

A Stone Made of Heart

By Zach Summerfield

The stone was perfect. It fitted neatly in my hand, flat, triangular, and pointed like an Indian arrowhead. Thoughtfully, I rubbed its ridges with my thumb. Plain and simple as it was, it housed a spiritual essence. It might not have been a crystal from my altar, or my father's black sapphire ring, but it was my gift, to be given with a heart of generosity.

My gift was soon to be sealed in a magnificent new stupa at the Maui Dharma Center in Paia, Hawaii, along with countless tiny handmade tsa tsas, scrolls of prayers embodying love, compassion, and wisdom, crystals, necklaces, rings, and religious artifacts brought lovingly to the site by the local community.

Upon completion, the Lha Bab Peace Stupa would be a tribute to the late Lama Tenzin – a symbol of the universal teachings on love and compassion – and had been commissioned by the Center's resident teacher, Lama Gyaltzen.

The sunshine that day was hot and blinding. I sat in the shade of a stand of banana trees, watching people preparing the offerings that were to be blessed on the shrine. A long line of laity wound around the steps leading to the top of the stupa, while monitors below wrapped scarves around faces, covering the devotees' noses and mouths. Tibetan lamas dressed in fiery red and yellow robes sat near the stupa, stoking up the flames, ringing bells and chanting mantras.

Monks from the local Zen community appeared in their traditional, dignified all-black robes. I could recognize the chanting of OM MANI PADME HUM, the Mantra of Compassion, and OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNIYE SOHA, the Mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha. Helpers offered cups of water to ease the coughing and severe throat clearing of one of the chanting lamas.

I glanced at my simple stone gift. Now it seemed no different than the gravel on which we were walking. My spirituality was faltering. Distracting myself, I tried to strike up a conversation with an Asian woman in turquoise. I dared not reveal to her the nature of my meager offering. An acquaintance had already scoffed at it.

Still, I held the stone lovingly in my hand, warming it with heart energy and repeating the mantras with the lamas. In one respect, I felt that it was as worthy as gold or any other offering. One effect of the teachings, as I understand them, is to transmute anger to compassion, hatred to love, evil to



goodness; surely a pure intention and the rumination of the mantras would purify any mind-made taint of lowliness attributed to my humble offering. I was especially encouraged by Lama Gyaltzen, who strolled past me as I was standing in a state of great doubt, staring at the ground. His "hello" conveyed the purest sense of welcome and friendliness.

I was almost the last in line to place my offering. I adjusted a yellow scarf around my face, and tied it in the back. When I admitted to the woman in front of me that it was my first time through, she handed me a cloth with the crown for an elaborate religious piece she was carrying so that we could make an offering together.

The stupa was still under construction and the steps rose to a scaffold on which we could circle the top, where a lama was receiving the offerings and placing them inside. I recognized my friend Jeff, a seasoned lay practitioner, who was assisting the lamas. My eyes flashed happily when I saw him kneeling at the window into the stupa, and I wondered if he recognized me with the scarf wrapped around my face – I thought I looked like a kind of spiritual bandit. When

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his eyes lit up, I felt that he did know me: In that moment we were sharing that feeling of spiritual banditry: childlike glee, presence, and goodness.

We knelt. My companion asked me to crown her piece with the ornament so that she could hand it via a go-between to a lama who was positioned further inside the stupa, arranging the treasures. The ornament was small and bell-shaped; I took hold of it and placed it assertively and properly into the rice that filled the top tier of her piece, seating it firmly into the grains. Apparently pleased, she offered the copper-ringed, wedding-cake-like piece. Without a word, it was taken into the stupa and, after the appropriate obeisance, the woman got up and left.

I was left there kneeling, dumbfounded and awkward. The helper inquired, "Didn't you bring anything?" Sheepishly, I palmed my stone into the offering cloth. Stumbling through an er-um moment, head bowed, and feeling about as humble as a run-over and pounded-into-the-ground pebble, I handed forth the offering, saying, "Well, I brought this stone. . . ."

To my astonishment, the helper – apparently responding to a quality I didn't know I had – acknowledged my stone with a robust "Yes!" and the lama's face lit up as my offering was graciously received. I felt great appreciation and gratitude, thanking them all profusely. We bowed to each other, smiling, with hands pressed close at our hearts. Solemnly descending the stairwell, still feeling humbled and reverent, I thanked the colorful lama I passed and felt the blessing in his hand-pat on my shoulder.

When I returned later from the beach, I could see that they had sealed the window into the stupa with six inches of concrete and a quarter-inch plate of steel. A handsome Buddha would soon be sitting in that window. And as for me, not normally one to succumb to pomp, ritual, and ceremony, the humility and reverence is still with me and will be, I suppose, forever. It is sealed in my heart as that stone is now sealed in the Paia Peace Stupa. ☸

Note: His Holiness the Dalai Lama was scheduled to arrive on the Hawaiian island to bless the stupa in April.

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