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We hope you enjoy reading the article. Nicholas Breeze Wood (editor)



# Connecting with Beyond

An Introduction to Creating  
and Maintaining Domestic Altars

Some altars are large, belonging to whole groups of practitioners, whereas others are tiny and very domestic. And yet within the myriad of different forms altars can take, there are a few things that link most of them together, and which can give pointers you can use in order for you to make your own individual altar at home.

## **BUILDING YOUR ALTAR**

Perhaps the first thing you need to ask yourself when making an altar is "Why?" "What is it for?" Does it have any specific intent, is it just something you feel you want - or need - to do on a deep level? Or do you feel you should have one because it's the proper thing to do and a lot of your friends have one.

Some altars are specifically made for healing, perhaps with a photo of the sick person or an ongon of them placed on it, along with representations of healing spirits or aspects of the person's healing. Other altars are for protection or containment of a situation, and will have specific objects relating to that situation on them instead. While others may be devotional, having images or statues or ongons of sacred beings the maker has a deep connection to. Altars may also be for the ancestors, and these will have images and objects on that relate to ancestral spirits.

Another question to ask is how long does this altar need to be assembled for? Is it an altar set up for a specific period of time, for specific work, and dismantled when the work is completed, or is it a long term permanent altar, set up for an indefinite period of time.

It is important to be clear about your intention for the altar before you build one.

The position of an altar is important to consider: it needs to be somewhere safe, somewhere where people or pets are not going to knock into it and damage it. A separate shrine room may be the ideal for some people, but in domestic life this is not always possible; although if you do have a room set aside for your shamanic practice this is an obvious place for it. However, saying that, one of the reasons for an altar can be to remind us of the sacred, and so if it's stuck away - out of sight and

The use of altars is one of the commonest traditions, across most of the sacred wisdoms of the world. An altar is a space set slightly outside of this reality, which acts both as a focus for sacred thought and activity, and also as a portal to the spirit worlds, and the beings who live in them. It is a place to keep our sacred objects, a place to make ritual offerings, and above all it is a place to connect with the sacred and the spirits.

Many sacred paths have, over time, developed a great amount of tradition regarding the 'building' of altars. These traditions may include the specific objects which need to be placed on the altar, as well as the colours and symbols used to decorate the furniture and room. They might even tightly control and carefully prescribe the positioning of all the objects on these altars too, as well as what offerings might be placed on the altar and when.

**Above: lighting a butter lamp candle on an altar in Tibet**

out of mind - behind a closed door, we won't see it and be reminded of the sacred aspect of our lives.

Some cultures make specific pieces of furniture for altars, perhaps with niches for statues, while others will put them on a shelf on the wall or on top of a cupboard or chest.

On top of a cupboard makes a lot of sense, as the drawers or cupboard storage under the altar can be used to store sacred objects and other things related to the tending of the altar.

### OBJECTS ON YOUR ALTAR

One of the most basic aspects altars from many traditions across the world is the use of an altar cloth and there is a great deal to be said for using them. Cloths are not always used, as sometimes the special furniture used for an altar is painted, and that can act as a cloth, but an altar cloth can often make a very good base of the altar.

Cloths mark the altar out from the rest of the world, and defines its edges - what is on the cloth is on the altar, and what is not, is not. Many ritual objects also have prohibitions placed upon them, which say they should not be placed directly upon the ground, so a cloth helps to 'suspend' these objects from ordinary reality and makes a sacred zone for them to be placed on.

You can choose any kind of cloth, from specifically made silk brocades used both in Tibetan Buddhism and by many Mongolian and Tuvan shamans, to the more 'rustic' woven cloths of the shamans of the Andes.

Find a cloth that is right for you, that appeals to your sense of beauty, and perhaps which reflects elements of your own spirituality. Above all an altar should be splendid and beautiful to honour the spirits, so choose something that reflects that.

Having laid a cloth, you have now defined the altar and can begin to place sacred objects upon it. There is no limit to the simplicity of an altar - or to its complexity either. Four stones placed in a circle, representing the Four Directions, may be all that is required for some altars, and if that is the case, then it is complete and perfectly appropriate. But, you may want more....



*Above: a butter lamp burns amidst offerings on a shaman's outdoor altar in Mongolia*



*Left: a Buryat shaman with an altar of offerings*



*Below: a Hindu altar in India, strewn with flower petals*



**Above: offerings of food, drink, flowers and other items on a Mexican 'Day of the Dead' altar**

Objects on an altar should mean something, you should know what every object on an altar is there for, and so you need to be aware - both intellectually and energetically - when you make, assemble and place objects.

You might well work with spirits that take the form of animals, and so finding small representations in wood, stone or metal of these - or perhaps small painted images of them - may form an important part of your altar. As might small photographs of your main teachers, or other inspiring people or ancestors.

**Below: antique silk brocade altar cloths from Mongolia**



Ancestors can be represented by making ongons for them. These can be as simple or as complex as you wish them to be. A stick with painted dots representing two eyes and a mouth is perfectly acceptable, but it's nice to add to things and make them even more beautiful, so if you are using sticks for instance, why not bind them with coloured thread to decorate them as you feel appropriate.

Ongons are enlivened with the spirits who live within in many different ways. In Tibetan Buddhism, statues (which are really only finely made ongons) may have elaborate ceremonies performed for them by high ranking lamas, whereas a shaman may sing the spirit into its new physical home.

Often cultures will raise up the main spirit figure of an altar, to show their importance. It is possible to use blocks of wood to do this - perhaps painted an attractive colour - although another simple idea is to find and buy a small oriental wooden display stand. Such wooden stands can be found on Ebay fairly easily from sellers generally in China. Some are round and some are oblong, and they are designed to have small vases or other objects placed upon them for display, but they make excellent stands for small statues or ongons.

What you place on your altar is entirely up to you.

#### **OFFERINGS ON YOUR ALTAR**

One of the most universal and simple offerings placed on many altars is a candle of some sort. This is a symbol of prayer and also a

symbol of the light of spirit. It is easy to buy small tea lights or nightlights. These burn for a few hours which is normally sufficient for the time you are doing sacred practice, and you can easily light a new one if one goes out. These can be put into special containers, which are often colourful and attractive, and this keeps the rest of the altar safe and reduces fire risk.

An alternative to this is to use Tibetan Buddhist butter lamps, which many Southern Siberian shamans also use. Butter lamps can simply have a tea light dropped into them, or if you wish you can fill them with butter or regular candle wax and a wick.

New butter lamps are easy to buy from online Tibetan ritual object shops or Ebay, but you might pay more for an old one, as old objects that have been used tend to be considered as having been blessed through use, and so can become more expensive.

A recent phenomenon, found in the Far East, is the use of strings of small LED bulbs on altars, like those put on Christmas trees. These are a candle substitute, giving a gift of light without fire.

Flowers are also popular on many altars, either fresh ones in a vase or 'eternal' silk ones. Incense is offered too, as the beauty of sweet fragrances is important in many cultures and considered attractive to spirits.

*An altar is a connection point with the sacred, it is a space set slightly outside of this reality, which acts both as a focus for sacred thought and activity, and also as a portal to the spirit worlds, and the beings that live in them. It is a place to keep sacred objects, a place to make offerings, and above all a place to connect*



Other offerings include food and drink. In Tibetan Buddhism it is traditional to put seven bowls of water on an altar. These represent drinking water, washing water, flowers, incense, light, perfume and food. Each of these bowls are filled with pure water, so their contents are symbolic.

Seven bowl sets are often made of silver and decorated with gold, but cheaper ones are also made of copper or brass. They are available easily online.

Shamans in Tuva and Mongolia use these Buddhist bowls for their own offerings of milk or vodka and it is traditional to have a bowl of Vodka - as well as water - on an altar in those countries.

If you are drawn to more Native American practices you might like to have a bowl of ceremonial blue corn flour on your altar and some of this is 'fed' to the statues and

fetishes on a regular basis by sprinkling it on them. It's a good idea to have the flour bowl just underneath the ongon to catch the excess so that it does not get all over the altar cloth.

Other offerings can be semi precious stones or crystals to symbolise you are giving wealth to the spirits, and a conch shell is often put on Buddhist altars to represent beautiful music. If an altar is for wrathful practice it should have wrathful offerings placed on it, such as small swords and images with flames and skulls.

Food is another offering, and sweets wrapped in bright foil, sweet cakes and fruit are favourite offerings of many traditions.

Offerings that may perish should be replaced often. It is traditional to make fresh water offerings on a



**Above:** antique Mongolian silk brocade altar cloth

**Above Left:** domestic Tibetan Buddhist altar with statues raised on a Chinese wooden display stand. There are seven silver gilt water bowls in front of the statues stacked upside down, as they do not have any offerings in them

Buddhist altar every day and to remove them before it gets dark. Offering bowls that are empty should be inverted to show the spirits they are empty.

Food that has been placed on an altar can either be left outside for the small creatures to eat, or eaten yourself, as it is considered to be blessed by having spent time on the altar. Water that has been placed on an altar is also blessed and never should be tipped away thoughtlessly; instead giving it to plants, as a mindful offering, is an excellent way of dispersing it.

However you make an altar and work with it, it needs to be tended and kept fresh. Sometimes objects need to be removed and other objects added. You have to keep your senses alert in the process, and not let the altar go 'stagnant'. From time to time it is also a good idea to strip and rebuild an altar, not only does that give you a chance to clean the objects upon it, but it also keeps your connection to it alive and dynamic.

Altars are a wonderful way to connect with - and pay respect to - your spirits and the spirit world. They provide a way to start and finish a practice - lighting a candle or making an offering can be like clicking the switch or turning the key in the door. The beauty of an altar speaks directly to the heart and the senses, side stepping the head, which is the last place we need to come from when we engage in sacred practice.



**Left:** simple altar in the Sacred Hoop Magazine office with Zuni stone animal fetishes together with their traditional turquoise encrusted fetish jar, and a corn paho offering. There is also an old Hopi Corn Maiden *katchina* doll, with a bowl of bluecorn flour in front of her