines often simultaneously embody both Japanese and British cultural patterns. I also often notice how altars in the homes of our Japanese friends and neighbours differ in form and function from those which embrace our emerging OBC traditions. I thought that it might be interesting to point to some of these contrasts. I don't intend to make any kind of comprehensive inventory here, but rather to select just a few of the differences in layout and use that feel important to me when I encounter them and have sometimes led me to reflect more about my own assumptions and the deeper meaning of setting up an altar.

Altars in European and North American Buddhist homes are still an 'emerging tradition' even though strongly influenced by practice in other parts of the world. British Tibetan or Theravadin home altars for example, may both strongly differ from each other and also embody images and symbolism characteristic of source traditions in Asia. Also one big distinction may be that they are not in fact 'household' altars as such at all, but rather the home altar of one—perhaps the only—household member who happens to be a Buddhist.

Lay Buddhists associated with OBC temples and meditation groups generally comprise a 'first generation' to use home

altars, and already have begun to set them up and employ them in ways sometimes quite different to lay Zen Buddhists in East Asia. We have commonly adopted one particular layout, based on a flat table surface often with a small dais for a Buddha rupa, although we may substitute a Bodhisattva statue or a picture or scroll as a centrepiece. The set of altar items (in Japanese *butసుగు*) usually comprises water and incense holders, and a single candle and vase of flowers together with two offering bowls placed on the single flat surface. The layout is partly asymmetric, emphasising something indivisible. The design is a personal and individual expression, often rather simple and ‘straightforward’, and we pay special attention to aesthetic balance and beauty. The altar is usually sited as a ‘still point’ in our routine and usually in the more private space in the home that we use for meditation.

This all bears little resemblance to most home altars in Japan, where they are known as *butsudan* (‘Buddha platform’). About half of Japanese homes have a butsudān, and it is estimated that more than 900,000 new ones are bought each year from Buddhist supplies shops. In country areas and small towns there will be one in almost every home. However this is also a ‘generation thing’, and they are much less common where younger single people or young families dwell in city apartments.

Butsudan are generally positioned as a much more central and public focus of the home because they say something about the status and affiliations of the household. Usually they are placed in the *washitsu*—the Japanese-style reception room which retains tatami mat flooring found in even modern houses and apartments. This is where guests and visitors are received,

and may sleep on futons if they are staying overnight, and is also commonly the place where the family will sit on the floor around a low table in the evenings watching TV. By tradition this room also has a *tokonoma*—a small alcove where a scroll and flower arrangement can be displayed. Sometimes there is also a small Shinto kamidama shrine fixed on the wall. If you visit Japan you can buy kamidama ‘kit’ as a souvenir very cheaply in DIY stores, but the family butsudān will usually be a formal, beautiful piece of hardwood furniture, very expensive and often an heirloom handed down in the family. It usually consists of a black lacquered cabinet on legs with gilded fixings, and when not in use the doors will probably be kept closed. Not all butsudān are kept in the washitsu, I know one home where the altar occupies part of the kitchen.

In terms of appearance the emphasis is usually on formality and conformity to a standard ‘layout’. There are many different layouts for home altars and the one adopted by the family is likely to reflect the preferences of the Buddhist sect they have an affiliation with. This points to an important and often unremarked difference in that the butsudān is almost always a family altar and does not relate to the practice of just one member of the household. An obvious practical contrast is that the altar is usually not a single shelf (*tana*) but more three dimensional with perhaps three or five tiered shelves rising towards the rear of the cabinet with a rather small and intricate Buddha rupa on the top shelf. In some Buddhist homes a special temporary altar might also be set up at festivals like *O-bon* and *Shogatsu*.

These different forms of butsudān point to some fundamental differences in their significance and use. Even amongst people who would consider themselves sincere lay Buddhists,

regular meditation practice is not common, and usually their relationship with the temple is focused around family graves and memorial ceremonies. On the other hand, most older members of Japanese families still have a very strong sense of the central importance of family and home in life. Parents and grandparents and earlier ancestors are seen as those whose love and hard work made you what you are, both physically and in terms of standing in the world. They transmitted your life to you so that you in turn may transmit that offering of life to your children and grandchildren. This sense of gratitude is reflected in the importance of both Buddhist and Shinto altars.

Although *butsudan* do not commonly define a space for formal meditation at home, they are of course the focus for offering incense and scripture recitations in a way that would be immediately familiar to 'Western' lay Buddhists. Usually this is done standing, sitting or kneeling directly in front of the altar itself so that the intimate 'circle' is completed by the process of offering, during which a signal gong placed on or in front of the lowest shelf of the *butsudan* is used. Sometimes if you visit the homes of older people they will invite you to do the same. Pictures of deceased relatives that were important to members of the household are sometimes kept on or more commonly around or in front of the altar. If there is a death in the family friends and relatives will come to light a candle, offer incense and make bows for the newly dead in front of a portrait, and later at memorials, much as we do in ceremonies in our own temples. In this way the altar has significance for all family members. In a deep place it represents both 'us' and our relationship with the Eternal.

When we do the jukai ceremonies in OBC temples we are given our ‘bloodline’ certificate expressing the line of teaching through which the Precepts have been transmitted to us, and each morning we chant the ancestral line. But in Anglo-American culture more general acknowledgement of our own ancestors before our parents and grandparents is not something that concerns most families. Many of us are pressed to name all eight of our great-grandparents, let alone people from earlier generations.

With migration to the cities during the last eighty years, this loss of continuity has become more common in Japan too, but on the butsudān the family line might often quite literally be put at the centre. A large memorial tablet that looks like an *ihai* might be placed in front of, or even replace, the Buddha *rupa* to represent all those generations of ancestors that have ‘become Buddha’. At New Year and at the *O-bon* Festival in August, the doors of the butsudān are opened and the family will take lights and visit the graveyard to invite their families back into their household for the duration of the festival. Before this happens people will clear up the area on the eve of the event so that their ancestors will have a good impression of how the place is being looked after, and then the children head off to the family grave with paper lanterns lit. Many lines in our scriptures and teachings take on a different perspective for me when I see those families in the lane at dusk. I especially think of that phrase in the *Shushogi* where Dōgen writes “for they in the past were as we are now, and we will be as they in the future.”

This practice of bringing the home altar into the family on these terms reflects an interest in origins and sources which we appear to have lost in Anglo-American culture. However in

the light of the current surge of interest in genealogy that has followed on from the development of internet resources to enable people to trace their family trees, I'm not sure this is true. 'Roots' are an important aspect of spiritual awareness that seem to be growing in significance for many; not from a perspective of individual distinctiveness so much as from an awareness of the complexity of interrelationships. In Asian family traditions the lineage expressed is traditionally a simple patriarchal line based on the historical transmission of home and means of livelihood across many generations, but that need not be so. With the power of databases and the availability of two centuries of public records in 'Western' society it is possible to trace the 'Web of Indra' in terms of its true complexity.

Our own home altar is not a traditional butsudān cabinet but a homemade piece of furniture which below, hidden behind a curtain, serves as a home for hi-fi equipment. Above it is laid out in part like a standard OBC altar<sup>1</sup>, and on it we keep a book called a *kakocho*. I'm not sure how common these are in Japan or even if they are an especially Buddhist practice, but the principle is very simple. It works like a personal 'Book of Remembrance' with a page for each day of the month. On each relevant day page is written the month and year when some family member or friend (and in our case also pets) died. Every morning after breakfast, before we offer incense and recite a scripture, we turn the page to see who we should recall today. It is a kind of 'rolling' household 'transfer of merit' board I suppose.

When you first start a family *kakocho* it is a clean and crisp item of stationery with empty white pages. These soon begin to fill up as the dates of death of former ancestors and

friends are researched and checked out and entered. But then in the ‘real time’ of daily life further additions to the register come unpredictably and without warning as new beings are recorded on the appropriate pages as they become one with the Eternal. It becomes a family record of change. Before this book is complete we too will need to be added there on one page or another.

### Notes

1. The diagram below shows a typical layout for an altar in an OBC temple. Rev. Master Jiyu speaks of the significance of these offerings in *Roar of The Tigress* Volume one (p. 213 & 217): “The reason that the items are placed as they are is because they form a circle: a circle of offering and receiving. On the way up the circle (it always turns from left to right), we make the offering of flowers and incense, and what we receive in return is the light of understanding, the light of the Unborn...Which means that we are asking to ascend to the Buddha. We are carrying our offering of training to the Buddha, which brings forth the light of the Dharma, the teaching. It is a circulation, and it is the deeper meaning of the circle, of constantly walking in the circle. To make the offering, the sweet smelling offering of our prayers and our meditation and our life’s work, which takes us on the way to Buddhahood, which brings forth the light of the Truth.”

