

WEEK THREE: WATER OFFERINGS

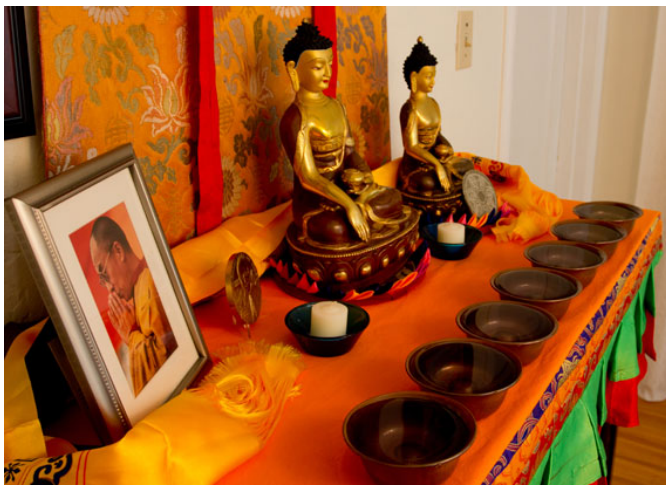
The making of offerings is an antidote to the pattern of attachment and greed.

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche

Now that you have set up a basic shrine, it's time to learn to make offerings, which is one of the core purposes of a shrine. The most basic and common type of offering made on a Tibetan Buddhist shrine is *yonchap* — water offerings.

You will need seven bowls for this, and if you have beautifully designed bowls made of silver or other precious metals, that's wonderful, but it is not at all critical. Your bowls can be made of just about any material — such as copper, glass, or wood — as long as they are clean and represent, in your mind, an offering to the Buddha that is respectful and generous.

Your water offering bowls should be used only for your water offerings — you don't want to use bowls from your kitchen that you also use for eating.



Why Do We Offer Water?

One reason that we offer water is that water in Tibet has traditionally been considered plentiful and free, and therefore painless to give. The idea is that all of our offerings should be given as freely as we would give water.

A primary purpose of any offering, along with honoring the Buddha and his teachings, is a pure motivation to cultivate generosity, and to reduce our selfishness, stinginess and greed.

We seek to give with an open, pure heart, with no attachment to what we are giving, and with no motivation of receiving something in return.

Paradoxically, as His Holiness the Dalai Lama often teaches, cultivating generosity and devoting ourselves to the welfare of others increases our own happiness in many ways, as we release the painful, stiff worry that accompanies greed and self-centeredness.

His Holiness encourages us to become selfishly altruistic, to become happy people by concerning ourselves primarily with the well being of others.

Video: Water Offering Bowls: How to Use Them

What Do the Seven Bowls Represent?

The water offering bowls are often considered to represent the seven aspects of prayer in the common “Seven Limb Prayer” or “Seven Part Practice”*:

- prostrating
- offerings to the Buddhas
- confessing our wrongs
- rejoicing in the good qualities of oneself and others
- requesting the Buddhas to remain in this world
- beseeching the Buddhas to teach others
- dedicating the merit of ourselves and others which has been accumulated throughout time, in order that all sentient beings may enjoy happiness and virtue

See the handout in the Weekly Practice sidebar for the Seven Limb Prayer in Tibetan and English.

How Should I Set Up the Water Offering Bowls?

Traditionally in Tibetan homes, someone in the family makes *yonchap* every morning. But in our busy lives in exile in the west, this does not tend to happen daily anymore. In our home, we only make the offerings on special holidays, like *Losar* and *Saka Dawa*. To set up the bowls:

- Start with seven clean bowls — called ting in Tibetan — and a pitcher of fresh water. Tibetans usually use silver, brass or copper bowls, which range from very plain to carved and intricately decorated treasures.
- One by one, pour a little water in each bowl before you place it on the shrine, lining the bowls up from left to right as you face the shrine. The reason to start with a little water in each bowl is that it is inauspicious to have a bowl sitting upright and empty on the shrine. (We sometimes have the bowls upside down on the shrine, while drying or between offerings.)
- Tibetan Buddhist masters explain that each bowl should be the distance of one barley seed from the next one.
- Starting from left to right, fill each bowl with water, almost to the top. Again, the common thought is that you leave the space of one barley seed from the rim of the bowl.
- While setting up your offering bowls, it is common for Tibetans to recite one of the more common mantras, like:

Om mani padme hung (Avalokiteshvara's mantra)

Om muni muni maha muniye soha (Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra)

Om tare tuttare ture soha (Tara's mantra)

- Others may recite what is called the kyamdro prayer. (See Week 6 for common prayers.) The prayer can be whatever you choose. What is most important is that you pray with a sincere wish to cultivate generosity and an open heart.
- In the same spirit, you might visualize that you are offering endless quantities of everything beautiful and precious, plus all the good qualities in our hearts and minds, to a vast assembly of Buddhas.
- You can put a butter lamp between the third and fourth bowls, or between the fourth and fifth bowls, symbolizing the light of wisdom, dispelling the darkness of ignorance.
- Once the bowls are filled, it is common to bless the offerings with kusha grass (also called elephant grass) or any kind of clean straw or grasses, or even a thin stick that you may have access to. To do this, you dip your grasses into one of the bowls and sprinkle the shrine with water, reciting the purifying mantra “om a hum.” (From Khandro.net) We have gotten out of the habit of doing this in the U.S. simply due to a lack of kusha grass, though of course one could use any clean straw or grasses or stick!
- Finally, you can dedicate the merit you have gained by the offerings to the elimination of suffering and its causes for all sentient beings.



Removing the Offerings

Normally, we will remove the bowls at the end of each day, any time before sunset. In central Tibet, this commonly happens as early as 3 p.m., but you can do it any time.

- Empty the bowls one by one, starting from the right this time, drying each one as you empty it with a clean cloth.
- When you are done, stack the bowls upside down as you see in the images here, and if you can, offer the used water to your plants.

May water offerings help you to cultivate generosity and to be relieved of the pain of selfishness and greed!

Footnotes:

* See a very nice teaching on the Seven-Limb Practice at the Berzin Archives site >>

WEEK THREE PRACTICE

If you don't already have a set of offering bowls, you might like to get a set of seven bowls. Remember that they do not need to be expensive, but rather just clean and, in your thinking, representative of a nice, respectful offering. They can be made of anything you

like. Practice making your water offering every day this week, while reciting any or all of the mantras you learned in Week Two.

Then please pop over to the Facebook group page and let us know which aspect of this practice, if any, especially appeals to you, and what you learned from this lesson.

PRACTICE TOOLS FOR WEEK THREE

The Seven Limb Practice that the seven offering bowls correspond with:

- Handout: The Seven-Limb Practice Part 1
- Handout: The Seven-Limb Practice Part 2
- Handout: The Seven-Limb Practice Part 3
- Handout: The Seven-Limb Practice Part 4

Also:

- Handout: Mantra Practice (from Week 2)