

Tsa-tsa Making Instructions



compiled by Kendall Magnussen

Tsa-tsa Making Options

- ◆ Hydrostone
- ◆ Plaster
- ◆ Clay or Water Putty
- ◆ Tsa-tsa Studio's casting system
- ◆ Water, paper, and other creative approaches
- ◆ What to do with your tsa-tsas

Hydrostone

Benefits

Easier to work with than plaster, less prone to bubbles, nice finish, dries in 20-45 minutes to remove from moulds

Drawbacks

More expensive, can be hard to find

Where to find Hydrostone

Ceramics suppliers, statue-makers, building supply stores. Known as "Hydrostone" or "Hydrocal", a fast-setting fine grain cement.

Contains: limestone, gypsum and plaster of paris.

Cost

Approximately US\$150-200 per 10,000 tsa-tsa images (2" high image)

Contact for production tips

Kendall Magnussen, FPMT Education Office

How to make tsa-tsas using Hydrostone

Make sure your hands are clean and the surface areas and utensils are clean in the area in which you will be making the tsa-tsas. You may want to have a tarp covering the ground area where you are working to catch the pieces of hardened material that flake off during the process as the

material is considered blessed and needs to be dealt with accordingly. If you can wear a mask or katag over your mouth, this is best. Some like to also wear rubber gloves, although this is not necessary.

What you will need:

- 1 bucket of warm soapy water (to wash utensils and moulds)
- 1 empty bucket for preparing the mixture
- 1 bag of hydrostone
- 1 measuring cup or scoop for getting hydrostone to add to water
- 1 container of water for making the mix
- 1 pitcher to pour the mixture into the moulds
- 1 brush or straight stick for removing bubbles with Windex
- 1 brush or straight stick for removing bubbles from hydrostone
- 1 empty container for storing extra Windex
- 1 bag full of mani pills, blessed beads or blessed rice
- 1 or more cans of gold or other spray paint (optional)

Set your motivation for the practice

Do the refuge and bodhichitta prayers and generate yourself as the deity. Bless the Hydrostone and the glass beads or rice with the appropriate mantras. You can bless a whole bag of Hydrostone at once if you are doing many sessions, making sure to reaffirm the visualization and blessing with each session.

Preparing the moulds

Wash the moulds with warm water and mild soap. If the moulds haven't been washed for some time, use a new toothbrush and scrub them gently with warm, soapy water. Recite the mantra for preparing the moulds and think that you are offering a bath to the buddhas. Rinse and allow to dry. If you are doing many sessions in a row, the moulds do not need to be washed for every session, only from time to time as needed.

Pour Windex (an ammonia based window-cleaning agent) into the moulds while reciting the mantra, again imagining that you are offering a bath or perfume to the buddhas. Windex can be diluted with water. Pour in the Windex and brush it into the mould then pour the excess off into an empty container. It also works well to put the Windex into a spray bottle and spray a fine mist of Windex into the mould. This reduces the next step of brushing the Windex into the mould and pouring the excess out. Leave only a fine coating of Windex on the moulds. The Windex can be reused again and again until it becomes cloudy or dirty.

Mixing the materials

Pour water into your empty mixing bucket or container. Large yogurt containers, ice cream containers, or small buckets work well. The amount of water you will need depends on how many and what type of moulds you have to fill and how fast you are able to work with the material before it hardens. You will need to learn by trial and error how much you can make and pour in any given batch without hindrances. Hydrostone is fairly forgiving, i.e. if you make your batter too thick, it will start to harden more quickly. Up to a certain point, you can simply add water. If you make it too thin, it will take a long time to dry and the tsa-tsas may crack and fall apart when you try to remove them from the moulds.

Best is to make your batter about the same consistency as a thin milkshake or pancake batter. Start with the water in your mixing container and slowly add the Hydrostone while stirring. Recite the appropriate mantras as you add the Hydrostone, and, again, as you stir the mixture. Some stir with a whisk, some a chopstick, others have used an electric mixer. Mixing by hand is most recommended due to the potential of introducing air bubbles into the mixture when using an electronic device. A good mix works out to be approximately 1 part water to 1 part Hydrostone. Expect your mixture to double in amount as you add the dry mix to the water. Mix it well until all lumps are gone, but don't take too long as it will start to harden!

Making your tsa-tsas

Pour your mixture into a water pitcher and use this to pour it into the moulds. Pour slowly and carefully, making sure not to overfill the moulds or spill. The mixture is blessed, so it cannot be thrown away if you make too much, spill it, etc. Use all of the batter you have made and fill as many moulds as you can with one batch. It is fine to only partially fill a mould and later top it off with another batch. It is better to make too little than too much to start until you work out how much you really need.

Keep in mind the five groups of beings to whom to dedicate your tsa-tsas when pouring and recite the appropriate mantra. If you have time, recite the special prayers for the respective group after each 1/5 of the total amount of tsa-tsas you are making, however, given the need to agitate the mix and place the beads before the mix dries, it is easiest to finish with agitating, beading, and washing out your containers, and then come back to recite the special dedication prayers and the seven-limb prayer.

When your containers that held the mixture are empty, pour water

into them immediately to avoid a crust hardening on them and making it easier to clean them when you have finished the session. For the same reason, keep your utensils in water when not in use during the session and rinse them well when you are finished. For this reason, it is good to have extra water on hand in a pitcher or bucket.

Then, while reciting the appropriate mantra, agitate the mix into the moulds using vibration, a chopstick or a paintbrush, working out the air bubbles. Don't take too long here as, again, the mixture will harden.

Next, take your blessed glass beads (glass beads are preferred as they sink well into the mixture, do not mould, and do not attract critters such as desperate mice looking for a meal!), and place them into the heart of each deity while reciting the mantra. If the beads do not disappear quickly from the surface, you may have made your batter too thick, or made too much batter for your production pace and it has had too long to thicken. You will need to physically push the beads below the surface or they will pop out while drying. If disaster strikes and the substance is too hard to get the beads in, wait until the tsa-tsas are dry and you can write OM AH HUM on the back of each deity at the crown, throat, and heart to bless them.

Now, take the time to go rinse out your containers and mixing implements. Then, recite the dedication prayers for each of the five groups of beings for whom the tsa-tsas were made (if not done earlier), recite the seven-limb prayer, mantras, and any other dedication prayers.

Final steps

Allow the tsa-tsas to set well. Depending on the climate and temperature, they will need from 20 to 45 minutes to set. They can be removed from the moulds when they are no longer warm and moist to the touch. Be careful to both push the images out from the back of the mould and pull back the mould from the images to remove them, watching not to tear the silicone rubber. Again, as you remove the tsa-tsas, recite the appropriate mantra.

Place the tsa-tsas on a clean shelf to dry. They are fine to stand up or lie down as you like. They should be allowed to dry well for at least two to three days before painting or storing them in boxes (if you are making a large quantity and using boxes to store them). If they are boxed too early, moisture still emits from the tsa-tsas as they are drying creating a damp atmosphere in the box which leads readily to moulding. It isn't pretty to open up a box of mouldy tsa-tsas only weeks after you put them nicely away.

Make sure to clean up well and to sweep up the bits and pieces of material that invariably end up around the table and ground area. This material is blessed and should be put into a river, on top of a mountain, or in the tsa-tsa house with other holy objects. It should not be thrown away or stepped on.

Hydrostone-Plaster Mix

To bring down the cost of using pure Hydrostone, but retain some of the benefits of its qualities, it is possible to make a Hydrostone-plaster blend using a percentage of each material. It is best to err on the side of more Hydrostone than plaster. Use the techniques described above or below as suits your experience as you work with the material.

Plaster

Benefits

Cheap material, easy to find at most building supply or art stores

Drawbacks

Prone to producing bubbles, challenging material to work with, long drying time (1-2 hours minimum drying time, 5-6 hours best before removing from moulds)

Where to find plaster

Building supply stores

Contact for tips

Chenrezig Nuns Community, Chenrezig Institute, Australia

What you will need

- same as with Hydrostone except using plaster instead
- a board upon which to place your tsa-tsa moulds for ease in vibrating the moulds
- option: hair conditioner

Preparing the moulds

Use hair conditioner diluted with water as a wetting agent. Add the water to the conditioner bit by bit to avoid forming small lumps of conditioner.

The conditioner can be heavily diluted; just make sure the water feels a bit slimy when you rub it between your fingers. Make a jar of it and keep it ready. Pour it into the mould until it is 80% full. (Some practitioners use diluted Windex, an ammonia based window-cleaning agent, in place of hair conditioner.)

With a rounded brush go over all the surfaces of the mould, paying special attention to the hands, faces and other detailed bits. You will see air bubbles detaching from the mould and floating to the surface. Keep the brush head below the surface of the liquid and brush gently and slowly. Don't take the brush in and out or you will create more bubbles. The best kind of brush to use is a small, stiff-bristled one for oil paints, with a round head. When finished, pour the liquid into a jar for use on later moulds, and turn the mould upside-down to drain while you are preparing the plaster.

Types of plaster

A more expensive plaster doesn't necessarily mean better quality and don't bother with dental plaster at all. If the plaster seems very light and chalky when it sets then maybe try another brand. Chalkiness can also result from using too little plaster. You can also use aluminium sulphide (Alum, from the chemist) to make the plaster less chalky. However, care in the mixing process seems the best way to avoid problems with chalkiness. If you do need it, use about one spoon of alum to half an ice cream container of water.

Mixing the plaster

Use a plastic container or mixing bowl into which you can fit your whole hand. Put the water in first; remembering that the volume of the mixture will just about double once plaster is added. Sprinkle in plaster powder finely and evenly over the whole surface. Keep sprinkling, letting all the plaster disappear before the next handful, and tapping the container to dislodge any plaster stuck to the sides. Allowing the plaster to settle will dissolve any lumps, which means you won't need to stir it as much, which can produce air bubbles.

Stop sprinkling when the height of the plaster reaches the water surface and is just starting to peak up through the water – evenly all over, not in a big lump in the middle. If there are big, uneven patches above the water surface, the plaster will be thick and lumpy and if you leave too much loose water on the top, the plaster will be too thin. Leave the plaster for a moment and check that your tsa-tsa moulds have drained. You may

want to flick it a bit if there's a lot of water left inside.

All the peaks should now be saturated. Put your whole hand in and move your fingers along the bottom lifting the plaster with smooth movements, without lifting your hand in and out of the water. It is mixed when there are no lumps; if you did the sprinkling well, you won't have to stir much at all.

Making your tsa-tsas

Pour the plaster into your moulds slowly and steadily from one side, until all the detail is well covered but the mould not quite full. Then brush over all the mould surfaces, slowly and smoothly without lifting the brush above the surface of the mix taking special care to brush the plaster into the tricky, detailed bits. Avoid creating air bubbles in the plaster.

Pick up the board with the moulds on it and tap it on the tabletop to dislodge any stubborn air bubbles, which will rise to the surface. You can bang it quite hard, as long as the plaster doesn't slop around too much, since this can create more bubbles. If your plaster is too thick at this stage, you either have to work more quickly or make a thinner mixture to start. You can put the blessed rice (beads) in now and then pour the rest of the plaster in, or the other way around, but poke the rice under the surface so that it doesn't become moldy later.

As soon as you have poured the plaster, put some water into your mixing bowl and leave the brush in it. Wash them out completely as soon as possible. If the plaster in your bowl sets hard, you will have to leave it to dry and then it will crack off when you bend the sides of the container. Be sure to clean the bowl properly before starting another mixture.

For stupas

With the 20 cm. stupas consisting of 6 moulds (from Peter Griffin), the roll of four powerful mantras can be wrapped in electrical tape (yellow) to seal them and placed in the steps and vase sections. Another set of mantras or the blessed ashes of the deceased can be placed in the base (throne) section. If the mantras/ashes are inserted into the plaster as it just starts to harden, it will stay in the plaster and not pop out again, as it does with wet plaster. The ashes can also be wrapped in electrical tape, similar to the mantras.

Final steps

Leave the tsa-tsas to dry on a level spot. Plaster becomes warm as it sets. When it has cooled down again, it can be taken out of the mould. It will get harder as it dries over the next couple of days. A minimum drying

time is 1–2 hours, depending on the size of the piece. Ideally, leave the plaster in the mould for 5–6 hours before removing. It depends on the type of plaster you are using, the weather conditions etc.

Before painting you can take off bubbles with a pin and fill any bubble holes with a little plaster mixture on the end of a pin

For stupas

The stupa pieces can then be smoothed down using a metal file, emery cloth, or putty knife. The parts are joined together using Bondcrete or Aquadhere. Fill any hollow spaces in the stupa with powdered incense, or crushed up scented tea. For filling the gaps between the stupa parts you can use a mixture of plaster plus Aquadhere or Bondcrete. An alternative material which is simple and effective and gives a good finish is a white acrylic gap-filler which comes in a tube and is applied with a sealing gun. Use a fine nozzle and apply with a paint-brush, washing off excess with another damp brush. Araldyte can be used for fixing if the pieces are very dry, otherwise a water-based glue like Aquadhere is necessary.

Painting your holy objects:

The tsa-tsas can be left white, painted with saffron water, painted completely gold, or the adornments on the stupas can be painted, or covered in gold leaf or gilding.

When dry, some like to seal the stupas or tsa-tsas by painting with a sealant, e.g., diluted Bondcrete, or put some Bondcrete in your undercoat paint. The advantage of Bondcrete is its sealant function and that it sinks into the plaster. It dries clear and shiny. [Dilute: 3 parts water to 1 part Bondcrete.] Others have found that this is unnecessary depending on the type of paint used. Spray paint is a fine option.

For stupas

The special pieces of the stupa, e.g., the spire and top, the Buddha section of the vase and surrounding decorations, the lotuses on the different sections, all decorations, and the animals, can be painted gold or covered with gold leaf or gilding. Spray paint is an option if you want to paint the whole stupa gold.

Options

When spray painting the top coat on tsa-tsas, terracotta or red-coloured house interior enamel paint has been recommended as an undercoat, well-thinned and applied with a brush. This is good because the top coat matches the deep sections, otherwise these sections stay white and show

through. Spray in short bursts from different angles around the outside of the tsa-tsa so you don't miss anything. If you spray from one point you will completely obscure all the detail before you have covered the white areas. If you have many tsa-tsas and little time, you can use spray paint without an undercoat.

Clay

Waiting for information

Water Putty

I have been having WONDERFUL results making tsa-tsas from this stuff called "Durham's Rock Hard Water Putty". It is not too expensive, it mixes easily, sets up quickly, and dries VERY HARD. (You can get it at most hardware stores). It really makes great tsa-tsas. The only trouble is that it will not take additives well, like paint, mani pills, etc., so I doubt that it will take cremation ashes. (*Babette Teich-Visco, Syracuse, New York*)

Tsa-Tsa Studio/Center for Tibetan Sacred Art

The Tsa-Tsa Studio uses a method called the Forton MG casting system, which consists of a number of different ingredients and is used by professional sculptors. The benefits of using this system are that (a) the material is extremely strong and durable (products made from it last approximately 25-30 years); (b) pigments or metal powders can be added when casting, to produce a variety of colors and metal tsa-tsas; and (c) the metal tsa-tsas can be used outdoors without being damaged, such as in gardens, installations, and walls. The drawbacks to using this system are that it is more expensive than other methods and is more complicated due to the large number of ingredients needed.

For information on classes and workshops, a list of tsa-tsas available, or information on Buddha Walls, please contact:

Tsa-Tsa Studio/Center for Tibetan Sacred Art
 Director - Roberta Raine
 4 Joost Ave
 San Francisco, CA 94131
 USA
 E-mail: tsatsafpmt@aol.com

Water, paper, and other creative options

There are a few practitioners who were given permission to make their tsa-tsas in water, use a stamp to make them on paper, photocopy their images, use a mould with 100 images, etc. to do their 100,000 tsa-tsa preliminary practice. It is best to check first with your teacher before opting for one of these apparently less challenging methods!

What image should I use?

Best is to check with your teacher which image would have the most karmic benefit for you to produce.

What to do with tsa-tsas

This is a very important point to consider well, especially if you have a commitment to make many tsa-tsas, such as the preliminary practice of 100,000 tsa-tsas. It is a very uncomfortable experience to have a surplus of buddhas and not know what to do with them, eventually neglecting their care. Have a plan in mind before you start. Best is to have a small tsa-tsa house already built and then as your tsa-tsas are dry, you can either paint them, or not, consecrate them and place them in their little house, creating a nice shrine that others can circumambulate, make offerings to, pay homage to, etc. Some have found it works well to box up the tsa-tsas using cardboard shelves in between the layers so that all the images can stand upright and then place the boxes into the tsa-tsa house.

Other options are to put your tsa-tsas in a cave, in trees, give them away as gifts, or place them in the ocean. If you put them in the ocean, do so respectfully, not upside down, as an offering to the nagas and the creatures of the ocean as an opportunity for them to be blessed and create merit and purify negativities.

One should be sensitive to the image one has created when giving tsa-tsas as gifts or putting them in a place where they will be in public areas. If a tsa-tsa is damaged or has a large number of air bubbles and the image is disfigured, it is best to put it in a protected place rather than distribute it publicly. Do not place tantric images or images that would be misunderstood in plain view or give them as gifts to those without the proper initiation, sympathy, or understanding. This helps newcomers to avoid the negative action of disrespecting the Buddha-jewel by thinking, "That Buddha looks funny. I don't like that Buddha." One can comment on the quality of artwork or craftsmanship, but it is unskillful to pass judgement on the quality of the Buddha!

Make offerings to your buddhas and rejoice often in your efforts and the blessed creations you have put into the world.

How to get moulds

To order moulds for your tsa-tsa practice, or for information on making moulds contact:

Nalanda Monastery
Chateau Rouzegas
Labastide St. Georges
81500 Lavaur
France
E-mail: Nalanda@compuserve.com

The Enlightenment Project for Purification and Merit
C/o Chenrezig Institute
PO Box 41
Eudlo, Queensland 4554
Australia
E-mail: enlightenmentproject@compuserve.com

For more general information contact:

FPMT Education Department
205 Ranchitos Road
Taos, NM 87571 USA
E-mail: education@fpmt.org

Colophon:

The information in this booklet was compiled from the notes of a few tsa-tsa practitioners and does not represent the entire scope of tsa-tsa making options. This document was put together by Kendall Magnussen, FPMT Education Department. Any improvements or additional “tips” are welcome.



Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition
Education Services