

# Articles

## VAJRAYĀNA ART AND ICONOGRAPHY

by Jensine Andresen

*Abstract.* Iconographic imagery in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Tantric (i.e., Vajrayāna) tradition is replete with polymorphic symbolic forms. Tantric texts themselves are multivalent, addressing astronomy, astrology, cosmology, history, embryology, physiology, pharmacology, alchemy, botany, philosophy, and sexuality. The *Srī Kālacakra*, a medieval Indo-Tibetan manuscript of great import, describes ritual visualization sequences in which practitioners visualize elaborate *maṇḍala* designs and deified *yab-yum* (father-mother) consort couples. The Kālacakra system is the preeminent conduit for the globalization of Tibetan Buddhism, and contemporary enactments of its initiation ceremony incorporate a variety of aesthetic genres, including sand *maṇḍala* construction and ritual dance.

*Keywords:* homology; Madhyamika; *maṇḍala*; Tantra; Vajrayāna; *yab-yum*; melothesia.

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Painted with broad strokes, the Indo-Tibetan religious terrain may be divided into three primary sections—early Nikāya (a.k.a. *Hinayāna*),<sup>1</sup> “Individual” or “Lesser Vehicle” Buddhism; later Mahāyana, or “Greater Vehicle” Buddhism; and cultic Vajrayāna (a.k.a. “Tantric”), or “Diamond Vehicle” Buddhism. Whereas early Nikāya Buddhism focuses on the enlightenment goals of individual practitioners, later Mahāyana Buddhism introduces the ideal of the *bodhisattva*, one who seeks enlightenment over the course of lifetimes in order to benefit all sentient beings. Lastly, the Vajrayāna practitioner, a tantric *yogi* or *yoginī*, similarly takes the *bodhisattva*

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vow yet hopes to achieve enlightenment in a single lifetime by following a greatly accelerated, highly esoteric, and reportedly dangerous path.

The emotive force of Vajrayāna Buddhist iconography belies the philosophical connection of this aesthetic genre to the tenets of earlier Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially strands of Madhyamika (“Middle Way”) Buddhist philosophy. Indeed, many tantric cults existed in both India and Tibet, one of the most popular being the system referred to as Kālacakra, traditionally translated as the “Wheel of Time.” Concerned as it is with the homology between macrocosm and microcosm, the experiential realization of melothesia in the Kālacakra system is said to bring fulfillment to tantric practitioners. In Buddhist tantra, “fulfillment” is said to follow from the realization of a nondual perception in which conventional distinctions between phenomena are perceived concurrently with their dependence upon one another. The Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna succinctly captures the union of conventional and ultimate in his statement, “There is no distinction at all of *samsāra* from *nirvāna*. There is no distinction at all of *nirvāna* from *samsāra*” (Thurman 1984, 159). In the Kālacakra system, not merely are macrocosm and microcosm analogous to one another, they *are* one another. The Wheel of Time, then, captures the cyclic, temporal portrayal of this experiential and philosophical realization.

Again, speaking generally, the full realization of melothesia is coterminous with enlightenment in Buddhist tantra, which is also sought through conventional practice techniques conjoining “method” (Sanskrit *upāya*; Tibetan *thabs*) and “wisdom” (Skt. *prajñā*; Tib. *shes rab*). Method is often translated as “skillful means,” the manner by which one attempts to assist sentient beings. In Buddhism, method is demonstrated primarily via “compassion” (Skt. *karuṇā*; Tib. *sn̄yig rjel/thugs rje*). During tantric empowerment and practice, the union of method and wisdom is symbolized by the union of the central deity of the tantra with his or her consort partner; practitioners are instructed to utilize subtle levels of consciousness arising from this union in order to realize the “emptiness” (Skt. *śūnyatā*; Tib. *stong pa nyid*) of any phenomenon’s inherent existence. This concept of “emptiness” is, more or less, the flip side of another important Buddhist concept referred to as “interdependence” (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*; Tib. *rten ’brel*), the fact that “all phenomena, both subjective experiences and external objects, come into existence in dependence upon causes and conditions; nothing comes into existence uncaused” (Gyatso 1991, 15).

#### KĀLACAKRA AND TEXTUAL HISTORY

Textually, the *Śrī Kālacakra*, otherwise known as the *Kālacakra Tantra*, is a tenth- or eleventh-century Sanskrit Buddhist text that was considered so important to medieval Indian and Tibetan Buddhists that it was translated into Tibetan more than a dozen times between the eleventh and fourteenth

centuries. The *Śrī Kālacakra* and its corresponding twelve thousand verse commentary, the *Vimalaprabhāṭikā*, both likely were composed during the sixty-year cycle from 967 to 1026. Members of aristocratic, political families are known to have commissioned block carvings of these texts, which facilitated the overall propagation of the Kālacakra tradition throughout Tibet and Central Asia.

The *Śrī Kālacakra* and *Vimalaprabhāṭikā* commentary are divided into five main sections in both Sanskrit and Tibetan redactions: (1) cosmology; (2) physiology; (3) initiation, or “empowerment”; (4) generation stage practices; and (5) completion stage practices. Focusing on astrology, geomancy, geography, history and eschatology (Jackson 1985, 31), the first section of the *Śrī Kālacakra*, which is sometimes referred to as “Outer Kālacakra” (Tib. *phyi'i dus 'khor*), presents a cosmological alternative to traditional Buddhist cosmology as it is presented in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (Newman 1987). The second section of the tantra is sometimes referred to as “Inner Kālacakra” (Tib. *nan gi dus 'khor*), and it outlines the physiology of the “subtle body” (Skt. *śukṣmadeha*), including its structure and function. This section of the tantra also addresses the time-cycle of breaths taken by a person during a day, and in this system, the temporal divisions of the universe are said to be situated in the body via vital-wind processes, which tantric practitioners seek to control (Wallace 1995).

The third, fourth, and fifth sections of the *Śrī Kālacakra* sometimes are referred to as “Alternative Kālacakra” (Tib. *gzhan gyi dus 'khor*). Beginning with an explanation of the qualifications necessary for both guru and disciple, the third section of the tantra addresses “empowerment” in the practice of Kālacakra. It then describes the activities that precede the empowerment, which include examining the site for the empowerment, accumulating ritual materials, taking control of the site, creating a protective circle, and constructing the Kālacakra *mandala*. It continues to describe disciples' progress through the *mandala*, the guru's conferral of the empowerment, and the concluding rituals that follow the empowerment ceremony. The fourth and fifth sections of the *Śrī Kālacakra* focus on the practice of Kālacakra's six-limbed yoga, specifically its generation and completion stages. This section of the tantra is both complicated and technical, outlining a range of yogic techniques designed to assist practitioners realize the nonduality of conventional and ultimate levels of reality.

In 1994, the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Varanasi printed a Sanskrit redaction of the *Śrī Kālacakra* as part of the Bibliotheca Indo-Tibetica Series and the Rare Buddhist Texts Research Project. Referred to in Buddhist Studies circles as the “Sarnath edition,” this redaction was compiled from six manuscripts, the oldest of which is written in eleventh-century Bengali script and apparently dates to the late eleventh or early twelfth century. Sanskrit Buddhist tantras became nonexistent in India within the first few centuries after they were written, and none of

these texts has been found in India for many centuries. Beginning around 1950, however, scholars began to recover various Sanskrit Buddhist tantric manuscripts from Nepal and Tibet. Despite this collection effort, the *Śrī Kālacakra* has not been found in its entirety in any collection (Upadhyaya 1994, xx). The Peking edition of the Tibetan redaction of the *Śrī Kālacakra* is edited by Raghu Vira and Lokesh Candra, while a later commentary was written by the Tibetan scholar Bo dong Pañchen Phyogs las rnam gyal, who lived from 1375 to 1471.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps as a means of validating the *Śrī Kālacakra*, its anonymous authors linked this text to the legendary kingdom of Sambhala made popular in the earlier Viṣṇuite tradition of the *Mahābhārata* and various *Purānas*. The precise geographical descriptions of Sambhala present in *Kālacakra* literature suggest that this kingdom existed historically. The medieval kingdom of Khotan probably is the most likely locale for the “Sambhala” that inspired the authors of the *Śrī Kālacakra*. Khotan was the most influential Buddhist kingdom that existed around the time that the *Śrī Kālacakra* was written, and it was besieged by Muslim invaders around the year 1000, which accords with the description of political events found in the *Śrī Kālacakra*. Additionally, Khotanese regnal records indicate that a monarch by the name of Viśa Sambhava, reminiscent of the name “Sambhala,” reigned from 912 to 966 (Zhang and Rong 1982, 202), the eve of *Kālacakra*’s first sexagenary cycle, which began in 967 (Andresen 1997, 82–93).

Although Khotan likely served as the prototype for the “Sambhala” mentioned in the *Śrī Kālacakra*, a combination of textual, archaeological, and epigraphic evidence suggests that this text was probably written in Bengal. The first historically identifiable people associated with the *Kāla-cakra* tradition lived and worked in Orissa, in Bengal, in Bihar, and, shortly afterward, in the Himalayan regions of Kashmir and Nepal—places where the development of medieval Indian Buddhism generally occurred (Orofino 1994). Additionally, textual passages from the *Śrī Kālacakra* itself show that the authors of this work were familiar with the thirty-six occupational castes common in Bengal during the period when the text likely was written. Furthermore, the authors mention specific geographical units that were also used by the kings of Bengal to describe their administrative units during this period (Andresen 1997, 96–99). Soon after its appearance in India, *Kālacakra* was introduced into Tibet, both as a text and commentary, and also as a series of oral instructions on the practical performance of its six-limbed yoga.

#### RITUAL KĀLACAKRA

Following the popularity of the medieval *Śrī Kālacakra*, a rich ritual tradition developed around this textual cult, culminating today in pageants referred to as “*Kālacakra* Empowerments.” These spectacles are conferred

by the fourteenth Dalai Lama and other high-ranking Tibetan religious leaders worldwide such as Kalu Rin po che of the Bka' brgyud lineage and Penor Rin po che, a Rnying ma lama. In contemporary settings, when the Kālacakra Empowerment is conferred to a large group, only those empowerments that enable practitioners to engage in "generation stage" practices are conferred. The "higher empowerments" (Tib. *dbang gong ma*) necessary for "completion stage" yogas are considered too esoteric to be granted during large public gatherings (Sopa 1985, 94–95, 116).

Certain common patterns characterize the last millennium's Tibetanization of Indian Buddhism and the contemporary globalization of Tibetan Buddhism. As in the past, monasteries are being founded and disciples congregate around roving tantric Buddhist teachers. Somewhat new, however, is the pattern of conferring large-scale empowerments to mass gatherings of people. Indeed, the current Dalai Lama quite intentionally uses the Kālacakra Empowerment as a vehicle for the globalization of Tibetan Buddhism and as a catalyst for world peace. Also new is the exhibition of tantric Buddhist art for the aesthetic enjoyment of the general population. Major exhibits of Tibetan Buddhist art now grace the Newark Museum in New Jersey, the Jacques Marchais Museum on Long Island, and the San Francisco Art Museum.

Without doubt, the Kālacakra Empowerment serves as a preeminent ritual vehicle for the dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism throughout the world. In Asia, this empowerment has been performed in both India and Mongolia, while conferrals of the Kālacakra Empowerment have become regular occurrences in major cities in the United States, Europe, and even the former Soviet Union.

The first Kālacakra Empowerment in the United States occurred in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1981. In 1989, the current Dalai Lama granted another Kālacakra Empowerment at the Santa Monica Civic Center; and at Richard Gere's request, the ceremony was conducted at Madison Square Garden in 1991. In fact, these contemporary enactments of the empowerment ceremony bear little resemblance to medieval textual descriptions of the ritual found in the *Śrī Kālacakra*, with the contemporary ritual festivals betraying serious aesthetic and iconographic accretion over the years.

#### KĀLĀCAKRA'S AESTHETIC DIMENSIONS

Iconography in Buddhist tantra is used to buttress underlying philosophical and practical agendas relating to yogic practice. Tantric practice, often denoted by the Sanskrit term *sādhana* and the Tibetan term *sgrub thab*, seeks to unify male and female energies within the human body and to facilitate a nondual state of awareness in practitioners. A number of iconographic representations of the basic macroscopic/microscopic homology, or melothesia, exist in the Kālacakra system, the primary ones being the

sand *maṇḍala* and the *yab-yum* (father-mother) consort couple. In this particular system, Buddha is believed to manifest as the deity Kālacakra, whereas elsewhere in tantric cults he is believed to manifest as deities such as Guhyasamāja, Hevajra, and Vajrayoginī.

In order to cultivate nondual perception of conventional and ultimate, tantric practitioners attempt to generate within themselves the qualities of enlightened Buddhahood by identifying with the Buddha's qualities of "body" (Skt. *kāya*; Tib. *sku*), "speech" (Skt. *vāc*; Tib. *gsung*), and "mind" (Skt. *citta*; Tib. *thugs*). This they accomplish throughout the empowerment and during tantric practice in general by engaging "the three M's"—*mudrā*, *mantra*, and *maṇḍala*. Students use *mudrā*, a term that derives from the Sanskrit root *mud*, meaning "to be merry or glad or happy, to rejoice," to identify with the body of Kālacakra. The term designates particular gestures of the hands and fingers, some of which involve interlocking the fingers. In more specialized ritual texts that refer to yogic practices of a sexual nature, the term *mudrā* also often refers to a female consort of a male yogic practitioner. The ritual manipulation of women for the benefit of male practitioners' yogic realizations, though not universally condoned, is a real yet problematic element of both medieval and contemporary tantric practice.



Fig. 1. Kālacakra and Viśvamātā Consort Couple. Courtesy David Patt/Deer Park.

Nevertheless, an elaborate assortment of gesticular *mudrā* are described in the third chapter of the *Śrī Kālacakra*. These *mudrā* require a precise positioning and interlocking of fingers together with the placement of the hands at various points on the body. For example, in Verse 170, the five fingers are listed—the thumb, the forefinger, the middle finger, the "nameless one" (i.e., the fourth finger), and the pinky. These digits are correlated with both elements and senses: thumb/earth/smell; forefinger/water/form; middle finger/fire/taste; fourth finger/wind/touch; pinky/space/sound.

Verses 171 and 172 describe the *mudrās* of the six Buddhas. In Verse 171, the *mudrās* of Vajrasattva, Akśobhya, Padmapaṇi, and Amītabha are described. In Vajrasattva's *mudrā*, for example, one clenches

both hands into fists and places them on top of the right and left thighs. In Akṣobhya's *mudrā*, one assumes the cross-legged posture (Skt. *paryāṅka*; Tib. *dkyil dkrung*), puts the upward palm of the left hand on the lap, and places the right hand on the side of the right knee until the fingers touch the ground. In Padmapāṇi's *mudrā*, one assumes the cross-legged posture, puts the fingers of the right hand on top of the left hand, and turns the right hand upward and level. Finally, Amitābha's *mudrā* is described as one of "concentration" (Skt. *samādhi*).

Later, verses 176 to 186 describe the *mudrās* of the implements held by Kālacakra. In the five-tipped vajra *mudrā*, one joins the palms of the hands, the thumbs, and both pinkies. These then are fashioned into the shape of a lotus petal. Having joined the tips of both middle fingers, they are extended in the center, and both forefingers are joined to resemble a half moon that is half bent toward the back of the middle finger. The two fourth fingers are contracted underneath and come onto the palm of one's hand. Next, the five fingers are made to resemble prongs—both hands are located in the middle of the middle finger, and all the other fingers stand straight.

Continuing with a description of the symbolic significance of Kālacakra's other ritual implements, Verse 180 describes the skull *mudrā*. Here, the fingers of the hand are placed together and the hand is placed on the auspicious skull, a lotus petal sits above, and the hand is extended to the back. In the bow *mudrā*, the fist and left forearm are extended and the right hand reaches toward the back. In the vajra-noose *mudrā*, the joint of the middle finger is placed above the left fist, the forefinger is lifted up and drawn forward, and a cavity is formed in the center of both the middle and forefingers. In the sling *mudrā*, the left hand becomes a hook. In the jewel *mudrā*, the five fingers of the left hand are joined, and one places the middle finger in the center of the five fingers, which are then brought together. In the lotus *mudrā* of the left hand, the thumb and pinky are joined and are placed on a single petal. The forefingers are spread in various directions in the shape of lotus petals. In the *mudrā* of the small drum, the middle finger and the fourth finger form a fist, the forefinger is joined on top of the tip of the thumb like an iron prod, and the half pinky is raised. Likewise, in the hammer *mudrā*, the fist is clenched, and all the fingers in the circle are extended like the sections of a spoke.

Tantric practitioners report that the ritual binding of successive *mudrā* assists them in their quest for divine transformation. What mechanics could facilitate such a process? Using terminology popularized by Laughlin Jr., McManus, and d'Aquili (1990), perhaps the ritual habituation of the neuromuscular system and the postural imprinting that occur during *mudrā* practice involve the willful reentrainment of conscious network.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that the conscious, willful intention of tantric practitioners who follow precise instructions governing the assumption of successive *mudrā*

functions to direct the patterns of entrainment (i.e., creodes) mediating consciousness. A “creode” is a series of equilibrating transformations that forms a type of “canal”—that is, a function is said to become *canalized*. During development, the process of “neurognosis” (the initial organization of a neural network) causes neural systems to become canalized into functional creodes, which moderate the demands of growth and adaptation. So, concentration during *mudrā* practice may function to direct the reentrainment of conscious network in specific ways. Willful attention directed toward the precise demonstration of intricate hand gestures and bodily postures is an “orientation function” that participates in a larger cognitive system, one that controls cognitions about the world-pervading conscious network. Concentrated attention enables the practitioner either to call up cognitive and motor networks already developed or to entrain and supervise the development of unprepared networks for future operation. Hence, intentional concentration during tantric practice utilizes the ability of consciousness to reprogram itself in specific ways.

As described previously, Kālacakra *mudrā* practice requires tantric practitioners to identify with divine images. One first “binds” the *mudrās* of the six Buddha families, and, having assumed the divine *mudrā* relating to the seed syllables, one later identifies with Kālacakra himself by performing *mudrā* modeled after each of his ritual implements. In all of these cases, conscious network is willfully reentrained to resemble the ritually prescribed representation of divine conscious network—Kālacakra wields a bow and arrow, so practitioners assume the forms of bow and arrow, and so on. Why? By punctiliously becoming Kālacakra down to the smallest detail of each of his ritual implements, practitioners reentrain their conscious network. Hence, they reprogram the neural aspects of their consciousness in increasingly fine approximations of this particular tantric cult’s representation of the divine.

Further, when tantric practitioners have practiced sufficiently to perform *mudrā* without the concentration and control of information provided by conscious network, this practice may be “relegated” to a specific neural network that is then disentrained from conscious network. Relegation often continues until a particular function (a particular hand gesture or bodily posture) is relegated to the lowest functional level of the nervous system capable of performing that function. Therefore, functions once involved with consciousness are shunted to relatively unconscious function. This loss of conscious involvement in the functions of the nervous system is referred to as “automatization.” Furthermore, because the role of prefrontal cortex in development includes controlling and monitoring the construction of self-concepts and images, prefrontal cortex is implicated in tantric deity yoga practice aimed at remodeling the self into the divine. Because the role of prefrontal cortex depends upon the extent to which the operations of self-reflexivity are conceptually loaded with images, prescribing



*mudrā* practice in conjunction with ritual that utilizes elaborate aesthetic images (*mandalas*, etc.) may enhance a practitioner's ability to reentrain his or her consciousness toward a culturally validated image of the divine (Laughlin Jr., McManus, and d'Aquili 1990, 98–99, 117–19).

Whereas *mudrā* practice helps the tantric practitioner identify with the body of the deity in question, *mantra* recitation is used to facilitate identification with the deity's speech. The term *mantra* derives from the Sanskrit root *man*, meaning "to think, believe, imagine, suppose, conjecture." It also carries the meaning of speaking and consecrating with words (Gonda 1963). *Mantra* is an agent noun, meaning "an instrument of thought." It can designate an element of speech, a sacred text, a prayer, or a song of praise (Padoux 1963). The efficacy of uttered *mantra* is critical during ritual performance, and *mantra* was important to the sacrifices of the early Vedic *śrauta* system, in more personal *pūjā* services, and in many forms of tantric ritual and practice (Wheelock 1989, 96–103). Theoretically, the effective dimensions of ritual utterance involve "speech acts" (see Austin 1962 and Searle 1969), in which making an utterance both expresses an idea and accomplishes a purposeful act. *Mantra*, therefore, is effective in transforming the body/mind of the ritual participant.

Last of the three M's is the tantric *mandala*. The sand *mandala* is a central element of tantric iconography, and the Kālacakra *mandala* is an particularly spectacular specimen. Students visualize *mandalas* to identify with the mind of Kālacakra. The term *mandala* derives from the Sanskrit root *mand*, which indicates the sense of "encompassing." The term *mandala* designates a circle or disk, especially of the sun (Tib. *nyi ma*) or the moon (Tib. *zla ba*). It also can designate a multitude, group, or society. Further, it connotes "extracting the essence" from something (Gyatso 1995, 167).

The Tibetan term for *mandala*, *dkyil 'khor*, connotes wholeness or roundness. Tibetan *mandalas* are two-dimensional figures that are meant to be visualized in three-dimensional form (Mkhas grub rje 1978, 271–308). *Mandalas* are symmetrical and multicolored, and they comprise of a circular border together with one or more concentric circles. These circles enclose a square divided into four triangles. Deities and their symbols exist in the center of each triangle and in the center of the *mandala*. A two-dimensional *mandala* is used for empowerment ceremonies and is constructed with colored sand. It occupies a space approximately five feet in diameter and sits atop a raised block of wood. Before a tantric empowerment, the preparation of the *mandala* may take as long as eleven days (Sopa 1985, 96). During tantric practice, meditation on a *mandala* is said to "serve as an antidote" that quickly eradicates obstructions to enlightenment (Gyatso, Tsong kha pa, and Hopkins 1987, 77).

The Kālacakra *mandala* contains five levels and seven hundred twenty-two deities, a number deriving from an astrological formula. The deities that inhabit the *mandala* are sometimes referred to as "gnosis beings" (Skt.

*jñānasattva*; Tib. *ye shes pa*). The sand *maṇḍala* is actually a two-dimensional representation of the five-tiered palace of Kālacakra and his consort, Viśvamātā. This *maṇḍala* is created using either pulverized quartz stones that are dyed different colors or dyed sand. In the sand *maṇḍala*, six concentric circles representing the six elements exist around the perimeter. The deities are represented in the *maṇḍala* either by Sanskrit seed syllables or by dots.

To construct the sand *maṇḍala*, a five-threaded “gnosis line” is set along the perimeter of the *maṇḍala*, and the *maṇḍala* is divided into three concentric *maṇḍalas* with white, red, and black sand. The outermost *maṇḍala*, the “body *maṇḍala*” (Tib. *sku'i dkyil 'khor*), contains five hundred thirty-six deities of an elemental and calendrical nature. The “speech *maṇḍala*” (Tib. *gsung gi dkyil 'khor*), which is enclosed within the “body *maṇḍala*,” contains one hundred sixteen deities; there are many female deities (Skt. *yoginī*; Tib. *rnal 'byor ma*) included in this number. The innermost circle, the “mind *maṇḍala*” (Tib. *thugs dkyil 'khor*), houses seventy deities, including “power beings” (Skt. *sakti*; Tib. *nus ma*), Buddhas, *bodhisattvas*, and protectors. According to Tibetan belief, the deities inhabiting the mind *maṇḍala* actually confer the empowerment. A four-faced, twenty-four-armed Kālacakra in union with a four-faced, eight-armed Viśvamātā inhabits the center of the mind *maṇḍala*. Also in the center is a white moon disc, on which rests a red sun disc, a black *rāhu* disc (*rāhu* is either a planet or the designation for an eclipse), and a yellow *kālāgni* disc (*kālāgni* may be translated as “fire at the end of an aeon,” and it may refer either to the destructive fire at the end of an aeon or to “the fiery tail” of *rāhu*). The *maṇḍala* also has a four-tiered perimeter that is composed of earth (yellow), water (white), fire (red), and wind (gray-blue) discs that underlie the *maṇḍala*. When construction of the total *maṇḍala* is complete, it is blessed by the guru. Demon-pinning knives and ten ritual vases then are placed around the *maṇḍala*, which is concealed behind a curtain. Namgyal monks then perform the dance of the offering goddesses (see Sopa 1985, 97–99; Gyatso 1985, 79; Cozort 1986, 125; Newman 1987).

Since the Communist Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, Tibetan Buddhism progressively has been exiled from its homeland and forced to adapt to different cultural contexts. In the past decade or so, and in conjunction with the Dalai Lama's increasingly frequent international appearances, Tibetan sand *maṇḍalas* have been the most potent tantric symbols used in the conscious effort to educate the world about Buddhism and to amass international political support against human rights abuses in Tibet. The first public display of a sand *maṇḍala* outside of Tibet actually occurred in Beijing in 1932. In the United States, the first public display of the construction of a Tibetan sand *maṇḍala* occurred in 1988, when three monks from Namgyal Monastery spent six weeks at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City creating the Kālacakra *maṇḍala*. Due

to the perceived power of Kālacakra in promoting world peace, the Kālacakra *maṇḍala* has been the tantric symbol of choice in public *maṇḍala* exhibitions, having been constructed more than a dozen times in the United States (for more on sand *maṇḍalas* see Yamamoto 1988).

Tibetan *maṇḍala* exhibits are well attended: the American Museum of Natural History estimated that between sixty and seventy thousand people saw the *maṇḍala* created there in 1988. Approximately half a million people saw the Kālacakra sand *maṇḍala* at the IBM Gallery in New York City in 1991, and a whopping fifty thousand people per day passed through the lobby of the World Trade Center when a sand *maṇḍala* was created there over a one-month period after the bombing in 1993.

The current display of traditional Tibetan *maṇḍala* construction involves a radical transposition from private/sacred/secret to public/secular/overt. In the traditional ritual context, *maṇḍala* construction occurs in the most private of settings; no one, not even a prospective initiate, is permitted to watch the process of constructing a *maṇḍala*. Only at the conclusion of the empowerment are initiates permitted to view the *maṇḍala*. Later, the *maṇḍala* is swept into containers and the sand is given as an offering to the *Nāgas* of the sea. In contrast to this traditional, private context, museum, gallery, and other displays of tantric *maṇḍalas* emphasize public consumption, and, hopefully, inspire donations to the cause of Buddhist *dharma*.

A second genre of *maṇḍala* exhibits, one that reflects the blending of Tibetan and American cultures, involves the construction of newer Tibetan-American *maṇḍalas* alongside traditional Tibetan ones. In the “Healing the Causes of Violence” program, Samaya Foundation, a New York based organization dedicated to supporting Tibetan arts, brought the Gyuto monks and their *maṇḍala* arts to homicide-ridden urban environments

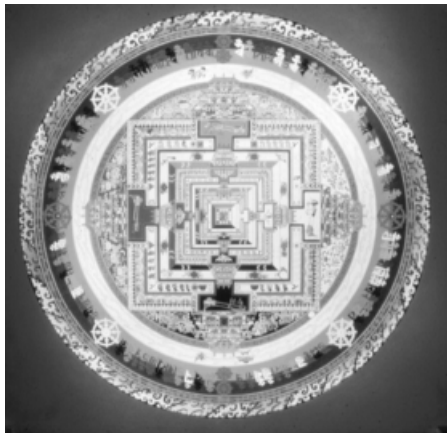


Fig. 2. Kālacakra sand *maṇḍala*.  
Courtesy/Copyright Samaya Foundation/Namgyal Institute.

such as Watts in Los Angeles during the summers of 1994 and 1995. What is unique about these projects is that at the same time that the monks create their traditional *mandala*, they also instruct children and adults in the process of *mandala* construction. The monks then encourage these new performers to design their own *mandalas* using culturally and personally relevant heroes and symbols. While display of traditional Tibetan *mandalas* was originally intended to generate support for Tibet, it is hoped that these more recent programs will bring peace to the inner city. The statistics are amazing: when the monks were present in Watts, a total of nineteen gang-related deaths for a one-month period dropped to only one death for the same month in 1995, reflecting in part the community preparation and town meetings with gang leaders that preceded the actual *mandala* exhibit. Samaya Foundation also brought the Gyuto monks and the Avalokiteśvara *mandala* to Camp David Gonzales, a youth detention camp in the Malibu Mountains, in 1995 and 1996. Focused on violent teenagers, this program schooled young inmates in qualities such as patience. Finally, Samaya Foundation also has brought *mandala* exhibits to the former Soviet Union, where Buddhism is enjoying a degree of resurgence after decades of repression.

#### AFTERTHOUGHTS

Historically complex, philosophically laden, and psychologically inclined, tantric Buddhist practice includes intricate visualization sequences involving elaborate sand *mandala* designs and consort couples intent on blissful union. Intended to catalyze within tantric practitioners the deep, experiential realization of nonduality, both practice sequences point to melothesia, the homology of macrocosm and microcosm. All may be said to harken back to one central Buddhist tenet, *pratītyasamutpāda*, which challenges us to realize how everything rests in complete interdependence upon everything else.

#### NOTES

1. Theravada Buddhism is one among eighteen known sects that constitute this division.
2. The Tibetan title of this text is *Bcom ldan 'das dus kyi 'khor lo'i dkyil 'khor gyi cho ga de nyid rnam nges*. It is contained in Bo-don Pan-chen Phyogs-las-rnam-rgyal, *The Collected Works of Bo-don Pan-chen Phyogs-las-rnam-rgyal, Encyclopedia Tibetica*, Vol. 118, Tibet House Library Publications, Series 1 (New Delhi: Tibet House, 1973).
3. Through a process referred to as *entrainment*, conscious network perpetually transforms its internal organization and engagement with the world. The term *conscious network* refers to the highest level of functional control in the human nervous system. Conscious network comprises those actively functioning networks that form a subset of all potentially functioning networks in the nervous system. Intentional processes in the prefrontal cortex are the most significant procedures involved in constituting conscious network. In addition, local neural structures often involved in conscious network include nuclear areas of the thalamus (gating input and output functions); the hippocampus (memory and recognition functions); and limbic structures (affective functions) such as the septum (fear) and the amygdala (aggression). Consciousness itself is

mediated by conscious network—"consciousness refers to function, and conscious network refers to structure: *conscious network is the structure of consciousness, and consciousness is the function of conscious network.*" Conscious network exerts some control over the process of entraining and disentraining networks to itself, and models may be entrained and disentrained from conscious network extremely rapidly. The continual flux in the organization of conscious network underlies the human experience of a "stream of consciousness." Conscious network therefore functions as "a living society of cells and networks of cells" comprising a continuously changing pattern of entrainment among potentially entrainable neural networks (see Laughlin Jr., McManus, and d'Aquili 1990, 44, 56, 94–98).

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