

The Symbolism, Rituals, and Contemporary Changes of the Kalachakra Mandala---Based on Fieldwork in Sku Bum Monastery and Other Locations

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Abstract

Based on a study of the etymology, structural connotations, and religious tenets of the Tantric Buddhist mandala, this article uses the Kalachakra mandala as a case study to analyse its function as a visual representation of the unity of the inner and outer universes, its complex symbolic system, and its core function in Tantric rituals. Through fieldwork conducted at Sku Bum Monastery, Rong Bo Monastery, and Shangwutun Village in Qinghai Province, the article further explores the cultural transformation of the mandala in contemporary society. On one hand, the colored sand mandala has evolved from a momentary ritual product to a medium for the transmission of religious, artistic, and cultural heritage, reflecting its modern adaptation. On the other hand, the mandala thangka has increasingly moved from the monastic world to the secular world, expanding its signification from a vehicle for meditation and visualization to a more complex and creative modern artistic and cultural symbol.

Keywords: mandala, Vajrayana, Kalachakra, adaptation

1. Introduction

The mandala is a highly sophisticated concept that emerged in the later phases of Buddhist thought. Centered on a deity, it functions as both a symbolic macrocosm and a microcosm that is actualized through visualization and samaya. In Vajrayana Buddhism, it plays a crucial role, serving as a cosmic blueprint and sacred sanctuary for Vajrayana meditators to achieve "instant enlightenment." Although the mandala has ancient origins in Indian intellectual history, its gradual integration with Buddhist thought and emergence as a distinctive concept within esoteric Buddhism was a complex process. Firstly, there are insufficient indigenous Indian texts documenting the encounter, acceptance, and integration of the mandala with Buddhist thought. Secondly, the concept of the mandala is complex and obscure as it is a product of late Buddhist thought. In most cases, reconstructing the late history of Buddhist thought (Vajrayana Buddhism) requires reliance on Tibetan literature post-10th century. In particular, the history and transmission of tantric texts can only be gleaned through works such as **The History of Buddhism by Bu-ston** and **A General Treatise on the Tantras** by the Xizang scholar Buton Rinchen Drub,[1] as well as Taranatha's **History of Indian Buddhism**.

According to Xizang Buddhist scholar Buton Rinchen Drub, the superiority of Vajrayana over exoteric Buddhism lie primarily in three aspects: Its methods are more diverse, emphasizing individual adaptation, hence its name "Dharmayana" or "Mahayana of Mahayana," is different from exoteric Buddhism, which primarily relies on the Six Perfections; Its duration of enlightenment is shorter, for those with superior faculties can achieve enlightenment in this very lifetime, those with average faculties at the time of death or in the bardo, and those with dull faculties only need a few lifetimes, whereas exoteric Buddhism requires numerous lifetimes; Its practice is also more comfortable, emphasizing the harmony of body and mind and deprecating asceticism. From an internal perspective, Vajrayana boasts a comprehensive structure encompassing three components: "Rgyu-basis", referring to the inherent Buddha nature of all beings, serving as the foundation of practice; "Lam-path", denotes specific meditation methods, representing the practical process; and "**Bras bun-fruit**", the ultimate goal of enlightenment. In terms of literature, while the tantric scriptures exist independently of the traditional Tripitaka of Kangyur, Tengyur and Abhidharma, forming a separate "Vajra Pitaka", and establishing a four-part Buddhist canon, it can also be integrated into the Tripitaka system, reflecting its unique characteristics of being both self-contained and harmoniously integrated with the overall teachings[2]. Within the Vajrayana's logic of "Rgyu, Lam and Bras bun", rituals based on the mandala are a core component.

Rituals hold a prominent position in Vajrayana. The human body (particularly the spine) is considered the cosmic center, where the power of the superconscious mind resides. Through tantric practices that unite mind and body, this power can be activated, propelling wisdom upward from the material foundation trapped by ignorance, ultimately achieving perfect enlightenment (bodhicitta). The visual mandala can be seen as an externalization of the symbolic system of "Rgyu, Lam and Bras bun" visualization and practice in Vajrayana. Drawing on existing research on Vajrayana and mandalas, this article specifically analyzes the significance and function of the Kalachakra mandala. Field research reveals the continuity and development of mandalas, and indeed Buddhist culture, across the changing landscape.

2. Mandala: Etymology and Structural Connotation

Mandala is also known as *dkyil vkhor* in Tibetan. This word is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word *mandala*. Mandala likely originates from "manda", meaning "essence or core". Therefore, mandala can be understood as capturing "la" the essence and core, achieving enlightenment. [3] Although mandala originally referred to the essence, or bodhi, it has historically taken on a broader meaning. The Buddha attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree, so mandala has come to mean the place of enlightenment, the place of practice. The "Sutra of the Inquiry of the Lion-Ornament King Bodhisattva" states, "The place of practice should be a square altar, named mandala." [4] Thus, the mandala evolved gradually from an abstract and obscure concept into a concrete pattern that could be described in words, painted, and constructed. Of course, it would be inaccurate to interpret the mandala solely as an altar. Mandala can also represent "gathering", symbolising the place where merit is gathered. In summary, the mandala has diverse interpretations, reflecting its widespread significance and importance within Tantric Buddhism.

When the mandala evolved into a concrete mandala pattern, its structure became a visual representation of Buddhist cosmology. The mandala embodies the holistic Buddhist view of the inner and outer universes. Each Buddha or Bodhisattva has their own unique mandala, which represents the world of a deity, their palace, and their followers. The structure of the mandala is central to its sacredness. It is not a random artistic creation, but a sacred geometric framework that strictly adhered to Buddhist cosmology and philosophy. Externally, the mandala's structure embodies the Buddhist cosmological concepts of the "material world" and "three realms" as outlined in the **Abhidharma-kosha** and **Kalachakra Tantras**: a circular disc centered on Mount Sumeru, surrounded by the four continents and eight sub-continents, the outermost circle encircled by the sun, moon, and stars. Therefore, the mandala is typically centered on a point, and surrounded by a quadrilateral wall with four gates, which is in turn enclosed by multiple circular walls. Each mandala pattern has its own unique symbolism. For instance, the three outer circular walls represent the flame ring, the vajra belt and the lotus garland. The four differently coloured gates of the square city within the ring symbolise the mandala's openness to all beings when opened. The center of the mandala houses the main deity. Depending on the practice, different mandalas enshrine different principal Buddhas or bodhisattvas. The location of the main deity is also the core of the entire mandala, serving as the central axis of the universe. Retinues, bodhisattvas and guardian deities often surround the main deity, forming a complete Buddhist retinue or pure land. When viewed inwardly, the entire mandala symbolizes the purified and perfectly transformed human body (the Buddha's body). It depicts the five aggregates, the six sense bases and other elements of the body and mind as the originally pure Buddha-land. The five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness) are the essential components of the body and mind. They are the foundation of afflictions and attachments. However, at the level of the mandala, they are symbolized as the wisdom of the Five Buddhas (Mirror-like Wisdom, Wisdom of Equality, Wisdom of Discernment, All-accomplishing Wisdom, and Dharmadhatu Wisdom). At the center of the mandala is the Dharmadhatu Wisdom (Mahavairocana), which understands the emptiness of the dharmakaya and is the source of all wisdom. Surrounding this are the four wisdoms derived from this fundamental wisdom. This means that by visualizing the mandala, practitioners are transforming their own five aggregates of affliction into the five wisdoms of the Five Buddhas; the mandala's palace is constructed from this pure wisdom.

Specifically, the six sense bases (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind) and their corresponding six sense objects (form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and dharma) are often symbolized in the mandalas as offering goddesses or specific symbols surrounding the mandala palace. The outermost lotus circle represents the inherent purity of the six sense organs, untainted by mud. The inner vajra circle symbolizes the six sense organs' perceptive abilities transformed into indestructible wisdom, capable of penetrating the essence of delusion.

The symbolism of the human body is a defining feature of tantric mandalas, particularly in the Kalachakra mandala. It is the most direct embodiment of the tantric theory of "attaining Buddhahood in this very body". The mandala is a microcosm of the entire universe, and the human body is considered a "microcosm". Therefore, the structure of the mandala closely corresponds to the human body. The mandala's center (the main deity) symbolizes Mount

Sumeru, the axis of the universe, and corresponds to the central channel within the human body. The mandala's square palace and four gates correspond to the human chest, pelvis, and limbs. The palace's multiple structures correspond to the three channels and seven chakras of the human body (crown, throat, heart, and navel). Each chakra can be viewed as a miniature mandala, complete with its own deity and symbols. The main deity at the center of the mandala symbolizes the practitioner's original pure mind (Buddha nature). They visualize themselves merging with the deity. The mandala's symbolism of the five aggregates, six sense organs, and the human body has a single core purpose: to reveal the profound meaning of "afflictions are bodhi." It uses visual, geometric, and symbolic symbols to reveal that the world you inhabit is the deity's pure land; your body is the deity's mandala; and your thoughts and actions, the five aggregates and six sense organs, are inherently perfect wisdom. Practice is not about seeking outside of yourself; rather, through the visualization of the mandala, you recognize and awaken the Buddha nature that already exists within you. Therefore, the entire process of drawing, visualizing, and ultimately destroying the mandala is a complete practice of transforming the ordinary body and mind into the wisdom body and mind of the Buddha.

The mandala is more than a simple artistic pattern; it is a sophisticated symbolic system that seamlessly integrates the macroscopic structure of the universe (the outer mandala), the microscopic mechanisms of the human body (the inner mandala), and the spiritual and psychological aspects (the secret mandala). Therefore, the painting of the mandala must strictly adhere to the scale and proportions prescribed by ritual texts such as the "Sutra on the Measurement of Images." It is primarily composed of concentric circles or squares, with the patterns arranged in an orderly manner, embodying central symmetry. Furthermore, all structures in the mandala radiate outward from a central axis, highlighting the importance of the center. There are many types and classifications of mandalas. Mandala paintings based on scriptural content can be simply divided into four categories based on their expression, namely the "Four Mandalas." Of these four types, the Great Mandala centers around the image of the deity, allowing practitioners to visualize the Buddha's body; the Samaya Mandala, symbolized by ritual implements and mudras, encourages the remembrance of the Buddha's aspiration; the Dharma Mandala, using seed syllables as a vehicle, fosters the realization of the Buddha's Dharma; and the Karma Mandala, in the form of a three-dimensional image, fosters the practice of the Buddha's path.

Mandalas have a wide range of uses and serve as important tools in both Tantric practice and ritual. First, practitioners can use mandalas as objects of visualization and meditation, achieving a state of concentration by gazing at the mandala pattern externally. Then, through internal visualization, they construct the details of the mandala in their minds to comprehend the truths it embodies. As Buddhism continues to evolve, mandalas have acquired other meanings and uses beyond visualization. Similar to offering Buddha statues, Buddhists can use mandalas as objects of offering and recitation to accumulate merit. Furthermore, mandalas are widely used in Tantric rituals. For example, Buddhist disciples seeking to enter Tantric Buddhism must undergo an initiation ceremony. After taking vows, they are guided to worship the mandala, embodying their deities to determine their destined deity. Today, the art of mandalas has taken on meanings beyond religious belief. Mandala thangkas and sand paintings are considered the pinnacle of religious art, representing the pinnacle of color and composition. Mandalas from different regions possess distinct characteristics, making them a vital part of world cultural heritage.[5]

3. Symbolic System and Ritual Value

Among the many mandalas of deities, the Kalachakra mandala stands out for its complexity and profound philosophical teachings. The Kalachakra itself is a complex and comprehensive system that integrates cosmology, human anatomy, and visualization practices. The Kalachakra mandala is a visual representation of this system. Simply put, the Kalachakra system consists of two parts: the outer Kalachakra and the inner Kalachakra. The outer Kalachakra represents the external material cosmic environment in which we live, or the macrocosm. In the Buddhist worldview, the structure of the outer universe includes Mount Sumeru, the four continents, and the stars, embodying the flow of time. The inner Kalachakra, on the other hand, represents the bodies of all beings, particularly the human body. The human body is believed to be a representation and miniature of the universe. Its meridians, chakras, respiration, and subtle energies can all represent parts of the macrocosm, thus being called the microcosm. The Kalachakra Tantra [6] emphasizes the unity and commonality between humans and the universe. When humans can encompass the entire universe within their bodies and achieve complete control over their life-breath, they can escape the Kalachakra and enjoy eternal freedom, like the Buddha. Kalachakra is considered the personification of the universal law of Kalachakra, an incarnation of the Adibuddha, and the guardian and source of the entire Kalachakra system. In the mandala, Kalachakra is positioned at the center, his body blue, with four faces colored blue, yellow, white, and red. His twenty-four arms symbolize the teachings of the twenty-four chapters of the Kalachakra Tantra and the wisdom that overcomes the twenty-four kinds of ignorance. Each of

Kalachakra's features corresponds to an aspect of the outer and inner Kalachakras, such as his ornaments corresponding to the six elements and his meridians corresponding to the energy channels in the human body. Therefore, it can be said that Kalachakra is a perfect fusion of the macrocosm and the microcosm, and visualizing Kalachakra can truly lead to understanding Kalachakra.

The Kalachakra mandala, also known as the Kalachakra mandala, is one of the largest and most complex mandalas in Tibetan Buddhism and a visual microcosm of the entire Kalachakra teaching. Take the colorful sand Kalachakra mandala, for example. Centered around the Kalachakra deity, the mandala is divided into three sections: the inner court, the middle court, and the outer court. The inner court serves as the deity's abode, with a vajra representing the deity in the center. It is surrounded by four square walls and vajra walls. The four walls of the square wall have gates facing east, west, south, and north, respectively, in red, yellow, blue, and black, representing fire, sky, water, and earth. From the center to the periphery, five concentric circles of varying diameters extend from the center to the periphery, representing earth, water, fire, wind, and space, respectively. Colorful sand mandalas like these are often used in Tantric rituals. First, a senior monk selects a suitable site and performs preliminary rituals such as chanting, mantra recitation, and prayer to purify the area. Afterward, senior lamas determine the proportions and the center of the mandala through precise mathematical calculations. Next, the monks use metal funnels called sand cones to draw the mandala from the center to the periphery. The entire process takes nearly a month, during which each day the monks must chant sutras, mantras, and visualize before painting. They then collaborate with other monks to paint the day's chants and visualizations according to the detailed instructions in the ritual text. Once the mandala is completed, it is used in rituals such as initiations (such as the Kalachakra initiation) or as an offering. Afterward, the most crucial step in the ritual is the unwavering destruction of the magnificent mandala after a period of visualization and offering. This destruction of the mandala, essential to all rituals, powerfully illustrates the Buddhist concept of impermanence, emphasizing the need to let go of attachment to the ephemeral in order to attain eternity. Thus, the Kalachakra mandala is not only a sacred pattern depicting Buddhist cosmology in precise geometric language, but also a vital guide for meditation and practice.

4. Transformation and Cultural Adaptation

As a targeted case study, we visited Sku Bum Monastery in Xining, Qinghai Province, to view the colored sand Kalachakra mandala on display and communicate with lamas there to learn more about it. The sand mandala, housed in a glass case, is remarkably well-preserved. Unlike conventional paintings, it is not a purely two-dimensional design. The central deity is represented by a square platform, surrounded by square walls also made of stacked colored sand. The mandala's colors and patterns are exquisite, with lotuses, animals, and ritual implements painted in six colors: white, yellow, red, green, blue, and black, showcasing its grandeur and beauty. The seed syllables of the various deities are depicted in different colors around the central platform and around the outermost ring of the mandala. It is truly a work of art of exceptional quality. According to lamas at the monastery, the mandala was created by more than a dozen senior monks over a period of nearly a month. During this time, they practiced visualization and painting in strict accordance with the ritual texts, collaborating to complete each day's painting.

However, this mandala was not destroyed according to ritualistic guidelines, but instead preserved permanently. This seems contrary to the concept of breaking through obsession, so why did the temple support this move? First, the painted sand mandala is more than just a tool for meditation and offering in the closet; it is also a unique and important intangible cultural heritage. Through communication with monks at Ta'er Monastery, we learned that only a handful of senior monks are capable of painting the mandala and understanding its meaning, and each painting requires a significant amount of time and effort. Therefore, the painted sand mandala is a relatively unknown art form. Preserving it permanently as a religious art and cultural exhibit allows more tourists and non-Buddhists to understand and appreciate this profound art form, thereby promoting religious culture. Second, a permanent mandala display serves as an irreplaceable three-dimensional textbook for Buddhist colleges and museums. Monks and scholars can devote significant time to studying its complex structure and proportions, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of its meaning. Finally, and most importantly, this practice does not fundamentally violate the Buddhist teaching of impermanence. In reality, Buddhism seeks to dispel people's attachment to "eternal entities." If people can understand and internalize the philosophy of impermanence, simply understanding that all things are inherently empty and will eventually perish, they won't need to worry about whether external objects like the mandala survive. Thus, the mandala's permanence is both an adaptation of its external form to the changing times and a deepening of understanding of Buddhist philosophy.

If the "permanent preservation" of the Ta'er Monastery mandala is a typical example of the "form adaptation" of the Kalachakra mandala, then the Longwu Monastery (Rong Bo Dgon) and Shangwutun Village in Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture can be seen as contemporary changes in the "inheritance and application" of

mandala culture. At Longwu Temple in Tongren County, we saw a monk instructing many others to paint the Kalachakra mandala. The monk was holding a ruler and a compass, drawing a sketch while explaining it to the monks around him. There were also some monks nearby who were trying to draw on their own. Here, people can see the continuation of ritual content and religious art, passed down from master to disciple from generation to generation. Such behavior reflects the inheritance and development of intangible cultural heritage. It is the continuation of such skills and spirit that created today's brilliant Buddhist culture. Later, we traveled to Shangwutun Village, known as the hometown of thangka, and interviewed a thangka painter. He mentioned that in the past, thangka artists would strictly follow the instructions in the image-making sutra when painting Buddha statues and mandalas. However, with the changing times, these paintings now have fixed templates to refer to, greatly shortening the painting process. Despite this, creating thangkas remains a demanding endeavor that requires high skill. It typically takes decades of persistent practice to become a qualified thangka artist. He explained that more and more people from outside of Beijing are choosing mandalas over Buddha statues when ordering thangkas. This trend may be due to the mandala's highly geometric, symmetrical, and colorful abstract art form. Its extreme symmetry, precise structure, and vibrant colors inherently possess a strong modern decorative aesthetic, blending seamlessly into interior decor. The increasing popularity of mandala thangkas is undoubtedly a significant development and evolution of mandala culture in the contemporary era. On the one hand, the mandala's function has expanded from meditation to a diverse range of uses, including decorative art and cultural symbols. On the other hand, as a symbol of Buddhism, the mandala has moved from monasteries' scripture halls into modern living spaces, influencing a wider audience and thus further promoting Buddhist culture.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the mandala has always held a very important position in Vajrayana Buddhism. It is the universe that appears outside, and it is also the subject of visualization hidden inside. The fourth Panchen Lama, Lobsang Chokyi Gyaltsen (1567-1662), a leading Gelugpa Tantric master, once gave a relatively concise explanation of the Vajrayana (rdo rje thegs pa): "There is a profound reason why Tantra is called the 'Vajrayana'. First, the Mahayana doctrine is fully summarized in the Six Perfections; second, the Six Perfections are condensed in skillful means and wisdom; finally, the unity of skillful means and wisdom is bodhicitta. Bodhicitta is the profound meditation of Vajrasattva, that is, the Vajra, so Tantra is called the Vajrayana." It can be discovered that bodhicitta, as the meditation of Vajrasattva, is the same as vajra, and the mandala, as the "core" or "essence," has the same meaning as bodhi. Therefore, the mandala, visualizing the reality of the external universe and the six prajnaparamitas condensed in skillful means and wisdom, ultimately leads to the perfected bodhi. This core embodies the Mahayana Buddhist concept of "macrocosm and microcosm" and "inner consciousness and outer realm," which are essentially the spirit of non-duality.

However, due to the profound nature of mandala texts and the difficulty of entering the study of Tantric Buddhism, mandala patterns and other content remained largely unknown to the general public for a long time. In recent years, the wave of cultural exchange fostered by technological advancements and an open and inclusive social environment has promoted the development of religious culture. Exquisite patterns such as mandalas have entered society as artistic creations, rather than simply religious elements, and have gained popularity among some people. This trend has promoted the spread of religious culture and provided support for the protection and transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

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