

Lesson One

Purpose: The purpose of lesson one is to get you familiar with setting up an altar, performing a ritual and creating a sacred space for communing with spirits and ancestors.

It is recommended that you read through this entire lesson prior to performing the ritual.

Setting up an Ancestor Altar

Ancestor altars are meant to be small and a place where you can communicate and ask guidance from your ancestors or those you know who have passed on. While they should remain in one place, if you live in an apartment or a place where you can not keep an altar out, you can move it. For your next few lessons, you will be using your ancestor altar to practice banishing negative energies, cleansing space, casting the circle, and communicating with spirit.

You will need the following:

A small table to set up an altar

Sage and dish to place it in; a feather or you can use your hand

Salt and small container of water

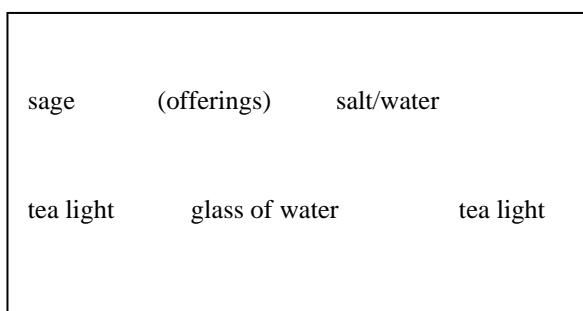
Two tealights

A simple cloth to cover your altar

A glass of water

Offerings

Your altar should be set up a little like this:



Generalized offerings:

- Hot coffee or tea, often sweetened
- Wine or hard alcohol
- Cigarettes/ tobacco
- Desserts, sweets, or candy
- Home cooked food, especially served warm and steaming
- Fresh fruits, cut and ready to eat
- Bread, cut and ready to eat
- Flowers
- Coins

The steps of the ritual are going to be in this order:

Smudging (Banishing)

Salt Water (Cleansing)

Casting the Circle

Lighting Ancestor Candles (The tea Lights)

Ritual to the Ancestors

Meditation/Communication Time

Thanking the Ancestors

Banishing the Circle

BANISHING

To banish negativity from your space, you will be using sage. Light the sage and walking counter-clockwise 3x fan the burning sage with a feather or your hand and say:

“All negative thoughts are banished; all unwanted vibrations are gone. Only the powers and forces I wish will be with me from this moment on”

CLEANSING USING SALT AND WATER

Mix three pinches of salt into the water and say:

“Earth and water now combine to erect this Holy Shrine. None shall enter my grace for this now is my Sacred Space.

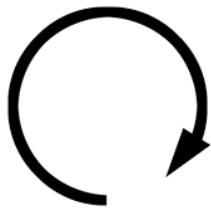
Dip your fingers in the water and walking around clock wise 3x sprinkle the water and say:

“Begone from here all negative thoughts and vibrations, begone by the powers of this pure water and holy earth.”

Casting the Circle:

To cast the circle, stand before the altar and take a deep breath. Wait until you feel a subtle vibration throughout your body. When you are ready, you can either use your index finger or if you have a ritual knife (called an athame) you can use that as well. Going clockwise around in a giant circle, say:

"I conjure and create thee, O symbol of infinity. No beginning. No end. Boundary between the worlds of spirits and men. That to all within, harm will be restrained, and all powers invoked shall be contained. So, shall it be"



Lighting the Ancestor Candles:

Light the tea light on the left and say:

I light the light that they have made may darkness flee this temple.

Light the tea light on the right and say:

I light the path that they have set, may I follow it in their wisdom.

Once the candles are lit, you are going to call upon a Deity that you work with daily. They will be your guardian and road opener. Say:

(the name of your Deity 3x) I call! This sacred space in which I dwell will serve as my crossroad and meeting place for myself, my ancestors, and the dead. Act as door and guiding light for those I seek. Open the veil between this work and that of the dead. Accept these offerings of fire, light, incense for your services. Please distribute these offerings to my ancestors when I call and invite them to partake. See that no uninvited spirits find their way to this altar.

Now is the time to call in your ancestral spirits. Take the glass of water from the center of the altar and hold it in your hands. Say:

I now call on the honored dead of my ancestral family, your blood who runs through my veins. Come to this altar and accept my thanks for the sacrifices and struggles you made for our family. Accept these offerings before you along with my love and gratitude. May these offerings take the form that most please you!

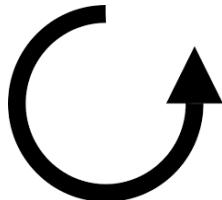
Come to this altar and accept my heartfelt thanks for the sacrifices you made for our family. Accept these offerings of (food, drink, scent, and fire), along with my love and gratitude. May they take the form that most please you!

You can place the glass of water back onto the altar. At this point you may speak or just be silent. Take this chance to commune with your ancestral spirits. Allow them to offer you advice or help give you direction and guidance. Take as long as you wish. When you are ready, you may say your goodbyes and let them go back to the spirit realm. Say:

Thank you to all my ancestors and the dead who have come to commune with me this night. I pray that you enjoyed your offerings and had your fill! Continue to aid and protect me in my life and works and know that I am grateful. You are given license to depart. Return to the resting places you belong, do not linger unduly, and come swiftly again next you are called. My love and gratitude are with you, always! (state the name of your Deity), see to it that all the souls who were called here today are delivered to where they ought to be, and help the lost souls find their way. This ritual is now closed.

Now is the time to banish the circle. Again, facing the altar, wait until you feel a vibration going through your body. When you are ready, you are going to counterclockwise in big circle with your index finger or ritual knife (athame). Say:

“I hereby retract and dissolve all that has taken place upon this sacred ground until such time as these powers shall be needed again by me, so shall it be.”



You can leave the tea lights lit until they burn out. You will keep the glass of water on the altar and change that every other day if not daily. If you have left any food offerings, you can either bury them outside or in a flowerpot, or, you can share the food with your family as a way of honoring your ancestors.

Repeat this ritual once a week.

ADDITIONAL STUDY

The Elements

The four elements represent our intellect willpower, desires, feelings, emotions and manifestations. They have form and consciousness. They represent the qualities and conditions that we need to observe to align ourselves with nature.

AIR: The element of AIR relates to the East. It stands in relation to breath. Air speaks of intellect and creativity. It represents new beginnings. In the Tarot it is represented by the Wands. The Archangel is Raphael. The color is Blue.

FIRE: FIRE relates to the South. It represents purification and transformations. It is the life giving regenerative powers of the sun. It represents willpower and the force that sparks the creation of our goals. In the Tarot it is represented by Swords. The Archangel is Michael. The color is Red.

WATER: WATER relates to the West. It represents the feminine. Water is seen as the source of life. Water is feeling and emotion. In the Tarot it is represented by Cups. The Archangel is Gabriel. The color is Green.

EARTH: EARTH represents the North. It represents the womb and the grave and the manifestation of goals. It symbolizes grounding and growth. In the Tarot it is represented by the Pentacle/Disks. The Archangel is Uriel. The color is Yellow.

Homework Assignment:

1. What aspect of the ritual did you find difficult?
2. What aspect of the ritual did you find the easiest?
3. What were your feelings when first starting the ritual?
4. What were your feelings when you began to call your ancestors?
5. What part of the ritual was your favorite?
6. Discuss your overall feelings, your likes and dislikes and what you feel like you need work on?

Magickal Journal Assignment: Write down your feelings about the ritual. What did you experience? Write down any dreams or visions you may have after having the ritual.

ADDITIONAL ARTICLES BY ZEHARA:

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Memento Mori: Bones & Veneration of the Dead by Zehara Nachash

I find death comforting. We are all going to end up there. Death is also the one thing in life that does not discriminate; Death does not care if you are rich, poor, what race you are, where you are from, who your family is, what religion you practice, who you pray to. Death is a bit of a coming home after a long journey. I do not fear Death for a find a beauty within Her.

As such, I work a lot with bones, both human and animal, in my spiritual practices. As someone whose life has been entwined with the dead from a young age, my abilities to see and hear beyond the worlds grew exponentially when I started working with bones. The more I worked with bones, the more spirits would communicate with me and with much more ease. When I work with bones--I find it an honor. To hold something so sacred that once supported the weight of a living thing, is a blessing. I always think to myself, what type of energy did that animal once have? I reflect on the essence of the being. With human bones I think of the person: who they may have been, what they may have done. When I hold a human bone in my hand, I think of my ancestors--of all our ancestors-- those who have walked this earth thousands of years before now. Its a sacred honor to hold those bones. Maybe that's why the spirits feel comfortable communicating with me!

There has been a deep spiritual connection to bones that reaches back thousands of years in human history. In 1914, an amateur archaeologist named Ernest Roulin discovered cranial amulets dated to about 3500 B.C. during the Neolithic period. The cranial amulets were oval and had holes drilled in them, presumably to wear to honor the ancestors.

In Tibet, the Kapala (Sanskrit for “skull”) are ritual cups made from the top half of a human skull. The Kapala are used in Buddhist and Tantric ceremonies as a symbolic representation of flesh and blood and, when filled with wine, serves as an offering to the Deities. Monks obtain the skull caps (crania) from sky burials in which human remains lay out in the open for the carrion birds to consume the flesh until the bones are bare. At this point, they are carved and decorated with numerous jewels and metals. Additionally, Tibetan Buddhists play an instrument called a kangling which is flute made from a human femur. This is played at rituals and funerals as a reminder that physical existence is temporary.

Bones are most notably used as divinatory systems in different parts of the world from Africa to Asia. Each bone divinatory system is unique to each culture. The most well-known divination with bones comes from the Sangoma (Zulu) of South Africa. The Sangoma are initiates into the mysteries who use bones to divine and commune with the ancestors on behalf of client, prior to a ritual or for guidance. The bones are thrown, and various patterns will form; at which point the Sangoma will “speak” with the ancestors and dispense advice or healing to the client. The key words here when it comes to using bones in a spiritual practice is ANCESTOR WORSHIP.

Ancestor worship is the veneration of the dead. This belief system reaches far and wide across the globe, and not only shows love and respect for the dead, but also hinges on the belief that the dead are still in existence, albeit, in different form. Not only to do the dead still walk among us, but they also can influence our lives and work as our spiritual advisors. Moreover, Ancestor worship is not taken lightly in those spiritual practices who perform it. They require attention and offerings frequently. They will not work with and for you if you are not making them happy! The best way to honor your ancestors and the dead is by creating a special altar just for them. I have included simple instructions how to not only set up an ancestor altar, but to use bones as way of connecting with the dead.

CREATING AN ANCESTOR ALTAR

Ancestor altars should be a place of comfort for you. A place where you can go and speak with your loved ones whenever you need to. A place where you can go for guidance that you know you will receive.

Find a nice place in your home where you can set up the altar. I like my ancestor altar in my living room because I always see it and am reminded that I am always being guided by my loved ones.

Once you have found a place its now time to set up. I use a white table cloth as that represents to me the souls of those who have crossed over. On the altar place photographs of family members, friends and even animals who have crossed over. Do not put pictures of relatives or friends who were unkind to you. You do not want their energy around! Add bones to the altar (and no it does not have to be the bones of your loved ones!). The bones work as a channel between you and the dead. On the altar have a white candle burning (I prefer 7-day jar candles since you can leave them

burning for a while), always remember to never leave a candle unattended. If your loved ones had something special, they liked: flower, scent, alcohol etc. leave that for them. Most importantly leave several small glasses filled with water. These will need to be changed daily as this is the way you will give an offering to the dead.

You have now created a sacred space in which you can communicate with your loved ones daily.

Honoring the dead with bones is not a scary thing. It's reverence for the being that once covered them and reminds us of our own mortality. Someday, we will walk with the ancestors ourselves.

Vivamus, moriendum est. – Let us live, since we must die.

Spirit Etiquette: By Zehara Nachash

(published in 2019 in Witch Way Magazine)

One of my favorite things to do during summer and fall is picnic at cemeteries. Cemeteries are quiet, peaceful and a great place to connect with the spirits. It's also a great place to do magick and ground your energies.

However, are you aware that there is a proper etiquette when it comes to working with the dead? Just because spirits are disembodied doesn't mean you show them less respect. In fact, you should respect what you can't see! Spirits are not playthings, they were at some point living and breathing beings.

So, what is spirit etiquette?

For starters, when you enter a place that is haunted or domain of the dead, you shouldn't just walk right in and assume its ok to be there. You should always ask permission of the spirit of the cemetery, or at the very least, dead know that you are entering their space. Just walking in, even if it's just for a picnic is just as rude as someone walking into your home uninvited. The simplest way of letting the spirits know that you are coming is to knock three times outside of the cemetery entrance. In my tradition, we call upon Papa Legba to open the door to the spirit realm so that we can enter in respect and honor.

Additionally, I always leave an offering when leaving. Three silver coins are placed somewhere within the cemetery and I will either pour some water into the ground, or I will leave a bottle of rum nearby. This brings me to the next part of spirit etiquette; do not take without giving.

I love collecting graveyard dirt from cemeteries. If someone is dealing with legal issues, graveyard dirt from a lawyer can help. Having issues connecting with family? Grave yard dirt from a grandmother can help alleviate tensions. But, don't think the dirt from their graves is free. You are taking from their home. It's a good time to put your hands on the grave and say, "thank you," followed by leaving some coins or some trinket in return for the gift you have been given.

If you don't have coins, you can always use a rock that you imbue with your energy and thank the spirit for their generosity and leave the rock on the headstone.

Now, what if your house is haunted or if you are entering a known haunted place? The same rules apply. Always let the spirit or spirits know that you are not there to cause harm. In fact, you are there to listen to what they have to say and to acknowledged them. If you are entering a place that is haunted and know the history of the spiritual residence, bring them something that they would have loved. If you know that a spirit loves a specific smell of perfume, bring a bottle of that perfume. If others have experienced the smell of cigar smoke during a haunting—bring some cigars! By recognizing the spirits of the place, they are more likely to want to communicate.

As with everything with the dead, we must remember that not all spirits are going to be nice. The dead are the same way they were when they were living. Walking into a place and antagonizing spirits to show themselves can have negative consequences. If you decide to picnic in an old prison cemetery—remember the spirits who reside there.

If you follow proper etiquette when it comes to the realm of spirit, you will have a peaceful, kind and wonderful relationship. You can enter a cemetery have a picnic and enjoy the company!
