

The Sand Mandala of Avalokiteshvara

In May 2008, His Holiness the Dalai Lama came to England to give five days of teaching in Nottingham, during the course of which a group of monks from Tashi Lhunpo Monastery created a sand mandala of the deity Avalokiteshvara for public display. A month after this event a Khenpo from the Drikung Kagyu tradition contacted me to ask if I would write a description of this sand mandala for him, as many people in Nottingham had asked him specific questions about the mandala, which he felt unable to answer. So I wrote a short description of the Avalokiteshvara Mandala on June 13th 2008 and sent it on to him, the reason being that this same group of monks would soon be creating another Avalokiteshvara sand mandala at his centre in Germany.

Although it may seem strange for a Tibetan Khenpo to ask such questions of a Westerner, a similar situation arose in 2003 at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, when another group of monks were creating an Avalokiteshvara sand mandala for public display with a different sequence of the directional quadrants: blue (east), white (south), yellow (west), green (north), and red (centre). The sequence of laying out the chalk 'working lines' and the particle colours of the mandala were filmed by some young Oxford students over the somewhat prolonged course of fifteen days. Then when the mandala was complete I was asked to explain its structure and symbolism for the Museum, which was also filmed for posterity with the monks in attendance. After the filming the monks, who had frequently constructed this sand mandala at many different international venues, asked me to repeat and explain in more detail many of the points I had covered during my filmed talk. For although the monks may know exactly how to correctly draw and colour a variety of different deity mandalas, they are not always so knowledgeable about the complexities of their symbolic meanings. A series of photographs of the Ashmolean sand mandala may be viewed at:

<http://www.ashmolean.org/ash/events/mandala/>

The Sand Mandala of Avalokiteshvara (Chenrezig)

This sand mandala illustrates the two dimensional representation of the divine palace or celestial abode of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion, who is more familiarly known by his Tibetan name of Chenrezig (Tib. *spyan-ras-gzigs*), and invoked by his famous mantra *OM MANI PADME HUM*. The plan of this celestial palace is based upon very precise measurements, design and colour placements, which especially attract the positive energies of compassion and loving kindness to the place where it is created. Sand mandalas are traditionally made for initiations, and then destroyed when their purpose has been fulfilled, with their sand particles being swept together and then dispersed into an ocean or a river as a universal blessing to all living beings.

All of the major deities of the Buddhist Vajrayana or Tantric traditions have their own individual mandala, many of which are populated by the multitude of 'residents' or deities that may appear in their retinue. Essentially the three dimensional structure of a deity's mandala palace invariably takes the form of an elaborate square building,

which is perfectly proportioned with four great directional doors or gateways and an ornate roof. The entire building is described as being fashioned from the most precious materials, which are visualized in the form and colourful purity of a rainbow-like luminosity.

The mandala palace itself rests upon a great square plinth, within which is embedded the attribute of a vast crossed 'universal-*vajra*' (*vishva-vajra*), which symbolizes the absolute stability of the earth element. The prongs of this crossed-*vajra* are coloured to correspond to the four cardinal directions, and can be seen enclosing the four outer gateways on a two-dimensional plan of the mandala palace.

The inner square of the mandala represents the floor or ground plan of this palace, which is divided into four coloured quadrants: the eastern quadrant (bottom or facing the viewer) is blue, the south is yellow (left), the west is white (top), and the north is green (right). Along with the red central circle these colours represent the fivefold qualities and attributes of the 'Five Buddha Families', which have a complex esoteric significance within the teachings of Vajrayana Buddhism. These Five Buddhas are represented by the symbols or 'seed syllables' (Skt. *bija*) that appear upon the four cardinal petals and central dais of the eight-petal lotus circle, which occupies the inner square of the palace walls.

Avalokiteshvara is the principal male Bodhisattva of red Amitabha Buddha, whose symbol is a red lotus, or the seed syllable HRIH. Amitabha traditionally occupies the western quadrant (top), but since he is the 'Lord of the Padma or Lotus Family' to which Avalokiteshvara belongs, he is represented here at the centre of this mandala. The symbol of a blue *vajra*, or the syllable HUM, of blue Akshobya Buddha appears on the eastern petal (bottom). The symbol of a yellow jewel, or the syllable TRAM, of yellow Ratnasambhava Buddha appears on the southern petal (left). The symbol of a white wheel, or the syllable OM, of white Vairocana Buddha appears on the western petal (top). And the symbol of a green sword, or the syllable AH, of green Amoghasiddhi Buddha appears on the northern petal (right). The four inter-cardinal petals are plain and may be variously coloured, and the blue rim of this inner lotus-circle or raised dais is ornamented with golden or yellow *vajras* to represent its immutable and indestructible nature.

The first linear square of the mandala represents the actual walls of the palace, which are composed of five layers of coloured light; blue, green, red, yellow and white respectively from the inside out, such that the walls appear blue on the inside and white on the outside of the palace. The structure of these walls follows the T-shaped contours of the four doors or gateways to represent the vestibules and outer porches, within each of which abide one of the 'Four Great Guardian Kings' of the four directions. These are Dhritarashtra (east), Virudhaka (south), Virupaksha (west), and Vaishravana (north). The Four Great Kings may be represented by their coloured symbols or seed-syllables, and along with the Four Buddhas that surround Avalokiteshvara; they complete the nine-deity assembly of the mandala of Avalokiteshvara.

The second square linear section of the mandala is the red offering-goddess platform, where the eight goddesses who offer beauty, garlands, song, dance, flowers, incense, light, and perfume. These eight Offering Goddesses stand outside the five-layered

translucent walls facing inwards, and are represented either by a small lotus or their specific symbol. In the four corners and eight intermediate ends of this red platform are the symbols of a joined crescent moon and half-*vajra*, which represent the union of relative (moon), and absolute (*vajra bodhicitta*, as the ‘mind of enlightenment’).

The third square linear section of the mandala is a frieze of coloured geometrical forms that represent the five elements: earth (squared shapes), water (circles), fire (triangles), air (crescents), and space (the empty areas of the frieze). This ornamental frieze runs along the top of the mandala’s walls as a projecting cornice that is one cubit in height, with the walls themselves measuring thirteen cubits in height. Above this is the fourth linear square or frieze, which is blue-black in colour and decorated with a continuous net of hanging loops of white pearls. These pearl loops may emerge from the open mouths of mythical creatures known as *kirtimukha*, meaning the ‘face of glory’, and they represent the jewel ornaments that hang down in front of the mandala palace’s upper ventilation cornice or lattice. This open lattice is constructed of four layers of stacked jewels that are fashioned from seven different kinds of precious substances; emerald, ruby, turquoise, crystal lapis lazuli, silver, and gold.

The fifth square linear section of the mandala is shown as a blue frieze with a diminishing series of short white lines upon it. These lines represent the beams, wooden struts and the layer of *vajra*-mud that forms the roof of the mandala palace, along with its protruding cantilevers, rainspouts, and hanging ornaments of a mirror, bell and yak-tail. Above this is the sixth and upper square frieze of white lotus petals, which represents the lotus parapet that runs right around the edge of the mandala’s flat roof. Although the roof itself is not actually represented in a two-dimensional painted or sand mandala, it is quite complicated in its construction: with eight ornate pillars supporting the circular central beam of the ceiling, which in turn is intersected by four large cross beams to create nine equal square sections. The ceiling’s central square is open to permit light to enter from the skylight above with its gilded roof, and the other eight squares are intersected by four sets of twenty-eight smaller lateral beams that emanate from each of the four walls.

The four gateways of the mandala are equally complex in their structure, as can be seen in this sand mandala, with the vertical sections representing the pillars that support the doors and outer archways; and its eleven horizontal layers representing the lintels and cornices of these archways. The small flat roof above each of these four archways is decorated with the traditional Buddhist emblem of a golden eight-spoke wheel flanked by two deer. These wheel and deer emblems can be seen within the encircling and directionally coloured prongs of the vast crossed-*vajra* that supports the entire structure of the celestial palace from below.

A series of golden treasure vases are shown upon each symmetrical side of the roof, with various banners, flags and parasols flying above them as symbols of spiritual sovereignty. Eight symmetrical wish-fulfilling trees are also commonly shown on the roof, with each one bearing one of the eight auspicious symbols, or one of the ‘seven jewels of a *chakravartin*’ amidst its foliage. Flowers, clouds of incense, gods sprinkling perfumed water, and the eight great *mahasiddhas* of a particular lineage may also be depicted upon the roof of the mandala palace, all of which serve to honour Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion, as a manifestation of the Buddhist *chakravartin* or ‘Universal Monarch’.

Outside of the mandala palace are its sacred green circular grounds, and beyond this are its three protection circles or wheels. The first or innermost of these wheels is the 'lotus-womb' of sixty-four variegated lotus petals, which represents the purification that an initiate must undergo in order to enter within the mandala palace. The second wheel is fashioned as a series of sixteen or thirty-two golden or yellow *vajras*, which encircle a narrow blue ring that represents the element of space. These *vajras* are interspaced by circular '*vajra*-symbols', with an undulating line known as the '*vajra*-thread' connecting them. This wheel is known as the '*vajra*-fence and canopy', which manifests as an impenetrable ring and hemispherical dome over the entire mandala palace, which represents that one's tantric vows and commitments must be upheld in order to enter within the mandala palace. The third wheel is fashioned from thirty-two banks of five-coloured flames that circle in a clockwise direction. This circle is known as the 'mountain of fire', which also forms a vast hemispherical dome over the entire mandala to represent that no impurities can enter within. These three wheels also symbolically protect the sacred realm from the three great forces of nature that will ultimately destroy all world systems, floods (lotus womb), earthquakes (*vajra*-fence), and conflagration (fire mountain).

Symbolically the thirty-two blazing sectors of the fire mountain represent the thirty-two petals of the 'wheel of great bliss' *chakra* at the crown of the head, and its five-coloured flame banks the Wisdoms of the Five Buddhas. The sixty-four petals of the lotus-womb represent the sixty-four petals of the 'wheel of emanation' *chakra* at the navel. And the thirty-two *vajras* of the *vajra*-fence represent the thirty-two 'major marks' or immutable physical characteristics of a fully enlightened Buddha. All the components of a mandala have precise symbolic meanings, which may be expressed, interpreted and understood on an outer, inner, secret, and 'alternative' level. Yet essentially all these exoteric and esoteric levels of symbolic meaning are purely designed to encapsulate the entire teachings of the Buddha and the Path to Enlightenment.