

Pujas by THE PEOPLE

By Julia Hengst

During rituals like pujas we are at our most human. We get preoccupied with the language of pujas, types of offerings, chanting tunes and styles, and steps we can take to make the pujas “perfect.” But consider this: pujas give us the chance to connect with our big minds and big hearts, even as we are confronted with our impatience, our laziness, our competitive spirit, our jealousy.

Puja means “offering” in Sanskrit, and this practice of making offerings can take many different forms. We can do them alone or with others, with or without our teachers. They can be peaceful or fierce and done with elements like fire and water, or entire pujas can take place in the mind.

Ven. Thubten Dondrub, an FPMT teacher, explains that “a puja ceremony involves making offerings of our devotion, faith and practice and also making actual offerings such as flowers, fruit, etc. We can also do these practices on behalf of other people, or, as is the Tibetan tradition, we can make offerings for the benefit of others who may be experiencing sickness or other problems in their life.” Ven. Dondrub also says pujas give us a chance to develop devotion to our teachers in a ritualistic, less intellectual way. For instance, the Guru Puja (*Lama Chöpa*) “actually contains all of the points of the Lam Rim meditation on guru devotion, but presented in a way that directly appeals to our senses and emotions”.

On another level, pujas connect us with benevolent, invisible (for most of us) energy sources that can help us. Long-time practitioner, retreator and FPMT staff member **Kendall Magnussen** thinks of a puja as the “handshake” – an opportunity for us to connect with numberless holy beings who want nothing more than our ultimate happiness. “But these beings are not omnipotent,” she says. “If we don’t extend our hand, the holy ones who wish to help us have nothing to grab onto in order to lift us up.” There is a saying in yoga: the more you give to yoga, the more yoga gives to you. In this way, pujas are most successful when our side of the handshake is firm: the more consciously we participate, the greater the potential shift in our mind and our circumstances.

Solo or Group

Can you do a puja alone? Yes, you can, and some people, like **Ven. Tenzin Chogyi**, prefer making their puja offering

a personal affair because they can sink into the meditation practice more deeply. “As a result of more than six years of solitary retreat, I usually find it distracting to practice with others in general, especially if we are reciting or chanting out loud ... I attend pujas at centers more for a sense of camaraderie and to promote harmony than I do from a feeling there is much benefit for my mind.”

In terms of generating merit, though, group pujas give us a karmic bonus – every person doing the puja accumulates the same amount of merit as all participants combined. Score! Kendall Magnussen points out another benefit of group pujas: “When I was working as a spiritual program coordinator at Land of Medicine Buddha, I often was not in the mood to do the assigned puja of the day, but because I was in charge I had no choice! I was never sorry after participating in a group puja – it always feels GOOD on a very deep level to join with others for a positive purpose using the most powerful tools available to make a karmic shift for the benefit of the world.”

Sera IMI House director, **Ven. Tenzin Namdak**, enjoys doing pujas and prayers on his own because he can meditate on certain sections of the Lam Rim as long as he likes. However, because the IMI monks are part of Sera Monastery, they are required to join in the big Sera pujas, where up to 2,500 monks participate. “Doing pujas in a group is very important in a Sangha community because you can meditate and have the blessings of the power of the object: the Sangha community itself. The pujas are compulsory, so with that discipline it makes it easy to go – we don’t have to find excuses not to go. The pujas also create a very good community feeling, which you need in a monastery or nunnery.”

Newbies

How do you explain something like the Guru Puja – with its focus on intense guru devotion – to newcomers, especially if they come from an individualistic society? I asked **Ven. Tenzin Nangsel** of Mahamudra Centre in New Zealand if she worries that the religiosity of such ceremonies will alienate newcomers? She replied at length:

“Yes, I’m very aware that the ritual side of practice can be very off-putting to beginners if they don’t understand what we’re trying to do with our minds, the visualizations, and the



Clockwise from left:

Offering to Lama Zopa Rinpoche at a Long Life Puja from left: Ven. Chosang, Ven. Mindrol and Ven. Holly.

Guru Puja (Lama Chöpa) PHOTO: Caroline Keill.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche with the five dakinis during a Long Life Puja at Kopan Monastery. PHOTO: Sandra Galistan

Long Life Puja in Singapore. PHOTO: Caroline Keill



mind-states we're trying to cultivate in the pujas. The meanings of pujas aren't always directly apparent from the words. I try to bring it into everyday experience they can relate to. I try to draw parallels between what we're doing in the puja and rituals in their own culture they're already familiar with.

"For example, we're all very familiar with traditional ways of welcoming someone we value highly into our homes. We'd clean and make our home very beautiful. We'd prepare delicious food and drinks and attend to everything we could think of to offer them and bring them pleasure.

"It's the same in a puja. We're saying welcome, we're so happy you've come. Please would you like something to eat and drink – we've prepared this for you. Then we'd settle in for a chat. We tell our guests we've been struggling with a few things (our afflictive emotions) and that sometimes we haven't been so skillful – we've harmed ourselves or others and we wish we'd done things differently. Then we happily tell our guests about the times we were able to be kind and loving, and we say we'd like to be able to do it more often. Then we tell them we're still struggling so it would help us if the buddhas could stay and show us how to develop love, compassion and all the qualities we need to be of real use to other beings."

Ven. Elisabeth Drukier of Kalachakra Centre in Paris says it is difficult to introduce certain pujas to new people, but "pujas like Medicine Buddha or Tara puja, which are sort of 'healing pujas' are popular with newcomers".



Lama Zopa Rinpoche at a Fire Puja in Milarepa Cave, Tibet.

"Guru Puja is definitely not for new people but we welcome them anyway; they like the singing, the devotional atmosphere in general, and the meditation on the graduated path," she said.

In several centers, it seems as if younger people tend not to engage in pujas and other ceremonial rituals as much as other generations. Root Institute Spiritual Program Coordinator Kirsti Kilbane offered a good theory. She thinks pujas "can be a bit scary or at least not so enticing for young people and even for more mature people who are new to the Dharma, especially as Buddhism is so often touted as a 'mind science' or a 'way of life,' as opposed to a religion".

"Many Western people I have met report coming to the Dharma with a feeling of disconnection from and resistance to what they see as meaningless, dry rituals from their own religious backgrounds," Kirsti said. "They enjoy the philosophical, psychological and meditative aspects of Buddhism and with no understanding of the meaning or psychological benefits available through rituals, they can possibly become confused or decide that they would rather not engage in that aspect of the practice."

The Great Debate: What Language

Some people say chanting in Tibetan brings more blessings. Others reason that chanting in Sanskrit is more powerful, as it

is possible (but not proven) it's the language Buddha spoke. Still others believe you need to understand the words you're chanting for it to have any meaning at all – that is has little to do with the tunes or language and everything to do with your personal comprehension of the words' meanings. It is safe to say that most centers around the world take – appropriately – the middle road, and chant their pujas both in Tibetan and the native tongue. For instance, **Joyce Teng**, one of Khen Rinpoche Geshe Tsephel's students in San Jose, California, prefers to chant most of the Guru Puja in Tibetan, but the Lam Rim prayer in Chinese – this seems to be a common pattern.

James Blumenthal, Associate Professor of Buddhist Philosophy: "The Buddha always taught in local languages according to the sutras. His omniscience made this possible. He did not speak Sanskrit. Only male Brahmins knew Sanskrit at that time in India. The Buddha said his Dharma could be taught in any language. The versions of the Buddhist canon that we have today, including Pali and what remains of the Sanskrit canon (not much) are translations from North Indian local languages circa 500 BCE. Technically, other than mantras which are basically sacred syllables, the language of all the rest should be irrelevant. It can all be translated. Count me in the group that says people get a lot more out of what they understand than some exotic sounds for which they have no comprehension of the meaning. That is not to say that there

cannot be great merit in chanting pujas in languages we do not understand, like Tibetan, Chinese, Sanskrit, or Pali. When done with faith, reciting in languages one does not know can be meritorious. But at some point, if Buddhism is to take hold in the West, we are going to need to understand what we are saying and doing. Again, other than mantras, which cannot be translated, there is no technical reason that doing a puja in Tibetan is more beneficial than English, other than if that is what pleases the lama.”

Several practitioners share their thoughts on the language issue:

Ven. Tenzin Namdak: “The Sera Jey Monastery pujas are all in Tibetan, and even when the IMI monks do our own pujas like Lama Chöpa, we do it in Tibetan because we all know the language. Tibetan is nice and chantable, which makes the pujas easy to recite, and the Tibetan language is also much richer in her meaning than Western languages when it comes to Dharma. But of course, this is only the case if you know the language yourself.”

Kendall Magnussen: “I think that blessings are experienced when the mind is moved – whether in the form of inspiration or insight. Some of the traditional tunes that have come down through our Tibetan lineage were inspired by dakinis, or angels, who gave these tunes to practitioners because they have a special power to move the mind. Personally, I am inspired very much by many of these tunes, so I like the Tibetan chanting.

“At the same time, because I have such an intellectual mind, I am more easily inspired by a tune when I also understand what I am chanting. So, I like chanting in Tibetan when I know the meaning and the tune is particularly moving. I also like chanting in English when someone has managed to put the English chanting to a tune that moves my mind. Unfortunately, to date, there are not so many pujas in English that are chantable. Still, as far as chanting and pujas are concerned, I think the blessings come from the tunes because of the effect they have on one’s subtle body and mind to effect a shift of awareness.”

Ven. Sarah Thresher: “Rinpoche often gives several reasons for chanting in Tibetan: when done slowly it gives time to meditate; when done beautifully it can inspire, uplift and move the mind, and it becomes an offering (the actual meaning of puja) to the merit field; and if the chants come from the lineage lamas and dakinis, or great realized beings out of bodhichitta, they have the power to bless (i.e. transform) the mind. But Rinpoche doesn’t recommend chanting everything in Tibetan. There are

many times he will say to recite verses slowly in English and meditate on the meaning – especially the seven limb prayer. I think it is important to strike the right balance between chanting and knowing what you are chanting so you can mix it with the mind.

“It seems that many Asians tend towards the faith side of Buddhism while many Westerners are attracted to the intellectual side. In the great monasteries of Sera, Ganden, Drepung, it is clear that both are needed. Sometimes I think Westerners can reach a sticking point in their practice because of too much intellectual study and not enough purification and accumulating merit – which is the point of pujas: lots of seeds in the ground but no sun or water.”

Ven. Tenzin Lhamo: “To me, whether a person chants in English or Tibetan speaks to the karmic potentials that individuals carry (or not) with certain practices and specific deities; also, if one wishes to establish a connection with a deity – dial that number, so to speak – it provides the exact pathway to do so. I think it is possible to love reciting the Medicine Buddha Puja in English, for example, because of karmic links with it in that language, while perhaps the puja to Twenty-One Taras might seem more meaningful in Tibetan, for the same reason.

“In the context of leading a puja, when I am in a group with others, if they have recited formulaic prayers many times, I ask them to spend just a few moments offering the prayers in their own words, to ensure that the prayers connect with their hearts. Also, because of karma, some people really love rituals and formalized ceremonies while others grow bored and disrespectful. So, unless they understand that as an obstacle and wish to work to overcome it, it is probably best in the beginning to find something that suits their inclinations.”

How do I know what pujas to do?

Fortunately, Lama Zopa Rinpoche has made this very easy for us! Just contact the FPMT Education Department or any FPMT center to get an idea of the different kinds of pujas there are and what their specific benefits are. In addition, most FPMT centers do a number of pujas on a regular basis, as advised by Lama Zopa Rinpoche and this is a great way to do some personal experimentation with pujas and see what resonates with you. ☸

Julia Hengst recently graduated from the University of California at Berkeley with a degree in Mass Communications. She plans to pursue a graduate degree in journalism from the same school.