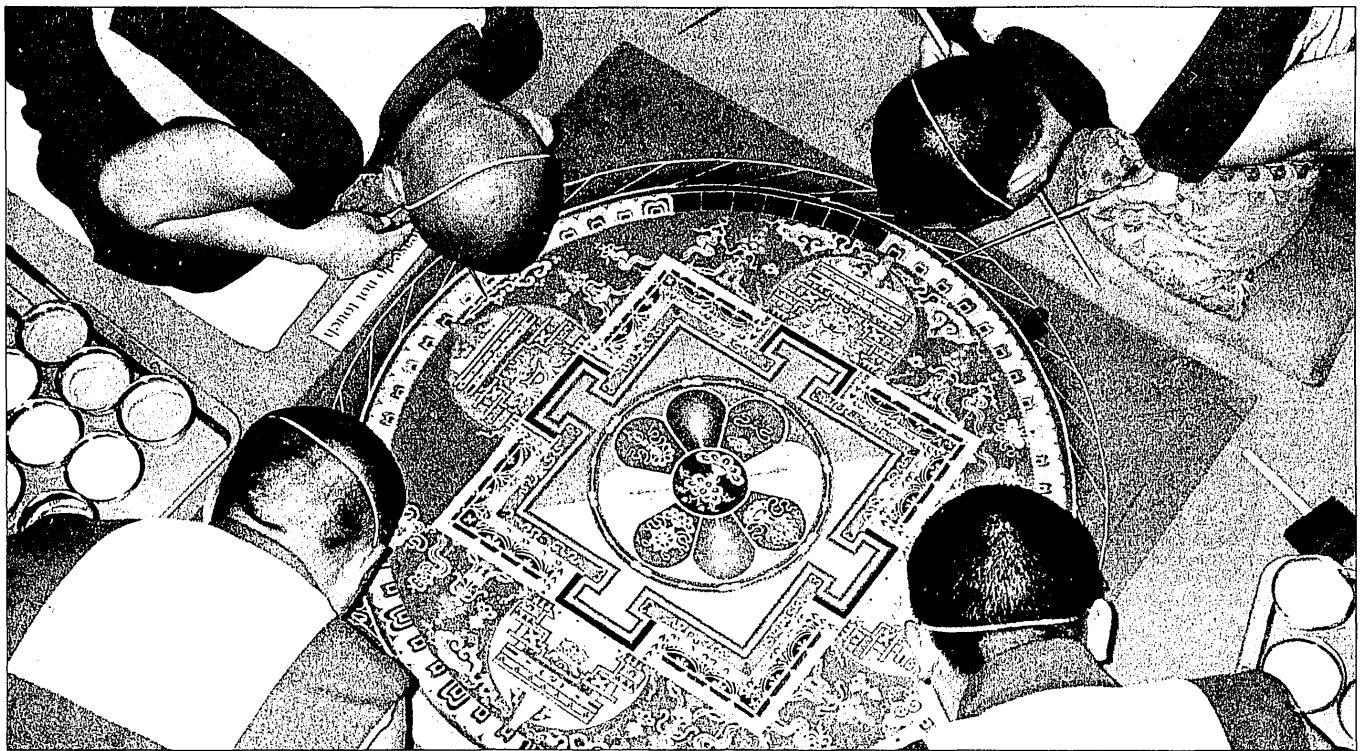


# RELIGION



MICHAEL MCATEER PHOTOS

**CIRCLE OF LIFE:** Tibetan monks crouch over their mandala at a northern retreat centre as part of a fundraising tour for the Gaden Jangste Monastery in India.

# Fleeting beauty of the universe

## Tibetan Buddhist monks create — and then destroy — brilliant mandalas

BY MICHAEL MCATEER  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

**SOUTH RIVER** — Created over four days by Tibetan Buddhist monks with skills honed by years of training, practice and meditation, the completed sand mandala looked very much like a colourful floor painting.

A work of vivid hues and intricate designs it was, nonetheless, a thing of fleeting beauty, like the short-lived beauty of a butterfly. In a ritual as old as Buddhism itself the mandala was "deconstructed," the sand swept into a ceremonial pot to be poured into the waters of a lake edging the northwest border of Algonquin Park.

"It's done, it's finished," said a monk in robe of saffron and maroon wearing a ceremonial hat of bright yellow as the colored sand spread out on the water. Buddha did teach that all things are impermanent.

**'You have to focus your mind in order not to commit any mistakes'**

The mandala (Sanskrit for circle) has been described as a road map of the universe, exploring the interrelationship of the heavenly bodies, the human body, and the working of the mind.

Each of the thousands of Tibetan Buddhist mandalas is said to be the embodiment of a deity representing an aspect of Buddha's mind. And each has a different form described in great detail in texts written down since the passing of the Buddha in 600 B.C. with the mandala's colors, symbols and their placement system-

atically explained in the texts.

Lobsang Tenzin, a doctor of Tibetan medicine at the Gaden Jangste Monastery in south India, was one of five monks who worked on the Buddha of Compassion mandala at the Northern Edge Algonquin Retreat and Awareness Centre on Kawawaymog Lake, about 28 kilometres east of South River. A monk for 20 of his 35 years, the Bhutan-born son of Tibetans started creating mandalas only after years of disciplined training

and practice.

"You have to focus your mind in order not to commit any mistakes," Tenzin said through a translator. "Everything has been decided, you cannot change any colour. If you make a mistake it is considered sinful... that you are not obedient to Buddha." A mistake and you start again from scratch no matter how advanced the mandala.

Each day before they started working on the mandala, the monks medi-

tated to purify their minds and their materials. They prayed to remove any distractions that might get in the way of their focused attention. They prayed that the mandala would be true to the text and pleasing to the deity.

Having prepared themselves mentally for the spiritual task, the monks donned white face masks and scooped a small quantity of sand into narrow, tapered metal tubes. Then, crouched over their work, faces only inches from the ground, they scraped and tapped the tube with a piece of metal, directing the sand from the tube's narrow opening onto the mandala to form the intricate designs.

**The monks meditate to purify their minds and their materials**

It is said that precious and semi-precious stones were once used to create mandalas in Tibet. Today's material is made from white stones ground to sand which is then dyed to produce the bright colours.

The Tibetan monks spent a week at the retreat centre as part of an extensive North American fundraising tour for the Gaden Jangste Monastery in India. The original monastery was established almost six centuries ago in Lhasa and was Tibet's second largest monastery, at one point housing 7,000 monks.

Following the 1959 exodus of Tibetan monks from their homeland, a new Gaden Jangste Monastery was constructed in India to house 300 monks. The number of monks has now swollen to 3,000 and funds are being raised to support the monks and to help construct a new assembly hall used for prayers, debating and special rituals.

These regular fundraising tours, sponsored by North American supporters, have been taking place for about ten years, helping propagate Tibetan Buddhism in the west. How-

ever, the unveiling of some of the more arcane aspects of Tibetan Buddhism has meant that teachings, once restricted to people with many years of training are now given publicly. Rituals and ceremonies once kept secret behind the walls of isolated Tibetan monasteries, now take place in the open.

The danger, the Dalai Lama notes, is that this can lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. In the case of mandalas, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism has encouraged a greater openness in the display and accurate description of mandalas because misunderstandings are "more harmful than a partial lifting of secrecy."

Has contact with the west corrupted the purity of Tibetan Buddhism? Or diluted its teachings?

"Doctrinally it has not changed but certainly teachings restricted to people with many years of training are now being given publicly," says Franklin Tall, a University of Toronto mathematics professor and a lay practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism for 25 years. However, as "long as the lineage is maintained," as long as untrained people don't claim to be experts, he sees no cause for alarm.

Tall says passing on teachings to the untrained public differs from passing on the ability to give the rituals.

"So, as long as the person to whom the ability to give the ritual is trained appropriately, then you maintain the lineage," he says.

"You are not giving away the ability to conduct these rituals to the general public."

Tall says there is always a danger that untrained people will set themselves up as teachers of rituals and meditation techniques.

"Fortunately it does seem to have happened to a large extent," he says. "There are enough Tibetans in the West so that people who are interested can find accurate teaching."

Michael McAteer is The Star's former religion editor.



**DIFFERENT STROKES:** After the mandala is finished, Lobsang Tenzin and a fellow monk enjoy a paddle.