

A Dharma Art Workbook

Number One January 2007



Dharma Art Workbook Introduction

Exercise One: Object Arrangement

THIS WORKBOOK IS INSPIRED BY the dharma art teachings given by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche at Naropa during the late 1970's. The contemplative exercises we have come up with, are based on a variety of skillful means he gave his students. We will not be able to cover all of these, but will include those with which we are most familiar. We have asked several people to contribute to include movement, brush, clay, two dimensional object arranging (i.e. images and type) and other forms people have been working with over the years.

The ground of dharma art is the practice of meditation. It is important to be following a daily schedule of meditation as a support for this exploration. In addition, we recommend that you study the dharma art source books 1-3 available from orders@shambhalashop.com. Each lesson we do here will be based on readings from sourcebook one.

The process we have followed is to start with ten minutes sitting, during which two contemplations from the chapter are read aloud. You can choose to have one or two people be responsible for presenting, to the best of their ability, a brief summary of what they understand the material to be about, and they can lead the sitting, pick the quotes, and read them. Just a phrase or sentence is enough. Then you can move into the exercises themselves followed by a review of the chapter, or reverse that process and start with the study material followed by the contemplative exercise. If you have no presenter(s), just use the quotes provided and skip the section on reviewing the material. Go directly to the exercise. This can be done by an individual or a small group of people. Four would be good to start.

For the first exercise, people should be sitting on the floor, with an 11 x 17 piece of white paper in front of them. During the week they will have found 3 - 5 objects which are not so big that three of them cannot fit on the paper. These can be placed to the right of the paper within easy reach. There are no guidelines for what type of object you choose. Later on, there may be specific recommendations.

There are no other preparations aside from this except to study chapter one thoroughly. A discussion to conclude is a good idea.

“The most penetrating and powerful symbol that ever occurred in our life is, whether you believe it or not, pain.”

“We really don’t want to relate with the actuality of things as they are.”

Start with ten minutes of sitting and reading of the contemplations—either the ones above or if you have a presenter, whatever they choose. Then, sit with eyes closed for a moment and feel your body on the ground and the space around you. Listen to the sounds right near you or inside you. Expand that out and listen to sounds as far away as you can hear them. Let your mind rest and go big.

Open your eyes and pick up the first object. Don’t think about it, just the first one you notice.

Close your eyes and feel the object. Feel its weight, its texture, its temperature. If it had a smell what would it be. Smell it. Develop as much intimacy with the object as you can. If you didn’t know what the object was, would you be able to identify it by touch without looking at it?

Now open your eyes and holding the object over the paper, move it around slowly being mindful of the shadows the object is casting on the paper. Lower it down and feel it coming in contact with the ground. Notice the space around it.

Repeat this process with object two, closing your eyes after you choose it and acquainting yourself with it by means other than visual.

Spend about a minute. When you are ready to place the object be aware of the space left on the paper. When you have placed it pay attention to what happens to the first object. Look at the space between and around the two objects.

Repeat the same thing with object three.

When you are finished look carefully at this arrangement. See if you can identify a gut feeling—like, dislike, couldn’t care less. Close your eyes and let that go. Open your eyes again and soften your focus trying to take the whole thing in, not just the details.

Repeat a few times. See if your feeling changes. If you are doing this in a group, get up and look at each person’s arrangement giving yourself a minute or so in front of it. (You can all move to the left or right.) Sit down so that you are looking at it the way the arranger saw it.

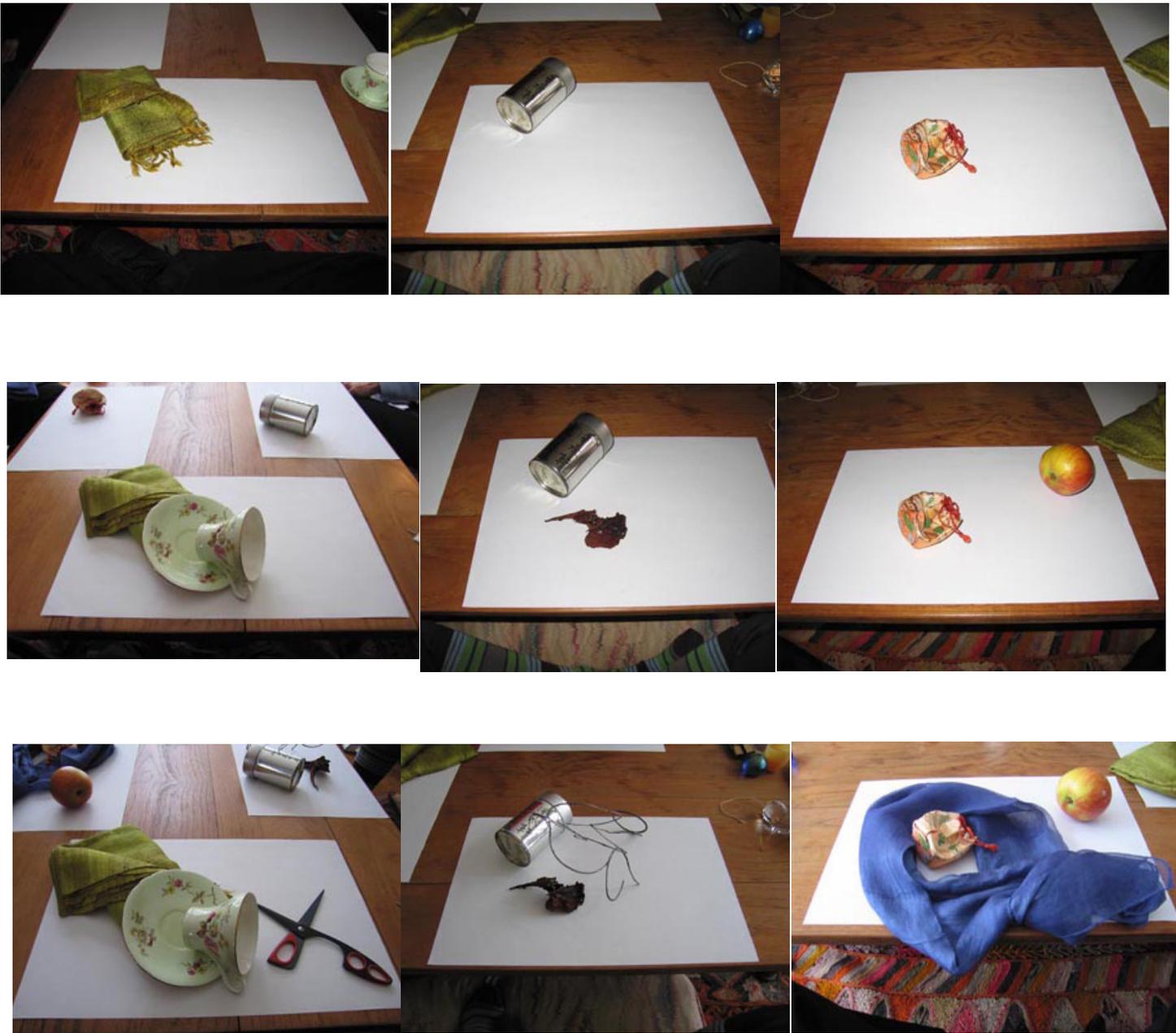
If you have time and the desire, you can repeat the object arrangement process but choose a different object to place first.

It is also really interesting to rotate one space to the left or right so everyone is using someone else’s materials and do a whole object arrangement. Take your time and get a feeling for your initial and subsequent reactions to the finished product.

The aim is not to create a “good” arrangement, nor is it to change how you feel. It’s to slow down and see how you might get stuck with your first impression and above all it’s to start to appreciate that all arrangements have their own distinct quality that has nothing to do with good or bad.

Enjoy yourselves.

—Molly Nudell



These photographs are just to give you an idea of the setup and some possibilities for how you might approach the first object arranging exercise. There were three of us doing this together and as you can see, we tried to demonstrate with these images how the arrangement builds up. We chose objects that we liked for one reason or another, but really the choice is completely up to you. You could choose something you don't care for particularly, or something that intrigues you. Whatever you

would like. When you are experiencing your gut level feeling for both your own and others arrangements, remember that the idea is to see how you get stopped with your first impression and to see if you can look again and again. When you have your discussions, the point is not to critique the arrangements with "I really liked this one and I didn't like that." You can just talk about your experience of making your own arrangement and viewing those of other participants in a non judgmental way.