



(photo by Gillian Marshall)

The Sacred Art of Sand Mandalas

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By

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The Mandala, Tibetan sand painting, is an ancient art form of Tibetan Buddhism. The mandala is a Sanskrit word meaning cosmogram or “world in harmony.” Mandalas are drawings in three-dimensional forms of sand. In Tibetan, this art is called *dul-tson-kyil-khor* which means “mandala of colored powders.”

Sand painting is an ancient Tibetan art form. The sand mandala is carefully constructed from dyed sand particles to represent the particular esoteric, textual traditions of Buddhism. It is a transient art form, thought to have originated in India and been transferred in the middle ages to Tibet. The sand mandala is constructed as vehicle to generate compassion, realize the impermanence of reality, and a social/cosmic healing of the environment.

In Tibetan Buddhism, a mandala is an imaginary palace that is contemplated during meditation. Each object in the palace has significance, representing some aspect of wisdom or reminding the meditator of some guiding principle. Various scriptural texts dictate the shapes, forms, and colors of the mandala. There are many different mandalas, each with different lessons to teach and blessings to confer. Most mandalas contain a host of deities, symbolic archetypes of the landscape of the mind.

Among the Tibetan arts, painting with colored sand ranks as one of the most unique and exquisite. Millions of grains of colored sand are painstakingly laid into place on a flat platform over a period of several days, forming an intricate diagram of the enlightened mind and the ideal world. The most common substance used in the creation of *dul-tson-kyil-khor* is colored sand which is ground from stone. Other popular substances are powdered flowers, herbs or grains. In ancient times, powdered precious and semi-precious gems were also used. Thus, lapis lazuli would be used for the blues, rubies for the reds, and

so forth. When finished, to symbolize the impermanence of all that exists, the colored sands are swept up and poured into a nearby river or stream where the waters carry the healing energies throughout the world.

In general, all mandalas have outer, inner, and secret meaning. On the outer level they represent the world in its divine form; on the inner level, they represent a map by which the ordinary human mind is transformed into the enlightened mind; and on the secret level, they predict the primordially perfect balance of the subtle energies of the body and the clear light dimension of the mind. The creation of a sand painting is said to affect purification and healing on these three levels.

Every tantric system has its own mandala, and thus each one symbolizes an existential and spiritual approach. For example, that of Lord Avalokiteshvara symbolizes compassion as a central focus of the spiritual experience; that of Lord Manjushri takes wisdom as the central focus; and that of Vajrapani emphasizes the need for courage and strength in the quest for sacred knowledge. Medicine Buddha mandalas are created to generate powers of healing.

The creation of a sand mandala begins with an opening ceremony. Monks consecrate the site and call forth the forces of goodness through chanting mantras accompanied by flutes, drums and cymbals. The construction of the mandala begins with the drawing of the design on the base, or tek-pu. The artists measure out and draw the architectural lines using a straight-edged ruler, compass and ink pen. The mandala is a formal geometric pattern showing the floor plan of a sacred mansion. Once the diagram is drawn, in the following days you see millions of grains of colored sand painstakingly laid into place. The sand, colored with vegetable dyes or opaque tempera, is poured onto the mandala platform with a narrow metal funnel called a "chakpur" which is scraped by another metal rod to cause sufficient vibration for the grains of sand to trickle out of its end. The two "chakpurs" are said to symbolize the union of wisdom and compassion. The mandalas are created whenever a need for healing of the environment and living beings is felt. The monks consider our present age to be one of great need in this respect, and therefore are creating these mandalas where requested throughout their world tours. When finished, to symbolize the impermanence of all that exists, the colored sands are swept up and poured into a nearby river or stream where the waters carry healing energies throughout the world.

For information about and links for prints of the Medicine Buddha (healing) mandala, click [here](#).

For information about and links for prints of the Chenrezig (compassion) mandala, click [here](#).

For information about and links for prints about the Amitayus (long life) mandala, click [here](#).