

## **Tibetan Sand Mandalas: Creating a Harmonic World**

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### **Abstract**

This essay endeavors to present an introduction to the Hindu/Buddhist word “mandala” as a special geometric pattern or “sacred cosmogram.”<sup>1</sup> An important mandala is “The Wheel of Time,” “a multi-colored diagram of the initiation of the Kalachakra” of Tibetan Buddhism. It opens “the road to knowledge and the path that leads to harmony.” Harmony results from “a subtle resonance between the human body and mind and the outer universe which encapsulates them within its astrological and cosmic dimensions.”<sup>2</sup>

Mandalas are studied through a review of research by Claude Levinson of Lomonossov University; W.Y. Evans-Wentz of Stanford University; Giuseppe Tucci of the University of Calcutta and the University of Naples; and the Lama Anagarika Govinda, University of Patna. Western artistic, spiritual, and healing mandalas are discussed.

The example of Tibetan Buddhist monks creating a sand mandala for the Kalachakra ceremony (or initiation) at the Paramount Theater of the Madison Square Garden in New York City, in 1991 – the International Year of Tibet – is studied.

### **Les Mandalas de sable tibétain : la création d'un monde harmonique**

**Par Dottie K.H. Alt, MSSc, FRC**

### **Résumé**

Cet essai a pour but de présenter une introduction au mot hindou - bouddhiste « Mandala » en tant que motif géométrique particulier, à savoir « cosmogramme sacré ». Un mandala important est « La Roue du Temps » ; il s'agit d'un diagramme multicolore représentant l'initiation bouddhiste tibétaine du « Kalachakra ». Il ouvre « le chemin de la connaissance et le sentier qui conduit à l'harmonie ». Cette harmonie résulte d'une « résonance subtile entre le corps et l'esprit humains, avec l'univers extérieur qui les encapsule au sein de ses dimensions astrologiques et cosmiques ».

Les Mandalas sont étudiés par le biais d'un examen de la recherche effectuée par Claude Levinson de l'Université Lomonossov ; W.Y. Evans-Wentz de l'Université Stanford; Giuseppe Tucci des Universités de Calcutta et de Naples; et le Lama Anagarika Govinda, de l'Université de Patna. Les mandalas artistiques, spirituels et curatifs occidentaux sont également passés en revue.

L'exemple des moines bouddhistes tibétains créant un mandala de sable pour la cérémonie (ou initiation) de « Kalachakra » au théâtre Paramount du Madison Square Garden à New York City, en 1991 - l'année internationale du Tibet - est également étudié.

## **Mandalas de Arena Tibetanas: Creando un Mundo Armónico**

**Dottie K.H. Alt, MSSc, SRC**

### **Resumen**

Este ensayo intenta presentar una introducción a la palabra hindú / budista "mándala" como un patrón geométrico especial o "cosmograma sagrado". Un mándala importante es "La Rueda del Tiempo", "un diagrama multicolor de la iniciación del Kalachakra" del Budismo Tibetano. Abre "el camino hacia el conocimiento y el camino que conduce a la armonía." La armonía resulta de "una resonancia sutil entre el cuerpo humano y la mente y el universo exterior que los encapsula dentro de sus dimensiones astrológica y cósmica".

Los mándalas se estudian a través de una revisión de la investigación realizada por Claude Levinson de la Universidad de Lomonossov; W.Y. Evans-Wentz de la Universidad de Stanford; Giuseppe Tucci de la Universidad de Calcuta y la Universidad de Nápoles; y el Lama Anagarika Govinda, Universidad de Patna. Los mándalas artísticos, espirituales y curativos occidentales son discutidos.

Se estudia el ejemplo de los monjes Budistas Tibetanos que crean un mándala de arena para la ceremonia (o iniciación) de Kalachakra en el Teatro Paramount del Madison Square Garden en la ciudad de Nueva York, en 1991, el Año Internacional del Tíbet.

## **Mandalas de areia do Tibete: criando um mundo de harmonia**

**Dottie K.H. Alt, MSSc, SRC**

### **Sumário**

Este ensaio tenta apresentar uma introdução à palavra hindu/budista “mandala” enquanto padrão geométrico especial, ou então “cosmograma sagrado”. Uma importante mandala é a “Roda do Tempo” – “um diagrama multicolor da iniciação do Kalachakra” do Budismo tibetano. Ela abre “o caminho para o conhecimento e para a senda que conduz à harmonia”. A harmonia resulta de “uma sutil ressonância entre o corpo e a mente humanos e o universo exterior que os encapsula em suas dimensões astrológica e cósmica.”

As mandalas são estudadas por intermédio de uma revisão da pesquisa de Claude Levinson, da Universidade Lomonossov; W.Y. Evans-Wentz, da Universidade de Stanford; Giuseppe Tucci, da Universidade de Calcutá e da Universidade de Nápoles; e do Lama Anagarika Govinda, da Universidade de Patna. São discutidas mandalas artísticas ocidentais, espirituais e de cura.

O exemplo dos monges tibetanos executando uma mandala de areia para a cerimônia (ou

iniciação) de Kalachakra no Teatro Paramount do Madison Square Garden de Nova Iorque, em 1991 – Ano Internacional do Tibete – é estudado.

## Tibetische Sand Mandalas: das Erschaffen einer harmonischen Welt

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### Zusammenfassung

In dieser Abhandlung wird versucht, eine Einführung in das hinduistische/buddhistische Wort „Mandala“ als ein besonderes geometrisches Muster oder als ein „heiliges Kosmogramm“ darzulegen. Das Mandala „Kalachakra oder Rad der Zeit“ hat eine hohe Bedeutung, es ist ein „multifarbiges Diagramm der Einweihung“ die im tibetischen Buddhismus praktiziert wird. Es öffnet „den Weg zum Wissen und den Pfad zur Harmonie“. Harmonie entsteht aus „der subtilen Resonanz zwischen Körper und Geist und das äußere Universum, das diese innerhalb seiner astrologischen und kosmischen Dimension zusammenfasst.“

Diverse Forschungsreviews wurden erstellt durch Claude Levinson der Lomonossov Universität, W.Y Evans-Wentz der Stanford Universität, Giuseppe Tucci der Universität von Calcutta und Neapel und Lama Anagarika Govinda der Universität von Patna. Es wurden westliche künstlerische, spirituelle und heilende Mandalas besprochen.

Man studierte das Beispiel der tibetischen Mönche, die 1991 – das internationale Tibet Jahr - eine Sand Mandala für die Kalachakra (oder Einweihungs-) Zeremonie im Paramount Theater im Madison Square Garden in New York erzeugten.

### Introduction

Giuseppe Tucci defines the concept of mandala as “a geometric projection of the world reduced to an essential pattern,” “a paradigm of cosmic involution and evolution,” and “a psychocosmogram.”<sup>3</sup> He describes the symbolism<sup>4</sup> and liturgy<sup>5</sup> of the mandala, as well as the mandala in the human body.<sup>6</sup> Gucci calls the best example of a Hinduist mandala, “*Sricakra* – ‘The Wheel of Sri’, that is of the *sakti*, or divine power which is the motive force of the universe and by virtue of which God manifests and displays himself...”<sup>7</sup>

W. Y. Evans-Wentz worked with a Tibetan lama to translate *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or the *Bardo Thodol*, as a contribution to “the science of death and of existence after death, and of rebirth.”<sup>8</sup> (It was originally conceived to be a guide for the living, also.<sup>9</sup>) He presents an outline of the 110 deities that are “united in the Greater Mandala (or ‘mystic groupings’) of the *Chonyid Bardo*.<sup>10</sup> This is another use of the term mandala.

Mandala construction can be used as “a support for meditation” and a “means of reintegration.”<sup>11</sup> An interior mandala vision is symbolically “a flower – figuratively speaking, the lotus.”<sup>12</sup> A rose can also be a mandala<sup>13</sup> or meditative instrument.

Judith Shaw, an artist and spiritualist, states, “Christianity has also used the mandala to represent Divine Oneness and to teach the wisdom of its tradition. The magnificent rose windows of the

Gothic cathedrals are luminous examples of western mandalas. Complex sacred geometries were used in the architectural designs of the buildings themselves and of the rose windows.” The rose windows represent “a Western representation of our human aspiration towards wholeness and balance” and operate on “spiritual, emotional, and intellectual” levels.<sup>14</sup>

Another mandala expert, Lama Anagarika Govinda, born 1898 in Germany, says that to understand the sacred Six Syllables of the Great Mantra OM MANI PADME HUM, it is necessary to also view the “organic relations” with a simultaneous inner vision. This vision requires the symbolism of the mandala connected with it, and “the *embodiment* of the mandala in the ‘person’ of the *Sadhaka* [faithful] and on all planes of his consciousness.”<sup>15</sup> (OM MANI PADME HUM “embodies the happy tidings of liberation, of the love towards all living beings, and of the Way that leads to final realization.”<sup>16</sup>)

One can find a contemporary mandala coloring book, *Mandalas: Coloring for Everyone*. Skyhorse Publishing states, mandalas “...were originally developed as Hindu and Buddhist symbols of the universe, and the process of their creation is known for reducing stress and helping artists find tranquility and balance.”<sup>17</sup>

### Tibetan Buddhist Expression

Tibetan Buddhist “monks and laypeople alike meditate on thangkas and mandalas, visual aids to concentration and illumination, which portray Buddhas and bodhisattvas and representations of an ideal universe.”<sup>18</sup> We find that a Tibetan sand mandala can be thought of “as a two-dimensional representation of a sacred three-dimensional structure, the Buddha’s celestial palace, populated with enlightened beings.”<sup>19</sup>

Tibetan Buddhists create a mandala in a Kalachakra ceremony, or initiation. Tradition states that “the Kalachakra teaching is believed to have been passed down by the Buddha himself to Suchandra, an ancient king of Shambhala [a mystical kingdom].” The Kalachakra came to Tibet and was entrusted to the Dalai Lama in the eighteenth century for initiating students “into the realm of enlightened beings.”<sup>20</sup>

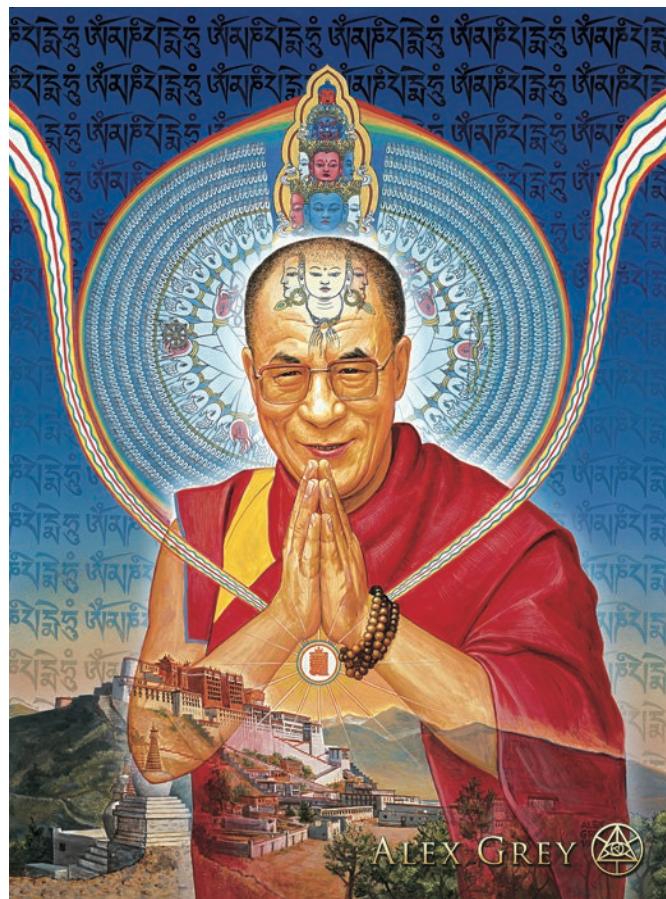
H. H. the Dalai Lama was Vajra Master of the 1991 Kalachakra Initiation at the Paramount Theater at Madison Square Garden in New York City during the International Year of Tibet. Over 4,000 students participated. Sixteen monks from the Namgyal Monastery<sup>21</sup> in Dharmasala, India, assisted the Dalai Lama. For many years, they had studied the sacred text of Kalachakra. (It takes at least two years of mindful study to memorize the “hundreds of symbols in the Kalachakra mandala design.”) Preparation for creating the sand mandala included the sixteen monks performing the Dance of the Earth to “subdue all interfering spirits.” To protect the mandala site, symbolic daggers were positioned. The Dalai Lama blessed all of the objects used in the mandala rituals. A taut string dipped in chalk was used to outline the design. (It is said that “each time the Vajra Master plucks the string, the snap sounds a blessing from the Buddha for the construction of the sand mandala...the mandala design looks like an enormous blueprint, seven feet in diameter.”) It took two days for the Dalai Lama and four monk gatekeepers to make the drawing.<sup>22</sup>

The description of the Madison Square Garden Kalachakra Initiation states:

On the third day, water mixed with a special spice, saffron, is scattered on the mandala; with it, the Vajra Master rubs out certain lines on the mandala blueprint, opening the entranceways for the 722 deities who will reside in the mandala during the ceremony. These deities represent different aspects of the nature of the Buddha, such as his wisdom and compassion.<sup>23</sup>

Grains of wheat were placed as cushions, where the deities were invited to sit. Lines of red, white and black sand grains were placed at the center of the mandala, representing the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha. The gatekeeper monks applied the rest of the sand using a serrated funnel called a *chakpa*, a wooden scraper called a *shinga* to fix errors, and sometimes their fingers. On the eighth day the spirits were thanked with sacred music and dance. On the ninth and tenth days, the Kalachakra initiation was performed. The students now “may enter the ideal world of the Wheel of Time – the universe of enlightenment, ruled by the deity Kalachakra.”<sup>24,25</sup>

H. H. the Dalai Lama had been a Vajra Maser for thirty-two Kalachakra Initiations as of 2014, utilizing the sand mandalas for over one and one-half million people.<sup>26</sup> An “Incarnation of the Divine,” some of his many titles include “Ocean of Wisdom, Incomparable Master, *Yishin Norbu* or Wish-Fulfilling Jewel, Precious Victorious or *Gyalwa Rinpoche*, Lord of the White Lotus, or simple *Kundun*, the Presence.”<sup>27</sup> A visual portrayal of H. H. the Dalai Lama, as “incarnation of *Avalokiteshvara*, shown in his eleven-faced, thousand-armed form, at home before Lhasa’s Potala Palace” can be found in the painting<sup>28</sup> by artist Alex Grey.<sup>29</sup>



## **Importance of the Mandala**

Edward de Bono<sup>30</sup> states, “The traditions of Western thinking are based on analysis and argument... We ought to be giving equal weight to the design of ideas and the design of action as we give to analysis.”<sup>31</sup> A mandala can be a visualization of the concept of bio-harmonics, a scientific term for harmony or peace.

Studying Tibetan mandalas and Tibetan culture is an act of wisdom. This research and study can help us see our own mandalas, such as cathedral rose windows,<sup>32</sup> from a fresh viewpoint.

Part of the appeal of His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet lies in his wisdom and insight. In regard to Exodus 33: 18-23, “I [the LORD] will make all My goodness pass before you...” The Dalai Lama makes the following statement of comparison between “tantric mandalas and deity visualizations”:

Here with great precision and vividness, the prophet sees a series of divine beings]... the differences between specific tantric mandalas and deity visualizations are numerous, but the genuine parallels are strong in terms of perceiving a divine world...<sup>33</sup>

H. H. the Dalai Lama of Tibet says that the vision is “a full, real experience at a supra-mundane level”<sup>34</sup> beyond the material, temporal level of the world, what we might call a higher “spiritual” or “metaphysical” level of Being.

Thus, the Tibetan Buddhist creation of a mandala can be considered as an example of an educational strategy that catches attention and encourages retention and transfer of spiritual information.<sup>35</sup> Because Tibetan sand mandalas are erased or destroyed once completed, we understand their deeper significance as emblematic of all things arising and subsiding in a great cosmic dance.



*Monks participate in the ritualistic erasure of a sand mandala in Seattle in 2001.*

*Photograph by Lowell Alt.*

## **Summary**

We have looked at a brief introduction to the meanings and concepts of the word “mandala,” the importance of studying mandalas, and an example of the Tibetan Buddhist Kalachakra sand mandala. As Giuseppe Tucci says, mandalas help us share the aspiration of writers of the Upanishads: "Let me pass from the darkness to the light."<sup>36</sup>

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## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Levenson, 12-13

<sup>3</sup> Giuseppe Tucci translator, Alan Houghton Broderick, *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala: with special reference to the modern psychology of the subconscious* (London, UK: Rider & Company, 1974), 25.

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<sup>5</sup> Tucci, 85-107.

<sup>6</sup> Tucci, 108-133.

<sup>7</sup> Tucci, 46-47 (Plate III).

<sup>8</sup> Evans-Wertz, W.Y., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1960), book jacket.

<sup>9</sup> Evans-Wertz, book jacket.

<sup>10</sup> Evans-Wertz, 217.

<sup>11</sup> Tucci, 37-46.

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<sup>15</sup> Govinda, 229.

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