



A Tibetan Offering of Peace

presents

TENZIN WANGCHUK

The Ancient Art of Sand Painting

Working with brass tubes filled with colored sand carefully rasped onto a template on a tabletop, Buddhist monks will carefully craft a mandala. A mandala (pronounced mun-DAH-luh) is an intricate design that has great significance to the Tibetan Buddhist religion. Permanent mandalas are created in pencil, paint or on fabric. Temporary ones are constructed of flower petals, dried grain or sand. Tibetan Buddhists believe that a mandala is a deity's divine environment or mansion.



By looking at a completed mandala, the viewer is said to be able to visualize the deity's dwelling and to experience some of the deity's qualities in his or her mind.

The sand mandala's construction begins with a prayer service and ends with the destruction of the artistry. To some, that might seem like a waste of time and effort, because the mandala takes days and sometimes weeks to complete, but Buddhists say the practice of destroying it represents the transience of life and the ideal of nonattachment to the material world and possessions.

As a work of art and one of the most revered rituals of Tibetan Buddhism, the sand mandala is a beautiful and fragile thing to behold. Fashioned by carefully tapping (rasping) grains of sand onto a grid outlined in white, it takes shape slowly and precisely. Using a tool called a chak-pur, which is a hollow brass tube with indentations, the monks coax grains of sand in a rainbow of colors onto a pattern on a table or the floor. Every dot and line in the design is significant and must be placed in the same location every time the mandala is created.

Watching the making of a mandala gives the viewer a serene, peaceful feeling and a sense that this is something truly spiritual. Leaning over the table, the monks work at an even pace, precisely pouring sand and quickly aligning the edges into intricate patterns. They work, for the most part, in silence. The mandala construction is a sacred ceremony for Tibetan Buddhists. Only in the last 20 years have monks from several monasteries begun traveling around the world, creating the mandalas in public — usually at museums, art galleries or universities.

In the Tibetan language, this art is called *dul-tson-kyil-khor*, which literally means “mandala of colored powders.” The specific word for mandala, “*kyil-khor*,” means “center of the circle with exterior walls and surrounding environment.”

Buddhists believe a deity actually inhabits the center of the mandala, and the straight lines represented in the geometric pattern become the “grounds surrounding the deity’s mansion,” according to the Kalachakra Mandala of the government of Tibet. According to the Namgyal Monastery Web site, “A mandala is thought to bring peace and harmony to the area where it is being constructed.



Simply viewing a mandala is believed by Buddhists to be enough to change one’s mind stream by creating a strong imprint of the beauty of perfection of the Buddha’s mind, as is represented in the mandala itself.

As a result of this imprint, one may be able to find greater compassion, awareness, and a better sense of well-being.” Even in Christianity mandala-like forms are prevalent: the Celtic cross; the rosary, halo, crown of thorns and the Rose Cross. These “circles of the deity” also are found in Islam and other religions, according to religious scholars.

At the completion of the mandala, the monk will sweep the colored sand into a brass urn and carry it in a procession across to where the sand will be released into the flowing water to allow the deity to continue its journey. Tibetan Buddhist tradition requires that the mandala be placed in flowing water as part of the dissolution ceremony. When the sand enters the water, the deity’s kindness and compassion are disseminated into the world to benefit all beings



A Tibetan Offering of Peace

A project of the 21st Century grant partnership.