Advanced Altar-Building

**Meaningful objects, personal values, and aspecting systems**

Course document for October 7, 2015—Deicidus, Internet School of Magic

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This class should really be titled, “Basic Altar-Building”, but I have not seen this material presented anywhere else, and it’s a catchier title. This class will cover the functioning of an altar and how and why one would want to work with one.

# A Phone Call

The inspiration for this class came when a friend called and was very depressed. He reported feeling depressed for no clear reason and even that he was having thoughts of suicide (he had talked to others about this and had no intention of following through—the thoughts were merely occurring, unbidden, and this was distressing him). He said that people were suggesting putting him on antidepressant medication, and this possibility seemed to be making him even more depressed. This is a guy who is normally very happy and joyful about life.

I encouraged him of course to get therapy (I think everyone should have a good therapist), but my first question was, “How is your altar looking? What kind of altar do you have right now?” It seemed to me that this particular depression was simply from a lack of a rudder, that he had drifted away from his core values and the things that got him excited about life. He had become distracted by the things in life and forgotten his passions.

I then told him the material of this class, about how to build an altar and why doing so is so important and vital to maintaining one’s center, and for that matter even of defining and having a center in the first place. By the end of the conversation, he was excited to go on a quest to find the objects for his altar, and a few days later his depression had lifted. (However, it is important to keep in mind that this new mood of happiness is just as transient as the prior depression, and that without long-term work with an altar or equivalent practice, the conditions for the depression will not be understood or captured and are likely to recur, apparently at random).

Realizing that I hadn’t yet done a class on this topic, I decided to share it with you. If you’ve been following the prior classes, you will see how my idea of an altar draws together most of the other concepts I have covered, into a simple practice which nevertheless covers most of the activities of the practicing magician.

# The Purpose of the Altar

The typical altar is a haphazard collage of knick-knacks, statuettes, and decorative items arranged on the all-important *altar cloth*. I think many people do not consider why they are constructing their altar in the way that they do; instead, their altar practice comes from an unexamined image of what they think a spiritual person should do or what an altar means. This produces a stereotyped altar rather than one created to work for the person.

I think the basic purpose of an altar is to give us a space to center ourselves and to identify a personal set of core values. There is a particular magical, alchemical method to creating and maintaining an altar that I will present in this class. There are three aspects to this practice: using objects to capture and tease out personal aspects; keeping lists of personal traits and values; and studying an aspecting system in order to link it with and balance our personal qualities.

# The Function of the Altar

The purpose of the objects on the altar is to allow us to draw down, tease out, and capture the essences of ourself which we want to identify and preserve or transmute. This is what it means in a myth when someone becomes enlightened and “tames the 40 demons” or “names the 100 passions” as their first act. We are going to capture our personal demons and angels into objects, so that we can remember them and continue to work with them.

# Choosing Objects for the Altar

Objects for the altar can come to you in three ways: They can “jump out at you” with a numinous glow, they can be given to you as a gift, or you can assign an object to function in a specific way on the altar (using an object you already had, or buying one at a store). The most effective objects are usually those found because they are glowing with personal Color, objects that jump out at us as representative of a certain idea, personal quality, or emotion. Whether we find or buy these objects, these are the types of things we want to collect on our altar—all of our most numinous glowing objects and concepts, the things which inspire and energize us.

For example, if one wants to be a writer, one could place a pen (an elegant pen, or any pen) on their altar and assign it the quality of writing, authorship, or facility with language. This naturally lends itself to an association with Thoth, god of writing, or one of his altar-egos, Hermes or Mercury, gods of communication and often of writing. We can allow this object to remind us that one of our centers is Writing, this most important art and source of renewal.

# Listing Personal Demons

It’s important to become aware of your various *stances*, your characteristic modes of subjectivity. This is particularly important for the negative ones—to characterize them and understand when they happen, so that you can be aware of them and mitigate their damage or heal (transmute) them. These are your personal demons, and one function of an altar is to stalk and capture them.

To this end it can be helpful, at first, to scatter a few unidentified stones on your altar. These can be found or bought at a store, and the lists of associated qualities can either be used or forgotten. I have asked several stone magic users about where these lists of associations for stones come from, whether they are objective, subjective, or merely historical lists, and I’ve never gotten a clear answer. Stones certainly have different aesthetic feelings or essences, and these can help us to tease out and identify personal qualities. Notice the way you assign qualities to the stones, and use these to identify personal qualities.

You can begin to list your personal complexes, or demons, as you identify them. Observe your behavior in everyday life and notice when you have extreme reactions. Begin to characterize these reactions and come up with words to describe them, and write these words down. Begin to cluster these words and put them into categories, thus identifying your primary personal demons as clusters of negative perceptions. What we are identifying here are characteristic traumatized stances that we take, such as paranoia, feeling persecuted, being aggressive, etc.

One easy way to identify your demons is to notice the negative judgments you make of others and the negative perceptions you have as others. Assume that *all* of them are merely projections of your own unconscious complexes. This exercise can very quickly catalogue all of your commonly-recurring complexes (demons or personality stances).

# Listing Personal Angels / Core Values

Similarly, we can begin making lists of our core values, the things which inspire us, our core passions. These can be things such as Beauty, Truth, Wisdom, or slightly more concrete thing such as Writing or Art, or roles such as Writer or Father. Whatever level we take for these positive attributes, we will also begin to find distinct clusters in the things which attract us. Identify these clusters and name them using your favorite word or two from each set.

It can be helpful to pair the positive and negative qualities, and there is a tendency for a natural duality to exist between our best and worst qualities (passions).

# Drawing Down the Qualities

Playing with the objects on our altar, we can begin to tease apart these qualities and draw them down into particular objects. We will find that certain qualities “stick” to certain objects, and that we either enjoy the presence of that object-quality on our altar or that it begins to annoy us. This is all information we can use to work with that quality or to refine our set of core values.

At first, the objects on the altar will not have a clear purpose or meaning, and the meanings will keep changing and wandering from object to object. But as we work with our lists of qualities and play with the objects on the altar, gradually we will develop lasting associations that inspire us and motivate us to continue.

# Working with an Aspecting System

At a still higher level, we can link our personal qualities and objects with the universalized essences of an aspecting system. Any magical alphabet or divinatory system or tree of life can be used as a system to classify universal energies. Since the purpose of these systems is to create an image of the whole, their energies tend to be balanced and comprehensive, so studying a system like this can give us insight into aspects of ourself that we are not paying attention to.

You can begin assigning your lists of personal qualities or complexes to glyphs in your chosen aspecting system. Assigning the pen to Thoth was an example of this. My obsession with Color, I label as Iris, and code as 2. Just as working out which objects become linked with which personal gods and demons takes time, so does learning an aspecting system and figuring out which of its elements link best with each of your items. This is difficult, because as qualities seem to merge and differentiate, their number keeps changing as well.

Working with an aspecting system in this way is essentially the creation of a mental altar, and over time this mental altar can reduce our need for a physical altar. One of the best descriptions of the kabbalistic tree of life I ever read was as a “mental filing cabinet”, and despite the simplicity of this metaphor, it does describe one of the most extensive and long-term uses of the tree of life or any aspecting system, the habit which brings the system to life and makes it work for us.

# Meeting in the Middle

In this way, we are working from the bottom up in constructing the altar and teasing out our personal qualities, and from the top down in working with an external aspecting system which claims to represent the whole. As we work with the aspecting system, we begin to pin down absolute qualities which function as abstract idealized essences. As we work with the altar, we begin to tease out personal categories or centers which drive and motivate us. We allow the two to meet in the middle, developing abstract ideals for our personal values and demons, and finding corresponding life experience for these abstract essences that are described in books. This allows us to make the systems real and intelligible, and to make our lives more intelligible in light of the systems.

# Symbolic Objects

The objects on our altar become links between matter and psyche; they take on qualities of both. The altar is our interface into the spiritual essences which drive us. As we come to more strongly assign particular essences to particular objects, those objects can become not just representations of that essence or concept, but actualizations of it, instantiations of it in time and space. They become somewhat translucent and homogeneous in their apparent substance, and they act as windows or touchstones into the feeling or essence that has inhered in the object. This is what it mean when it is said a spirit has chosen to reside in a stone or statue.

# Friend Objects

Another type of object I keep on my altar or consider to be part of my “extended altar” are what I simply call “friend objects”—objects which have such a strong link to a particular person that they come to represent the person or link you to them. These objects can help us to feel connected to others or remind us that we have friends. They can also come to represent certain qualities—however, **I would recommend keeping friend objects separate from symbolic objects, that is, avoid assigning abstract qualities to objects that you also associate with specific people.** Doing so does a disservice to the people the object represents, by linking them with archetypal qualities rather than focusing on the actual person who exists. However, sometimes both of these things (a person and an abstract or personal quality) come to be associated with the same object and there is little we can do about it but remind ourselves that they are actually separate and only linked by our personal sphere.

# Conclusion—A Functional Altar

Thus, the altar becomes highly functional rather than merely ritualistic or decorative. It becomes the hub or steering-wheel of your personal reality, the bridge of your spaceship or merkavah, so to speak. Your personal touchstones come gradually to align with traditional, universalist models, which is useful for orienting and for encompassing the whole of imaginable possibilities.