

# THE MANDALA SAND PAINTING

## A SACRED ART BY THE TIBETAN LAMAS OF DREPUNG LOSELING MONASTERY

From all the artistic traditions of Tantric Buddhism, that of painting with colored sand ranks as one of the most unique and exquisite. In Tibetan this art is called *dul-tson-kyil-khor*, which literally means "mandala of colored powders." Millions of grains of sand are painstakingly laid into place on a flat platform over a period of days or weeks. 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.

On previous US tours the lamas of Drepung Loseling have constructed mandala sand paintings in more than thirty North American cities. These sand paintings are made from millions of grains of colored sands carefully poured onto a flat surface approximately five feet in diameter, and take four monks a week to construct.

The most common substance used in the creation of *dul-tson-kyil-khor* is colored sands. Other popular substances are powdered flowers, herbs or grains, and also powdered and colored stone. 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.

The subject of a Tibetan sand painting is known in Sanskrit as a mandala, or cosmogram, of which there are many types. In general all mandalas have outer, inner and secret meanings. 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 enlightened mind; and on the secret level, they depict 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 effect a purification and healing on these three levels. Formed of a traditional prescribed iconography that includes geometric shapes and a multitude of ancient spiritual symbols, the sand-painted mandala is used as a tool for re-consecrating the earth and its inhabitants.

Every tantric system has its own mandala, and thus each one symbolizes a particular existential and spiritual approach. For example, that of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara symbolizes compassion as a central focus of the spiritual experience; that of Manjushri takes wisdom as the central focus; and that of Vajrapani emphasizes the need for courage and strength in the quest for sacred knowledge.

The mandalas the lamas will construct include those of the Medicine Buddha, the Amitayus Buddha, \* Guhyasamaja, Chakrasamvara, Yamantaka, Vajra Yogini and Avalokiteshvara. These are created whenever a need for the healing of the environment and living beings is felt. The lamas 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.

The Amitayus Buddha (the Buddha of Boundless Life) was constructed at the Western Gallery on the Western Washington University campus May 15-20.