



KARMA TRIYANA DHARMACHAKRA

A Teaching on the Shrine

Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche

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We are all capable of developing and unfolding our spirituality. Acknowledging this capability, I would like to discuss how we dharma practitioners can relate to the environment of the shrine in order to enhance our potential for growth.

Each country has different cultures and customs. Ultimately, the customs themselves are not necessarily important because they are not particularly beneficial. However, they are not completely insignificant because they do express something about the uniqueness of a particular group of people. And even if these customs are simply ways of doing things without any inherent positive qualities, this does not mean that they are harmful. In Tibet, for instance, a customary way of showing respect for someone is to take off your hat. This gesture is not particularly beneficial to anyone involved, but if you really have respect for another person, it is good to be able to communicate that. By showing respect for others you also show respect for yourself, and you create a dignified situation. From this point of view, this particular custom makes perfect sense.

A great deal depends on whether a custom is just a cultural pattern or if it really has meaning. If you are just adopting somebody's culture, it would not make much sense. For example, in India a sign of genuine respect is getting down on the ground and touching the feet of an elder or superior, and then touching the crown of one's own head in the same gesture. In this way, the lowest part of the other person's body is equated with the highest part of their own, which affirms the reverence they feel towards the other person. Such an expression of respect and humility can be extremely worthwhile. But if we are merely "trying on" new cultures, not really understanding what we are doing and remaining reluctant and uptight, there is no real benefit in such a gesture. Instead, internal conflict may result, because once the infatuation with the surface charm has worn off, we are left feeling disappointed.

Similarly, when relating with a shrine, the unfortunate possibility exists of the shrine becoming merely a collection of dharma objects, like an entertaining and exotic exhibit. As a result, others will also see it as a show, something strange and interesting, a kind of novelty. In the end, they relate to the shrine as if it were any other mundane object.

There is also the possibility of making inappropriately large offerings on the shrine. In the past, if you visited an aristocratic or noble family in Tibet, you might have found their shrine to be quite ostentatious, as if it were there merely for others to notice all the precious objects. This is typical of the spiritual materialism we are all susceptible to, where all religious appreciation is based on infatuation and ego-glorification.

According to the teachings of the Buddha, the shrine should be placed where there is no fear of danger or great disturbances. If you have it in a place where there is a great deal of fighting, or if the premises are owned by someone who can tell you to leave or not to practice there, then there will be no true sense of refuge or openness. Once you have found a place free of such hindrances, it is important that it be kept as clean as possible, just as you like to keep yourself clean so you feel more comfortable. A neat and ordered

environment can be very inspiring, especially for beginning dharma practitioners. If we were advanced practitioners, then our internal relationship to the enlightened objects of refuge would take precedence over their condition or placement. We would be relating to the internal order, and the external arrangement would be less important. For beginners and most people in general, this is not the case, so it is important to set the groundwork concerning the shrine area.

There are no specific measurements for the height and width of the shrine; this will depend on the space available. Generally, it should be well-built and as dignified as possible, and the higher it is the better. As for the precise construction, the shrine should have an odd number of tiers: one, three, or five.

If the shrine has three tiers, it can be seen as an offering of our body, speech, and mind to the body, speech, and mind of the buddhas or enlightened objects of refuge. Having offered these, or having offered our clinging to the idea of a personal self, we can experience a realization equal to the realization of the body, speech, and mind of the awakened ones.

If a shrine has five tiers, it can be seen as a symbolic rendering of the five buddhas or the five enlightened aspects of the mind. In this way, it serves as a reminder of the awakened state of mind towards which we aspire. When there is only one tier, it signifies that there is only one ultimate fruition, the perfect awakened state of mind. The one tier and its set of offerings therefore embody the three or the five levels.

On a five-tiered shrine, the first and highest level should hold whatever symbolizes the enlightened objects of refuge: the statues and scrolls of the buddhas and bodhisattvas and great teachers, and the texts of the teachings. The second, third, and fourth layers should each hold a set of offerings, collectively known as the offerings to the three roots. These are: (1) The outer offerings, made to the gurus or to the highly enlightened teachers, who are the actual sources of our understanding; (2) the inner offerings, made to the yidams, who are the deities of practice who essentially embody the teachings and the accumulation of the dharmas; and (3) the secret or ultimate offerings to the bodhisattvas, who manifest themselves in different forms as protectors of the dharma. Generally, these offerings are used only in more advanced practices, and detailed explanations will be given as you are introduced to them. Then on the fifth and final level, you place general offerings of food and drink. By making these offerings, by extending our generosity, it is possible to accumulate enlightened qualities and purify the habitual tendencies of desire and greed.

Whatever statues, pictures, or paintings are used should be as clean and as well-made as possible. If they are of varying shapes and out of proportion, the shrine will be more a reflection of our psychological patterns than anything else. In terms of skillful means, this is exactly what we do not want to do. When other people look at our shrine, especially those unfamiliar with the practice, it will not create a positive impression. They may just get an impression of something weird and unusual rather than an expression of inherent dignity and sanity. It should be inspiring and uplifting to look at the representation of buddhas and bodhisattvas on your shrine, and it should orient us to the responsibility of

practicing the dharma. Essentially, the shrine should be as beneficial to ourselves and others as we can make it. The buddhas and bodhisattvas don't care if you have oddly shaped representations of them, but we should do it for our own sake because otherwise we are showing poor discipline. So it is quite important to have a decent set of statues and pictures and arrange them in a neat and orderly manner.

For the same reasons, the offerings should be neat, clean, and properly lined up. In fact, the whole reason we try to relate to the shrine correctly is to practice the six perfections. When the environment is properly arranged, it is a healthy place and it feels good to be there. Through the offerings of clean water and clean bowls, and the mental offering of a genuine purity of mind, we are actually working on the perfection of discipline. The nature of discipline is purity and freedom, and we perfect these qualities when we express them through caring for our shrine.

Making the offerings of the different objects, such as incense, flowers, lamps, food, and so on, should be done with a sense of genuine hospitality, which will rid us of the patterns of greed and miserliness. Whether making a large or small set of offerings, they should be put forth sincerely and wholeheartedly, without hesitation. In this way we relate to another of the six perfections, the perfection of generosity.

These offerings should be made joyfully, and we should gladly spend whatever time is needed to attend to them. If we do it unwillingly, thinking about something else that needs to be done and seeing the offerings as a burden, this shows a lack of patience. However, by taking the time to care for our shrine properly, we will be practicing the perfection of patience. Furthermore, the offerings should be made consistently, day in and day out, not merely when we feel excited about it. By maintaining this undeviating devotion, we also lay the foundation for the perfection of diligence.

When making offerings, you should always be mindful of what you are doing. For instance, if you are pouring water in the water bowls and some are overflowing, some are half full, and others are barely filled, this reveals a lack of mindfulness. By making sure that each one has just enough and that all are appropriately placed, you can develop the perfection of meditation.

Ultimately, these offerings are made to the enlightened objects of refuge for the benefit of ourselves and all beings, to cause the accumulation of meritorious qualities in all beings. These efforts are made for the liberation of all beings from egoistic patterns which trap them in cyclic existence. This embodies the practice of the perfection of wisdom. Whatever offerings have been made, large or small, we should desire them to symbolize and embody all worthy offerings. And if we dedicate the benefit towards the liberation of all beings, this benefit becomes inexhaustible; such benefit cannot be destroyed, no matter how strong the individual's karmic pattern may be. Making the offerings in this way and relating to the upkeep of the shrine are important ways of working towards the development of—and ultimately the perfection of—wisdom.

Having attended to the offerings, it is important that mindfulness of the relationship with the shrine also be maintained during the course of the day. It is very good to attend to the

shrine in the morning with a wakeful attitude, sincere intentions, and good spirits. But if during the course of the day you leave a hat on your shrine, or maybe gloves or dirty socks, this is not so good. Although you may not have negative intentions, you are showing a lack of mindfulness and decency. There is still merit accumulated from having made offerings and from having a shrine, but that benefit will be diminished by our laziness, carelessness, and lack of mindfulness. It is as though you have made a good painting with your hands, but then you step on it and it becomes worthless. Therefore it is vital to maintain mindfulness of the shrine's proper condition.

Altogether there are several different sets of offerings, and as you work with more advanced practices concerning specific deities, you will be making specific offerings that are set out in certain ways and specific directions. These more advanced offerings will be gradually introduced as you progress in your practice. At this point it is important to know that there are seven or eight basic sets of offerings. Whether it is our personal shrine or the dharma center's shrine, it should have at least these seven sets of offerings to the images of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and deities of practice.

To begin with, the first two offering bowls should contain water. If saffron is available, one might add some for greater purity, but otherwise just use clean water. In the remaining five bowls, place the following items, respectively: a flower, some incense, a lamp, another water offering, and a food offering.

The first bowl of water is an offering of drinking water to the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Although enlightened beings have no need for this water and would not be excited or disappointed whether we offer it or not, we do this for the accumulation of meritorious qualities. Also, this simple offering is made before the compassionate buddhas and bodhisattvas so that there is water to alleviate the temporary suffering in realms where beings constantly suffer from thirst, and it is also offered so that ultimately the water of dharma will alleviate the suffering of all beings. Therefore, with an understanding of this two-fold meaning, we very sincerely make this offering.

The second offering bowl is for bathing water. Again, we do not offer this because the buddhas and bodhisattvas need such a gift. Rather, for the benefit of ourselves and all beings, we request the buddhas and bodhisattvas to accept such offerings so that the karmic patterns of all beings may be cleansed.

In the third offering bowl, we offer flowers for buddhas and bodhisattvas. As before, the offering is not made because awakened beings are attached to beautiful flowers. Instead, the offering is made so that all beings may temporarily experience higher realms of existence. We aspire that all beings will eventually experience the Buddha's body, the immaculate body which engenders all the marks and attributes of a perfectly awakened being.

The incense in the fourth bowl is offered to the buddhas and bodhisattvas in order to eliminate the unwholesome smell of beings. This does not necessarily refer to earthly tastes and aversions, but to what might be called the distinctive odor of bad discipline. A bodhisattva who has experienced the perfection of discipline will emanate a perfume or

profound fragrance all the time, whether or not their clothes and body have been washed. Furthermore, if a bodhisattva stays in a particular house, it will seem as if incense has been burned every day for months, and this will continue for years afterwards, even if no incense or perfumes have been used. Therefore, in order for all beings to experience the perfection of discipline, we make this offering.

The offering of the lamp in the fifth bowl is made so that it may cause relative wisdom to arise among beings. We hope that all beings will be able to discern what is proper and beneficial to themselves and to others. In this way, whatever we undertake is not wasted effort because we can apply a sense of wisdom and intelligence to it. So we make the offering of light towards the accumulation of these qualities and towards the ultimate realization of the awakened state without limitation for all beings.

The sixth offering is composed of the perfumed or scented water used after bathing. Since the buddhas and bodhisattvas experience the pervading fragrance of the perfection of discipline, they have no need for artificial fragrances. However, we make the physical offering so that all beings may experience the awakened psychological state which is aware of the natural purity, perfection, and pure scent of things. As a result, everything we encounter radiates goodness and has a soothing and enlightening smell.

The seventh bowl contains the food offering. Basically, any kind of food will do as long as it is clean. This offering is made so that the temporary suffering of all beings in the realms of starvation and hunger may be endowed with food and everything else they need. Ultimately, we wish that all beings will have the capability to live on the food of meditation.

The eighth offering is music. This is made by placing a bell or a specific source of music used in practice on the shrine. If the practitioner is using the instruments in their practice, they do not have to keep the instruments on the shrine all the time. Through offerings of pleasant sound and music we accumulate merit for ourselves and all beings, and ask for the elimination of all painful, irritating, and harmful sounds that cause fear and frustration among beings. Consequently, we wish that the self-sounding nature of the dharma pervade all beings.

This set of offerings is what might be called the actual offerings. As such, they embody all other worthy objects of offering, meaning that along with these offerings we could also make imagined offerings. With the offering of the drinking water, for example, we simultaneously make an imagined offering to the buddhas and bodhisattvas of all the pure water throughout the world. This is done so that the goodness of the dharma may permeate all beings. For similar reasons, when we offer the flower, we also make an imagined offering of all beautiful, desirable objects and forms to the buddhas and bodhisattvas. With the offerings of incense, we also offer to the enlightened beings all elements of perfection generated by beings practicing immaculate discipline.

The offering of the lamp incorporates all forms of light: the light of the sun, the moon, the stars, and all illuminating objects. The totality of all these lamps and lights is offered to the buddhas and bodhisattvas for the benefit of all beings. With the perfumed water,

one mentally includes in the offering everything that has a profound and attractive fragrance. With the food offering, we offer all forms of good and nutritious food found in the world. Finally, we offer not merely the symbolic music of the practice, but also all the pleasant sounds and music that pervade the world.

When making an offering, it is essential to be immersed in the action and to maintain a very personal sense of the presence of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, enlightened masters of the lineage, and deities of practice. It should not be just a routine thing and a burden, such as thinking, "As long as I show up and keep the boss satisfied, it's all right." Taking on these responsibilities gladly and with a sense of openness at all times is extremely important.

Integrating wholesome actions, attitudes, and disciplines, and letting go of harmful and unwholesome actions and attitudes is what the dharma is all about for us as practitioners. Any wholesome discipline we use will enhance our practice. From that point of view, discipline is not restriction, but freedom and sanity. We come to the shrine room with the proper attitude and with the appropriate clothing, being mindful not to do anything unwholesome or negative. Of course, we should be mindful at all times, because the practice of dharma is definitely a way of life. The point here is to begin to take a more dignified outlook and to develop a more uplifted state of mind. This is why we sit in a particular position, not stretching out or lying down as we might do somewhere else, but cultivating a sense of control and seeing ourselves as disciplined beings. This is also why we do not take intoxicants or smoke in the shrine area.

These things are not technical rules or laws. In this particular situation, we do not practice discipline just because someone has told us to, but because correct practice of these positive actions causes them to become expressions of true freedom and sanity. It would not make sense at all if you felt that somebody was burdening you with restrictions, because there would be no benefit even if you were to follow such discipline, and after a while you would just feel disturbed. Physically you might be sitting in the shrine room doing all sorts of things, but in reality you would be somewhere else mentally, in a completely different realm. The essential point here is learning to do something correctly, both physically and psychologically.

In terms of the representations of the enlightened objects on your personal shrine, you should use those objects that you feel the most connection with, as well as the specific objects you have been instructed to work with. The simplicity or elaborateness of these objects depends on what you can personally accommodate, as well as what you have an understanding of. In a dharma center, it depends on the school of practice. Anything that symbolizes the Buddha, such as a scroll, thangkas, or statue, is suitable for a shrine in any school of Buddhism. The other representations, such as those of bodhisattvas, deities, and enlightened masters will of course vary from school to school. For instance, the Kagyu school will have different lineage masters and protector deities than the Geluk, Sakya, or Nyingma schools. The main thing is to have a personal connection with whatever objects you use. If you just throw together a bunch of different objects, this is more like a collection of religious art, and it might be difficult to relate to the objects and fully understand them.

In discussing the representations of different enlightened masters, we should also mention those deities and bodhisattvas who manifest themselves in different forms for the accomplishment of virtuous activity. No matter what appearance or method they utilize, whether they appear in wrathful or peaceful forms or whether they use direct or indirect means, their use of skillful means is always for the benefit of samsaric beings.

To make an analogy, in our everyday life there are certain actions we completely and sincerely wish to accomplish. Sometimes we have to perform these actions in a humble, low-profile manner, and sometimes we have to appear confident and self-assured to show that we are capable of doing them well. This is, in a sense, similar to the different forms that deities must take. I won't give details about these different manifestations of the deities and bodhisattvas since I am just discussing the beginning stage of practice. The important thing at this point is to provide an orientation to the forms we use, then gradually learn the meaning of the forms, and eventually learn the ultimate meaning.

Questions and Answers

Student: When you were outlining the transcendent aspects of the seven or eight offerings, you said that we should wish temporary benefit to beings, such as wishing for them to temporarily see things more beautifully, or to be temporarily cleansed. Why do we only intend temporary benefit rather than enduring benefit?

Rinpoche: There are temporary and ultimate benefits for each of the offerings. We wish for the temporary benefit that all beings experience the quenching of thirst—this refers to literal thirst—and ultimately we wish that the water of dharma will permeate all beings. Whatever temporary impurities are experienced by beings, we ask that those ultimately be transformed or purified into the clarity of wisdom.

Similarly, we ask that all beings temporarily experience beautiful and positive forms, from lower forms to higher forms, so that ultimately they may experience the buddha body, or the marks and attributes of enlightenment.

Student: So temporarily means the time between now and when they experience the ultimate benefit?

Rinpoche: That is correct. For instance, right now you may be so thirsty that all this talk about enlightenment and perfection will not make any sense to you. What you really need is water. Then once you have drunk some water, you can begin to look around for more important things.

Student: What is the difference between the perfumed water and the incense?

Rinpoche: In this case the incense is a remedy for odors, in the sense of the imperfections of poor discipline. We wish to rid ourselves of this defect temporarily in order to ultimately experience the scent of the mental and physical perfection of discipline, like the bodhisattvas do. The perfumed water, on the other hand, is a more

objective offering because we are asking that the world be temporarily filled with perfumes and good scents. Ultimately, we desire to experience the transcendent state of the mind of the buddhafiels, where everything is perfect.

In a way, being able to relate to the perfection of all things is actually a psychological state. In this state, for example, when you see water you are able to recognize its perfection and purity and all its noble qualities: it is soothing, it is cleansing, it is satisfying, it is healing, and so on. In this way you may also experience the ultimate state of mind as that experienced in the buddhafiels.

Student: Would you tell us something about the small crystal balls you gave us?

Rinpoche: From the ultimate point of view, also referred to as the Vajrayana fruition point of view, the crystal ball symbolizes the wisdom mind in which everything is contained. Such symbols are used to help you recognize the true nature of your mind. The symbolism can take place on different levels, depending on the level of the student and the teacher. Through this representation of the perfect wisdom mind, may all beings thus arrive at the recognition of the true nature of their mind.

On a shamata level, or basic meditation level, it symbolizes clarity of mind; this means that whatever you are working on, may there be clarity, precision, and openness. Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche placed crystal balls on most of his shrines to convey this sense of clarity.

Student: Should statues of the Buddha be clothed?

Rinpoche: Definitely—otherwise they get very cold!

Actually, this is up to you. It is not necessary, but it can be used as an offering, just as in the past patrons and disciples used to make offerings of robes to the Buddha and his retinue. This is why we symbolically make offerings of robes to statues of Buddha. As with other offerings, the purpose is to accumulate meritorious qualities and let go of our egoistic patterns and point of view, but it is not strictly necessary.

Student: Concerning the seven offering bowls, would you take the flowers down, remove the food, and throw the water out each night?

Rinpoche: Yes. The water should be removed each night. The flower can be taken down each night or left for a couple of days, as long as it is changed when it has withered or lost its petals. If you have problems getting real flowers, you can use good quality artificial flowers. The incense can be left on the shrine whether it is burning or not. You can also use a separate incense bowl for burning.

As for the lamp, the best thing is to light it and offer it every day. If you cannot, do not just leave it empty. If you have made food offerings in the morning such as fruit, cookies, and so on, you can take them down in the evening and use them, and then the next day you make a new offering. If you have other appropriate items you would like to offer,

such as additional flowers, you can put these wherever they seem to fit. In any case, all these offerings are very important.

Student: Is it acceptable to just put water in the seven bowls, if you do it with the right mental attitude?

Rinpoche: Yes. If you are not able to get all the offerings—if they are not available or if you cannot afford them—then offering water is fine. Actually, this was done traditionally, for two reasons. First, water is available almost anywhere, and second, with water there will not be pride, spiritual materialism, or miserliness. There is always the possibility of pride or miserliness interfering with the wholeheartedness of our offerings, but if we offer water there is little reason to worry about these things.

Incidentally, water is very difficult to get in Tibet, especially in the winter, so the other objects may actually be easier to get. It's a big deal to offer water, because there are no hot water pipes running into the tents! You have to go out and break some ice find water, but about an hour after you offered the water it would be frozen!

Student: When choosing a covering for the shrine, is there any significance to the colors?

Rinpoche: For a general shrine, no. If the fabric is of good quality, then whatever color looks the best is fine. If one is involved with a particular sadhana practice, however, then a specific color may be required. With the full moon practice, for instance, you need a separate shrine with a white cloth.

Student: In terms of the placement of the three levels, I noticed that the bell and dorje are on the same level as the pictures. Is that the correct place for them?

Rinpoche: Yes, that level is the appropriate place, because the bell and dorje are not just for the music offering alone. The bell is a mandala in a sense, with the five prongs symbolizing the five buddhas or five wisdoms. So it is a music offering, and yet it is more than that; it is an object that represents enlightened beings, just like a mandala. On the other hand, the damaru is more for the offering of music or, rather, sound, and doesn't really possess any profound meaning by itself, so it would not be on that level.

Student: Would it go on the same level as the offerings?

Rinpoche: Yes, that's right, like the cymbals and the gyaling.

Student: What exactly is Tara? Is she a yidam?

Rinpoche: Actually, the deities that you relate to are known as jnanasattvas, or wisdom deities (YESHE SEMPA in Tibetan). If you visualize yourself as a deity, this is known as a samayasattva, and this has more to do with uplifting yourself than with relating to the actual deity. The term yidam comes from the Tibetan words YI, meaning mind, and DAM, meaning commitment. Thus, a yidam is a deity you commit your mind to. From

that point until enlightenment, you commit yourself to doing the practice of this particular jnanasattva, which is called yidam practice.

In this way, a yidam is generated more by the strength of your practice than by the actual deity. Any of the wisdom deities could be yidams. So yes, Tara is a yidam too.

Student: If one has an inherent affinity for certain yidams, will one's guru know that and guide one accordingly?

Rinpoche: Yes, that is possible. The essential nature of jnanasattvas is all the same, yet we might have a stronger affinity to certain ones because of former connections with certain practices. If you have a strong attraction for a deity or the sense of having really worked with this deity (which is quite possibly true), then relating to the particular deity as a yidam can become very meaningful.

There are also other ways such affinities can be discovered. For example, there are sometimes long series of empowerments that last for several weeks. If you make an offering of flowers, and these flowers fall on the seed-syllable of the mandala of a certain deity, then you will work with that deity as your yidam. Or sometimes your teacher will specify a particular deity for you to work with, and will give you the corresponding instructions as well.

Student: If the wrathful or forceful form of the deity is placed in the shrine area, are there certain conventions or customs with regard to it, such as covering and uncovering it?

Rinpoche: Yes, there is one situation where one works on a very personal yidam practice with a particular deity. This involves a separate, enclosed, personal shrine; the deity involved may be in a wrathful or peaceful form, but in any case the shrine is enclosed. The practice is so personal that even the mala used for it must have a separate case. Also, because of its highly personal nature, it would not be something that you talk to others about. This is not due to selfish reasons, but rather it is because you have committed yourself to personally work with this practice. You will find that it is not necessary to share it with others; in fact, it might be important not to share it with others.

In terms of a general shrine, there is not usually any need to show some deities and keep others hidden. As a beginner, though, there might be people who encounter your shrine you find it difficult to relate to all the images. This is especially true here in the West, where we want to know all the details right away, and we get annoyed if we cannot. If somebody feels excluded, they might want to criticize your shrine, the practice, or Buddhism. This could be a serious and destructive force, since this person does not have the slightest idea of the outer, inner, and ultimate meanings of this particular situation or sacred object. So when you think that some people might not be able to relate to certain objects in a positive way, especially beginners, you can just put them away or keep them covered.

At the Karma Triyana Dharmachakra monastery in Woodstock, for example, we welcome any visitors, whoever they are and whatever their background. Certain people, of course, do have problems relating to the shrine, and they ask questions like, "Is this

really what you do?” or “Is this what you are involved with?” This can be difficult. In such a situation you cannot really give a full explanation, nor would an explanation help. It would only create more problems.

The best thing to do is just let them keep whatever impressions they have and try to make the situation a little more comfortable for them. Then as we become more involved in practice and begin to learn more, we become more accommodating, because we know that the objects on the shrine are not just works of art, a piece of paper or a painting; we know that they have much greater significance. In any case, it is not suitable for the intrinsic meanings and profound instructions to be explained right away to someone who does not have the slightest idea of the meaning.

Student: In Hinduism, certain deities have certain seasons and special days. Is this true in Buddhism as well?

Rinpoche: Not exactly, but there are some similarities. For example, certain deities or bodhisattvas may have particular anniversary dates associated with them, dates when they performed certain immaculate deeds that generated the enlightened mind.

Student: I have a nice bronze statue of Maitreya from China, but I don’t really know how to relate to it. Would it be appropriate for a shrine?

Rinpoche: Yes, that statue would be fine. However, from the Tibetan Buddhist point of view, that particular statue is not called Maitreya. The Tibetan Maitreya bodhisattva has a different form and is known as HAI SHAN, who definitely seems to be a bodhisattva or an emanation of one.

The story of Hai’Shan is that there was a time when there was a great drought and famine in the country. At that time he happened to appear as a bodhisattva, and through the power of meditation and meritorious accumulation, he was able to generate a lot of wealth. Because of that, he was able to support many beings—in particular, a thousand young orphans—so in some depictions of him you see children crawling all around him. Being a bodhisattva, he helped these children generate the bodhisattva attitude and experience buddhahood. This is why he is sometimes referred to as the Patron of the Thousand Buddhas. So yes, this would be a fine statue to put on a shrine.

Student: I am not exactly sure that I understand what the nature of a deity is. Is it something that we create in our minds, which then becomes real, or is it actually a creature in another realm?

Rinpoche: That would depend on the level of understanding and the level of your relationship. There is what might be called a “relative divine being,” a being which performed wholesome deeds and for a certain number of lifetimes is now experiencing constructive power to aid and benefit others. From our perspective, there are divine qualities involved, and so it seems that these divine beings could be existing in another realm. They may have some divine qualities, both in outlook and the sort of power they have, and they may appear to have eternal and profound abilities, but in actuality there is only the highest realization and embodiment of mundane or conditioned goodness.

If you relate to these beings, you may temporarily experience some kind of protection and happiness, either because of actual divine powers or because of psychological self-manipulation. But it is questionable whether you will be truly changed or not when you go on with your life, because after you have gone through some different experiences, your same patterns may begin repeating again. This is one level of relationship that takes place, and there is no ultimate benefit in that relationship because whatever is realized is eventually exhaustible and part of cyclic existence.

As for the deities we have been discussing, there are two additional levels of divinity, which may be a little difficult to understand. On the first level, there are those who were at one time ordinary beings, but were able to experience the perfect awakened state of mind by working on the path of dharma. Currently they work for the benefit of all beings by manifesting in different forms. If you work with them through constant meditation, you will begin to experience your inherent sanity, so in this sense you are identifying with this particular deity. This inherent sanity was not divinely given to you; rather, because of the existence of these jnanasattvas, you were able to recognize your own potential for enlightenment. If your relationship is continuous, at some point you will also experience the jnanasattva level of realization.

The second level is that of the primordial buddha and deities. Certain deities are manifestations of the nature of ultimate reality, also known as the primordial wisdom or the totally awakened state of mind. We can also relate to deities on this level.