

The Sands of Performance

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THE TIBETAN SAND MANDALA is a beautiful thing, astonishing in its complexity and colour, remarkable both for the effort that goes into its construction and the readiness of its makers to destroy it upon completion. Something between painting and sculpture, the process involves the careful arrangement of coloured grains of sand into piles and patterns, forming a large canvas like an elaborate map with raised topographical features. It is part of a larger tradition in Buddhist ritual arts, which include dance, sculpture, music, chanting, and painting. In addition to a particular mandala—made of coloured particles such as flowers, rice, powder, or sand—the patterns may either be painted, drawn, or sculpted in three dimensions with materials like wood, metal, and stone. They may also be mentally envisioned through meditation. Scholarly analysis on mandala building practices, along with other forms of Buddhist art, especially performance, is a relatively young discipline outside of anthropological circles. While scholars and artists writing on Buddhist ritual arts do not ignore the fact that the building process is central to various visual media, they have not fully investigated the inherent theatricality of many, especially mandalas.¹

Buddhist Mandala Building as Cultural Offering

Scholars and art critics alike continue to address sand mandalas as a visual art. Even John Bryant—the founder of the Samaya Foundation—does so, as the title of his book on the topic, *The Wheel of Time Sand Mandala: Visual*

Scripture of Tibetan Buddhism, clearly demonstrates. This text offers a thorough discussion of the place of the mandalas in tantric doctrine and does valuable work by placing them in the broader context of Tibetan Buddhist ritual arts. Labelling them ‘visual scripture’ does not ignore the processual nature of the creative act in question—it is difficult to forget that shortly after completion, sand mandalas are dismantled and disbursed to symbolize the reunion with the cosmic whole. Nevertheless, it does minimize the performative dimension of the construction, which is central to the identity of the form. The live, performed quality of the building and dissolution ceremony associated with a mandala includes a number of meditative gestures inherent to the devotional nature of the process. My analysis here is an effort to draw the practice of sand mandala making into the realm of performance studies, and to situate publicly created mandalas as para-theatrical events in which sacred and secular spaces meet.² The events I address, which occur in secular spaces throughout the west, frame the work as ‘cultural offering’—a phrase coined by Bryant—which extract the ritual from its original sacred context in order to foster intercultural community-building and consciousness-raising, while retaining the essential function of the mandalas in Buddhist prayer. As Tibetan Buddhist religious communities have become increasingly politically active and engaged with the global public sphere, ritual arts like mandala building have become important tools for peace-building and political consciousness-raising.



Chenrezig sand mandala created at the House of Commons in the United Kingdom

Private, Public, and Performative Character

The mandala concept is complex and, at first glance, seemingly incompatible with the public venues that have hosted building events in the West. *The Buddhist Handbook* describes it thus:

This is a *temenos*, a sacred space. It is also a model of both the cosmos and of the total human being, for there is an equivalence between the two: they are macrocosm and microcosm. ... Formally *mandala* thus consist of series of concentric precincts converging on a focal sanctum or palace, guarded by dreaded guards, where the presiding *yidam* or some other potent symbol of ultimate reality resides. In a sense, therefore, *mandala* are maps of the spiritual journey itself, and contemplation of them assists in the accomplishment of that journey by awakening latent spiritual potentials buried deep in the subconscious of the practitioner.³

The Tibetan equivalent term, *kyilkhor*, also refers to a multiplicity of manifestations of the form and translates as ‘center and surrounding environment.’⁴ David E R George refers to them as ‘maps of its [the Vajrayana] meditative universe at the centre of which is the Adi-Buddha, the primordial, universal and infinite Buddhahood latent in all beings.’⁵ The practice creates sacred spaces, both physical and metaphysical, and tradition holds that they belong in private, consecrated territory.

To serve their function, the mandalas would seem to require devotional surroundings. The images presented most often depict the palace of a given deity, which itself represents something more abstract, the state of being that the deity inhabits and embodies. Each serves as a focusing device to create the heightened awareness that is

central to Buddhist faith. Through visualization and meditative study of the image, students of the tantra may seek to 'enter' the mandala and ground themselves in that same state of being. This work requires intense concentration and full immersion in the devotional praxis. How can the sacred character of a space endure when the practitioner must share it with a milling crowd of uninitiated observers who have no connection with their beliefs or culture?

Indeed, as an art form aimed primarily at efficacy, sand mandala making has long been a practice to which only members of the Buddhist faith community had access. Often part of a larger series of ceremonies intended to initiate students to a given tantra, the construction process focuses the practitioner on meditative interaction with the mandalas as a means of developing *bodhichitta*, the selfless compassion needed to help others achieve enlightenment. For example, the Kalachakra, 'Wheel of Time' sand mandala, is part of the larger Kalachakra initiation. Nine days of ritual activities comprise the initiation. In the first seven, monks prepare the space for the students' arrival, including the construction of a Kalachakra sand mandala. Initiates participate in the final two days, during which they perform rituals of repentance and commitment and receive instruction from a master. During this time they observe the mandala, meditate before it, and participate in its dissolution ceremony. The mandalas offer to anyone gazing upon them the opportunity to contemplate on their own Buddha nature. With the mandalas, to gaze is to participate, for the object invites interactive imagining and serves as a pathway or vehicle to attaining that ultimate state of being. Robert A F Thurman stresses that the act of gazing upon the mandala constitutes a vital step in the initiation process: 'Tibetans thus believe that

anyone who looks on the color-particle Mandala of the Kalachakra Buddha with reverence and faith will be reborn advantageously during the era of Shambhala. That is why they undertake arduous pilgrimages and make intense efforts to attend performances of the Kalachakra initiation ritual.'⁶ This particular mandala is a symbolic pathway along which the soul may travel towards that ultimate destination, making it an invaluable spiritual tool.

The key to the successful transition of mandala building from sacred to secular space is in the performativity already woven into its ritual purpose: the image serves as a route along which the practitioner mentally travels to increase discipline and awareness, the conscious mind often aided by constructing a physical map of the psychic territory in question. The object is, as Bryant says, a manifestation of scripture, a visual text. But in creating it, the monk performs. He chants, he breathes, he gestures, and he labours at a series of physical tasks. He envisions himself undertaking the journey mapped by the image. Where observers are gathered to watch the process and meditate upon that image, they too are invited to undertake a pilgrimage of self-awareness, with the mandala as a guide. If the construction occurs in public, they serve as witnesses to that process. And it is in the painstaking process of making the object, the mindful adherence to ritual at every step of laying out diagrams and placing the sand granules, the conscious belief in observing and being observed —by oneself through mindfulness, by the deity or divine aspect to whom it is dedicated, by others who are present—that the significance and efficacy of the practice lies.

Tibetan Buddhist ritual arts are grounded in a theology that stresses the real possibility of radical personal transformation and a powerful belief that enlightened beings are constantly at work in the world, attempting to open doors for the rest of

us. Robert Thurman describes Tibetan culture as defined by this experience of real Buddhas dwelling among them. It is thus a civilization that feels itself touched by Buddhas, marked by having experienced the living impact of real Buddhas. Tibetans have even come to take for granted the constant presence of many Buddhas around the country. Tibetan Buddhism is thus a reorientation of individual and social life to account for the reality of Buddhas, the possibility of becoming one oneself, and the actuality of a methodical process for doing so (2).

According to this doctrine, ordinary humans exist in a state of constant desire—persistent and eternally deferred even as the wish of a given moment is obtained—combined with a seductive but false belief that we exist independently of and in isolation from the universe at large. Buddhas have divested themselves of both desire and the illusion of the discrete self, but remain among humanity to guide others to the same path. In a prophesied golden age students of the dharma will help bring an end to violence of all kinds and kindle a great spiritual transformation among humans. Individuals who seek refuge in the dharma commit themselves to the intentional cultivation of selfless awareness and motivation to benefit other conscious beings. They undertake daily practices of mental and physical discipline to cultivate detachment and goodwill. The ritual arts serve that purpose. The builders of publicly constructed mandalas intend that their events should do so as well, that their actions should reap positive benefits for the community of observers of their work and impart peaceable enlightenment to the world at large.

Mandala Events in the West

As a form of meditative training, the mandalas offer pictographic presentations of certain beneficial states of being. Bryant states that ‘they not

only provide another dimension of the teachings but also the opportunity to develop devotion through their practice.’⁷ Traditionally, their primary goal has been to enhance the spiritual discipline or experience of the practitioner. Dancing, sculpting, drawing, meditating—whatever the medium, the act for the practitioner is a prayer practice intended to draw him or her out of bad habits of mind or body and into a place of conscious release and awareness. George indicates that mandala building was an important early phase in the *Mani Rimdu* celebrations of Tibet and Nepal, a ritual he describes as ‘an act of compassion motivated by the *bodhisattva* ideal which will cleanse the whole area of evil for the next twelve months.’⁸ Bryant indicates that all ritual arts ‘[w]hen properly made and consecrated ... are believed to contain the same empowering energy as the text, the deity, or even the Buddha himself. They are considered to embody that which they represent.’⁹ Ritual arts have, therefore, special significance as a practical means to the ultimate end of the dedicated Buddhist—detachment from the illusion of self as well as the trap of personal desire and the subsequent attainment of enlightenment. Through them the practitioners can hope to effect genuine change in themselves and in the world.

This is the philosophy that guides communities of Tibetan Buddhist monks, who bring ritual arts practices into Western settings, often including in their activities the construction of a mandala. Indeed, the very first of these visits concentrated specifically on sand mandala construction and were framed as ‘cultural demonstrations.’ The Samaya Foundation sponsored two inaugural events in 1988, first at their building in New York and another a short time later at the American Museum of Natural History. These initial demonstrations paved the way for further interactions between Himalayan monastic communities and arts and cultural organizations in



*Buddhist monks making
a sand mandala*

the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. These began as occasional invitations to perform in specific cultural venues. Increased interest through the 1990s eventually led to monastic groups making themselves available for tours, with a repertory of ritual performances that can be requested as part of a residency. The Gaden Jangtse Monastery, Mungdod, Karnataka, India, for example, houses the Tsawa Monks and their ongoing ‘World Peace Cultural Tour.’¹⁰ Each visiting group of monks has its own character, as have the residencies and ritual performances that have occurred since the initial Samaya sponsored events. But the articulated goal of the events, as a category of performance or ‘cultural demonstration,’ has remained remarkably consistent, in tune with the doctrine that guides the monks in their work. As articulated in the Tsawa group’s statement of purpose: ‘We seek to promote harmony and peace amongst all people and within each person, and to encourage the cultivation of compassion and kindness towards all living beings through the sharing with others of our [sic] ancient and vibrant Tibetan Buddhist traditions’ (ibid.). These intentions always undergird the

stated purpose of the rituals presented, including the mandalas.

While the specifics of any single mandala building event can vary,¹¹ its ritual nature requires that a number of codified behaviours be observed. The whole ceremony constitutes a ritual performance. First, the space and tools must be consecrated through chanting and musical accompaniment. Then the basic grid of the design is laid out on a flat surface by drawing lines with ruler and pencil or chalk-impregnated string. It is divided into quadrants—north, south, east, and west—and then the lines associated with the layout of the deity’s palace. The detail work is filled in from memory using this grid as a guide. When the layout is done, the monks, usually four in number, take up their coloured powders and long thin metal funnels called *chakpu* and execute the complicated patterns of figures, words, symbols, and decorative flourishes by slowly pouring small amounts of sand down the funnels. They control the flow of sand by tapping and stroking the *chakpu* with a small metal wand. It is a slow, painstaking process, and the monks work with their faces hovering inches above the developing

image, carefully controlling their breath and posture so as not to disturb the delicately arranged particles.¹² On completion, the work might be permitted to stand for a short time—often the case in public Western settings as sponsors typically prefer a large number of visitors to see it—but after a brief interval the builders sweep the sand into a pile at the centre of the grid, erasing in moments what has taken hours or days to build. They then pour the resulting dust heap into a sacred receptacle and with music and chanting carry it in procession to a nearby water source, where the sand is poured in. From start to finish the practice utilizes performative gesture; when an audience of secular outsiders enters the equation, the process shifts from performative to overtly theatrical.

Analyzing the Event

As stated in the introduction to this essay, there exists little inquiry into the embodied, performative nature of sand mandalas, as well as other more plastic medium such as sculpture and painting. In the early days of Western mandala events, art critics were the most inclined to recognize the connection between the mandala making and theatre performance. For example, following the 1988 Natural History event, *Village Voice* critic John Perrault called the demonstration ‘performance art of a high order.’¹³ In *Buddhism as/in Performance* George also suggests that Buddhism and performance art are mutually illuminating. He argues that, like meditation and other rituals, ‘if Performance Art does anything it refocuses the attention on the artist and the process rather than the artwork, exploding the falsely static quality of the “product”.’¹⁴ The work of creating and destroying a sand mandala accomplishes this as well. As the meditative process encourages a close awareness of self—with the ultimate goal of recognizing and releasing attachment—it produces a kind of phenomenological attitude in the performer and the

observer. That said, while sand mandala making is a species of performance, it is not performance art. While both practices share an emphasis on the process of the making and not on the completed object, the devotional discipline seeks not to foreground the performer—as personality, discrete self, or subject—but rather to allow both the performer and the spectator to be absorbed into the deeper spiritual function of the event. The goal is not the explication of self, it is rather the disappearance of self. While Buddhist ritual arts ought not to be considered performance art *per se*, they do share the sense that the process is key to the deep metaphysical understanding pursued or explored by the performer.

Martin J Boord, an Oxford-trained scholar and Buddhist practitioner, offers a more accurate description of the theatrical character of the process, especially with regard to consecrating the chosen site: ‘Accompanying these generation stage meditations are a number of elaborate and demanding rituals that dramatize the meditations with arcane theatre.’¹⁵

There are many mandalas, with specific spiritual benefit associated with meditatively building or gazing upon each. However, all demand the same commitment on the part of the individual: a selfless, pure motivation to benefit others. Boord puts it thus: ‘As each tiny speck of coloured powder alights upon the consecrated ground, the yogin must have the firm conviction that another Buddha has descended from the sky in order to become manifest in the very fabric of the drawn *mandala*. In this way the entire structure is made of Buddhas and has enlightenment as its very essence’ (83). With that in mind, all the mandalas are intended for the spiritual seeker and student of the dharma, not the casual spectator, ethnographer, or art lover. Yet the earliest of the Western sand mandala events; which were sponsored by the Samaya Foundation; contextualize

them as cultural demonstrations of an art form intended for a general public uninitiated in the tantra and, moreover, ignorant of the spiritual implications of the ceremonies involved. At first this seems to be at odds with the devotional nature of Buddhist ritual art. But the changing relationship of Tibetan Buddhism with the global community helps illuminate the shift from sacred to civic space in contemporary, Western demonstrations of sand mandala making, which Bryant styles as ‘cultural offering[s]’.¹⁶

The present situation of Tibet has brought Tibetan Buddhism, and especially the monastic communities of Tibet, Mongolia, and Nepal, into much more frequent contact with the rest of the world. Indeed the Dalai Lama himself has long been an internationally recognized advocate of peace and pacifism, a popular author and public speaker on both religious and diplomatic subjects. In his travels, the Dalai Lama often aims to raise awareness of the situation of his homeland, having committed himself to being a voice for his people to the international community.¹⁷ Tibetan monks often participate in public events organized by their supporters in other countries—speaking, chanting, dancing—where exhibitions of ritual art forms double as a means of raising money for their monastic communities in the whole world. One translator for a university campus visit by monks, which included a mandala building and musical performance, phrased it most succinctly: ‘They travel to bring their spirituality to the world.’¹⁸

Mandala events taking place in secular spaces—especially those staged at Western sites throughout North America, the UK, and elsewhere—can be read as part of a socially aware theology; moreover they demonstrate that for the monks, devotional praxis can also be social praxis. That is to say, the prayerful, meditative work of building the mandala serves not only to advance the spiritual

development of the mandala builders, but to generate positive spiritual benefit for the community witnessing the building; indeed, the benefit can extend to the whole world. Tibetan Buddhist theology holds that individual prayer and meditation can create favourable energy that extends beyond the practitioner’s immediate sphere. As with the prayer practices of other faith traditions, the subject of a prayer need not know of the intervention on their behalf in order for the practitioner to believe in its power. They do not have to consent to the prayers deployed, nor agree with its intended impact on their lives. In many cases, they will carry on in complete ignorance of the act, though the practitioner offering the prayer may view some change in the subjects’ circumstance as evidence of the prayer’s efficacy. This may encourage the subject at some point, to concentrate on the act of prayer as well. The key element in the interaction is the practitioner’s intention to influence the subject’s well-being and a belief that their intervention will succeed.

There is certainly an element of this in public, Western mandala events. The monks continue to view sand mandalas built in Western, secular settings as personal spiritual practice, requiring meditation and mindfulness in their execution. In addition, they serve as a direct spiritual intervention undertaken by the monks on behalf of the world at large. The selfless compassion that they hope to stimulate in the building is intended to transfer not only to the monks themselves, but also to observers that watch them work, the community that sponsors the event, and ultimately, the world at large. In some sense, the event becomes a public prayer offered for those outside the belief community by those inside it, and intends to have an immediate and lasting impact on the material world through the enacted rituals involved in making the prayer. Whether the observers recognize or feel the spiritual benefit

of the work done on their behalf, in the mind of the practitioner those benefits are real indeed and have a profound influence on the shape of the performance that the audience sees. That belief permeated the first Western mandala building events in 1988. In the process of transferring the practice from sacred space to public arena, ‘the term “cultural offering” evolved as a means to describe this transplant of a sacred art into a cultural and anthropological institution.’¹⁹ It is an attitude that has continued to characterize subsequent public mandala building events in the west in the ensuing years.

Bryant’s term foregrounds the spiritual impulses behind these public events; it also implies an inherently performative dimension to the work, for to offer something requires a gesture. And the audience, not the deity invoked, is the intended recipient of this particular gesture. The cultural offering intends to impart benefit to both the builder of the mandala and all humanity, like all the mandalas. But in these events there is an additional focus on the observing public, as it invites them to be mindful of the web of benefit by observing the prayer environment. There they can witness the work being done, and receive instruction on how it constitutes a spiritual intervention undertaken by the monks with specific results in mind. The knowledge of the audience’s gaze becomes part of the monk’s meditation. It should not change his outward posture or activity, of course, as that could endanger the structure, but it becomes part of the will-to-create. And that same intention influences the audience, as they perceive themselves as the intended recipients of the event. That is always part of an audience’s interpretive framework—we as observers always believe that the performers present their work for our consumption—but the ritual efficacy of this performance changes the dynamic. When audiences become aware that the ceremony constitutes

a lengthy prayer with specific outcomes, their focus must shift from ‘culture’—secular display of another people’s art—to ‘offering,’ sacred ritual in which they become participants by association. Whether they choose to accept it as such matters less in the moment of performance than the practitioner’s declaration of purpose and successful completion of the ritual.

This is not a purely contemporary phenomenon; the *Monlam Chenmo*, the ‘great prayer for the well-being of all beings,’ has also been a traditional part of New Year festivities among Tibetan Buddhists, during their largest yearly gathering of the monastic community.²⁰ These rituals ground themselves within the community of the faithful, occurring as part of the devotional practices of Buddhist communities in Tibet and surrounding countries. Yet they aim for the inclusion of a wider, global community in their attempts to actively transform the world. This is in keeping with the Bodhisattva’s responsibility to act for the enlightenment of all conscious beings; but until recent decades, the work done on behalf of the world was done within the community of the faithful, in their particular consecrated spaces. These Western mandala buildings represent a new approach to the long-standing doctrine.²¹

My first experience of a public mandala building was in February 2003, while teaching at Oklahoma State University (OSU). With the OSU mandala building, the monks chose the *Chenrezig*, or *Avalokiteshvara*, representing the Bodhisattva of infinite compassion; organizer Brian Deer indicated at the event that the monks made the selection in response to the social climate of the United States on the eve of the current war in Iraq. Geshe Tashi Dhondup, the group’s spokesman, indicated that the selection of *Avalokiteshvara*—incidentally, the Bodhisattva of whom the current Dalai Lama is said to be the reincarnation—was intended to have a direct spiritual

impact on the host community and the world. 'Out of the many different mandalas, we chose for Stillwater the mandala of compassion, so I believe because of that there will be more peace and compassion in this world.'²² Through the meditative effort of building the *Avalokiteshvara*, the monks intended and believed that the social climate of the world would be improved, hopefully decreasing the chances for the impending war or lessening its effects. In witnessing the construction and dissolution, the spectators were invited to join in this meditative practice.

Taking place in secular environments, these performances might be at risk of losing their sacred status—we have seen this happen, for example, with Native American rituals that become popular with tourist audiences. Yet the work of mandala building is able to retain its identity as devotion or prayer because the monks and organizers, such as Bryant, cast it as an *offering*. The presence of the monks and their public practice of the ritual art is intended to be a gift to the community in which it occurs as well as a political gesture advocating peaceable coexistence between nations. Moreover, they frame their efforts as devotional action on behalf of these communities and the world. As followers of this path, they take responsibility for bringing peace and enlightenment to all. ☞

Notes and References

1. A notable exception is the recent increase in writing on Buddhist-related dance, mostly in dance and movement oriented journals.
2. I have not taken refuge in the Buddhist dharma. I approach this as a performance studies scholar and fascinated observer of theatrical manifestations of religious devotion.
3. John Snelling, *The Buddhist Handbook: A Complete Guide to Buddhist Schools, Teaching, Practice, and History* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1998), 96.
4. Barry Bryant, *The Wheel of Time Sand Mandala: Visual Scripture of Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: Snow Lion, 2003), 21.
5. David E R George, *Buddhism as/in Performance: Analysis of Meditation and Theatrical Practice* (New Delhi: DK Printworld, 1999), 108.
6. Robert A F Thurman, *Essential Tibetan Buddhism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 9.
7. *The Wheel of Time Sand Mandala*, 21.
8. *Buddhism as/in Performance*, 114.
9. *The Wheel of Time Sand Mandala*, 21.
10. See <<http://www.tsawamonksusa.com/index.html>> accessed 21 June 2014.
11. The specific requirements for each mandala building event in the US has varied over the last decade. For example, in the case of the Guhyasamaja sand mandala at Samaya Foundation, the attending monk required a 'thekpü', a mandala house, be built. On the other hand, for the 2003 Chenrezig/Avalokiteshvara mandala at Oklahoma State University, the monks simply asked for string and a ruler painted blue.
12. Brian Deer, the organizer for a mandala building event at Oklahoma State University, to which I was witness, refers to the effort as a 'grain by grain exercise in patience'.
13. *The Wheel of Time Sand Mandala*, 32.
14. *Buddhism as/in Performance*, 26.
15. Martin J Boord, 'Mandala Meaning and Method: Ritual Delineation of Sacred Space in Tantric Buddhism', *Performance Research*, 3/1 (Spring, 1998), 79–84.
16. *The Wheel of Time Sand Mandala*, 27.
17. See *The Wheel of Time Sand Mandala*, 110.
18. 'Monks Making Mandala, Music to Raise Money', <http://www.ocolly.com/article_583d953c-3863-5864-949b-92e3a9c-d1ae1.html> accessed 21 June 2014.
19. *The Wheel of Time Sand Mandala*, 28.
20. For more details, see Claude Levenson, *Symbols of Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2000), 75–6.
21. The events have now a more than thirty-year of history in the US and elsewhere, so in that sense they are not 'new' anymore though they are still a relatively new phenomenon in the broader context of ritual arts history.
22. 'OSU Sponsors Buddhist Conference', <http://www.phayul.com/news/tools/print.aspx?id=3807&t=1>, accessed 21 June 2014.