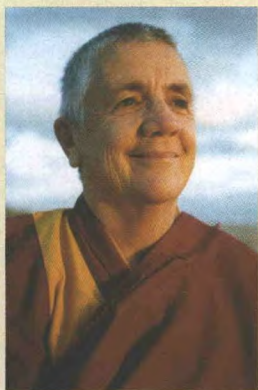


The Perfect Altar



Welcome to MIXED MOTIVES, a new regular column by Ven. Tenzin Chönyi, a.k.a. Dr. Diana Taylor, an Australian-born Buddhist nun and psychologist. She shows us how the spiritual path can easily get undermined by the ego if we constantly have “mixed motives”. In this issue she talks about our mind – and “the perfect altar ...”

“If you check into how your mind expresses itself, your various views and feelings, your imagination, you will realize that all your emotions, the way you live your life, the way you relate to others, all come from your own mind. If you don’t understand how your mind works, you’re going to continue having negative experiences like anger and depression. Why do I call a depressed mind negative? Because a depressed mind doesn’t understand how it works. A mind without understanding is negative. A negative mind brings you down because all its reactions are polluted. A mind with understanding functions clearly. A clear mind is a positive mind.”

- Lama Yeshe, Chapter 3 of *Make your Mind an Ocean*

If we are honest we see how often our good intentions in Dharma practice collapse into the lesser intentions of our self-serving egos. Often we think we are acting from a good motive, such as generosity, when the reality is that we are coming from a negative motivation, such as pride.

There is the well-known story of Drontempa who saw a monk circumambulating a monastery. He called to the monk: “It is good to circumambulate, but it would be better to practise Dharma.” The monk then thought he would do prostrations instead, but when Drontempa saw him, he called out, “Good to do prostrations, but better still to practise Dharma”. The same thing happened when the monk tried reciting mantras or making many offerings, even when he tried meditating. What was wrong? When he asked, Drontempa said three times, “Give up this life in your mind.” Drontempa was referring to the Eight Worldly Dharmas: acquiring or not

acquiring things, comfort or discomfort, interesting or uninteresting sounds, praise or criticism. The Twenty-first Century versions of the Eight Worldly Dharmas are called neuroses.

Psychiatry coined the word “narcissism” to refer to this self-serving ego. It came from the myth of Narcissus, the ultimate self-admirer. He fell in love with his own image reflected in a pool. The problem was that the image could not love him back. Rather than shattering his own image into a thousand pieces, he died of thirst at the pool. If we want to eliminate the self-serving ego, then we need to shatter its image. Cherishing our narcissistic image is cherishing our self-serving ego.

The motives that come from the self-cherishing ego can trick us into thinking they come from a clear mind. If we investigate carefully, we can separate them out. This means taking a clear and courageous look at ourselves. That is the psychological task in realizing emptiness.

Rules, rules, rules

I was once criticised for not filling my water bowls properly. I was told I should measure them with a rice grain. Should I measure it by the length or the width of the rice grain? Which variety of rice? What does it mean to fill the water bowls “properly”? What are the rules, and why do we have them anyway?

Rules are great for boosting the self-serving ego, particularly pride. Keeping to the fine print of ritual can come from pride or it can come from delight. Geshe Baen Gung-gyael knew about mixed motives. He set up the very best offerings on his altar because his benefactor was coming to visit. Suddenly he realized he really wanted his benefactor to think he was a good monk. He jumped up and threw ash all over the offerings. He caught himself out – his motives were mixed. The way we react to rules and ritual can give us insight into our mixed motives.

Rules are handy because we do not have to make decisions. Everything is in black and white. Rules can give us freedom, such as feeling confident that other cars will drive on the correct side of the road. They can also be like a prison. I remember when the acceptable length of a school uniform was three inches below the knee. That rule felt like a prison.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche says¹ that practices are more meaningful and enjoyable if you know the reasons why they work, rather than just following the rules of a tradition and invoking this or that. There are rules, which we call precepts, for lay people, for retreat, for Tantric practitioners, for monks and nuns. The purpose of these rules is to help protect the mind so that we become free from problems and obstacles, all the sufferings. All our wishes for happiness, up to highest enlightenment, even the cause of happiness for all sentient beings, become fulfilled.



Altar in Lama Zopa Rinpoche's room.

Rules become all-important when our self-confidence is very shaky. For a person with a chaotic or fearful mind, routine and rules mean being in control, at least for a time. This is the logic behind obsessive-compulsive behaviour. Excessive adherence to rules becomes a way of escaping from other suffering such as depression and the causes of that depression. But when we are unsure or afraid, then rules can help to develop self-confidence, such as a child knowing how to get to school. We cannot work out which is which by just observing someone else. We can only judge by examining our own minds.

When our motives are clear, then filling water bowls is a symbolic act with positive karmic benefits. Offering cool water gives rise to pure ethics. Similarly, offering the deliciousness of the water, its lightness and clarity, and its kindness to the stomach, all have positive karmic benefits. On the other hand, when our motives are from self-cherishing, whether disguised or not, then we create the karma for more self-cherishing.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche has transformed his home in Aptos into a pure land. As you walk in, you are surrounded by a wealth of holy images and offerings and lights carried on the scent of incense. It feels like walking into his personal visualization of the merit field. For someone else the perfect altar may simply be a candle, flower and bowl of fruit. It all depends on the motive. ☸

¹ See commentary on Ghanden Lha Gyama