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Mandala: Constructing Peace through Art

Author(s): Tom Anderson

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Mandala

Constructing Peace Through Art

M*any of us go through our lives believing that our view of the world is true and that other people share it.... But occasionally this complacency is shaken and we are confronted with a frightening possibility. What if the “reality” that I usually take for granted is not “out there” in the world... What if it exists only in my mind and extends only to the limits of my subjectivity? What if other people... live in different realities, traverse different worlds, and believe that the universe around them (and within them) is fundamentally different than the world I inhabit? (Anderson, 1990, p. 95)*

BY TOM ANDERSON

I wrote this article many months ago, but left it languishing in the hard drive of my computer. “You’re starting to sound like a mystic,” I said to myself. “The art education mainstream is not ready for this.” But then September 11, 2001, the unthinkable happened, and with the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the U.S. mainstream changed forever. In that context the art education project I describe here may be ready for prime time. At least it doesn’t seem so mystical anymore, and there is certainly healing to do.

Introduction

In the spring of 2001, 10 Tibetan Buddhist monks from the Drepung Gomang Monastery visited Florida State University, conducted chants and performances, and created and ritually dismantled a sand mandala. The goal of this process was to attain local balance and world peace. I used this weeklong event to introduce my art education students to the idea of instrumentalist artworks and processes. Our

goal, developed by the students themselves, was not the construction and dismantling of a mandala, although we did that. Rather, it was to explore the idea of constructing—or more accurately reconstructing—caring, cooperative, and self-reflexive community through art.

Mandalas: Making and Balancing the World

Mandalas are created by a number of cultures, but those of interest to me here are the healing mandalas constructed by Tibetan Buddhists and the Navajo people in North America. Healing mandalas can be developed to restore or protect either an individual or the larger environment. Mandalas are temporary works, composed of sand, grain, pollen, flower dust, and other natural materials and are accompanied by chanting, prayers, and blessings. The Navajo ceremony is called a Sing.

The Navajo Sings are designed to help someone who's ill or has misfortune, or they may be focused on maintaining current health or balance. Sings last 9 days and consist of all-night singing, daytime prayers and chants that reiterate creation stories, and ritual cleansing (Anderson, 1990). During the course of the Sings the Navajo make sand paintings appropriate to the healing that is being conducted. The ultimate goal of a Sing is to restore balance and beauty, or Hozho, to the universe, which in turn will make it right for the afflicted member of the group.

Hozho is the condition of beauty, harmony, or happiness, the desired end-state of being. It came into being when First Boy, associated with thought, and First Girl, associated with speech, gave birth to Changing Woman. Changing woman is Earth, incarnate, the source of all life and fertility (Anderson, 1990). The dark side—fear, disorder, ugliness and so on—is represented by *Hochxo*. But *Hochxo* is not the opposite of *Hozho*. Rather, *Hozho* and *Hochxo* are continuous, mutually existing, and cyclical.

Tibetan Buddhism has an amazingly similar set of ideas about balance and harmony through correct thought and speech and ceremonial ritual. At the root of all four strains of Tibetan Buddhism is the desire to free all beings from suffering and confusion (Farrar-Halls, 2000). At the most basic (Sutra) level practitioners study the canon of sutra and practice insight and visualization meditations to calm the mind and acquire positive, moral states of mind. At the higher (Tantra) level enter mystical and ritualistic practices that involve using symbols of the cosmos (mandalas), chanting with bells and drums and horns (mantras), and holding the hands in special ritual positions (mudras). At the tantric level the practitioner visualizes himself or herself as a



particular deity while reciting sacred scriptures—clearly not a practice fit for an outsider or a novice.

Although outsiders cannot understand others' cultures or other peoples' rituals and ritual meanings at an intrinsic level, certain aspects of the process and the forms can be understood and held by the outsiders for their own practices, in this case for the benefit of art education. First is the idea of ritual itself and its value to human beings in helping us to understand, frame, value, keep, and pass on those aspects of our culture and our humanity that we cherish and hold as social and spiritual beings (Arguelles, 1985; Dissanayake, 2000). The ceremonial aspects involved in the development of mandalas in both the Navajo and Tibetan Buddhist cultures involve ritual as a sort of social glue that holds people together, as processes and products that personify and cement collective values, mores, and beliefs. Outsiders may not understand the intricacies of these form-process-belief connections, but they certainly can understand that they do exist.

The Way of the Tibetan Mandala Ceremony

The way of the Tibetan Buddhist mandala consists of eight steps, the first being purification (Arguelles, 1985). Purification usually consists of cleansing and purging the body of toxic elements, as through fasting, so the consciousness is not bogged down by the body's demands.

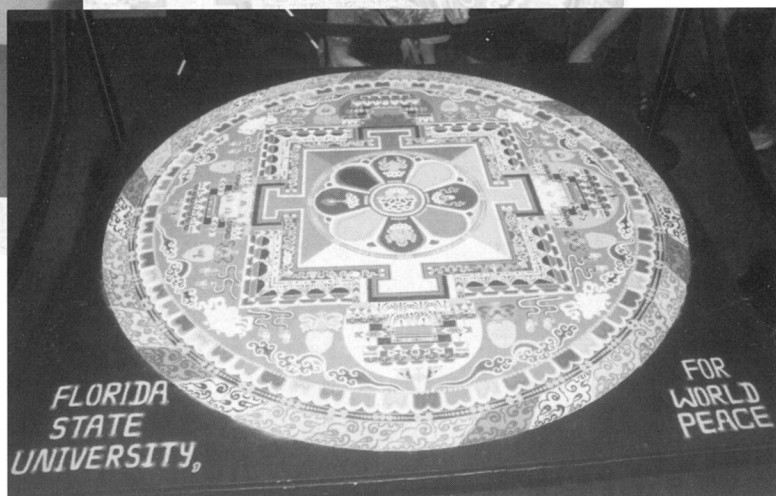
The second step is centering through meditation. The idea is to turn the outflowing energies inward and focus them in one's psyche to achieve a quiet center. When one becomes centered, it creates an internal organized field pattern called orientation (Arguelles, 1985), the third step in the way. Only through orientation—for example, by understanding and orienting oneself to the rising sun—can one understand the



Far left: Tibetan monks from Dreung Gomang monastery in the Milrepa performance.

Left: Tibetan monks constructing the world peace mandala.

Below: The completed world peace mandala.



larger field of play, the cardinal points. In Native America, within the circle of the sand painting, each cardinal direction (east, west, north, south, above, and below) is significant in its own way, each having its own powers, represented by its own colors and imagery (Arguelles, 1985). In the mandala process of both the Native Americans and Tibetan Buddhists, the orientation process is usually connected with chanting, prayer, singing, dancing, incense burning, and sometimes ritual eating and drinking, with the person or earthly phenomenon to be healed somehow represented in the center. The orientation ceremony is usually presided over or conducted by a priest or medicine person of some sort. The purpose is to bring all who participate and all their energies into a psychic harmony.

Then there is the actual construction of the mandala, step four. There are two basic types of mandalas. One is the mandala to transmute demonic forces. The other, the mandala as cosmic fortress, was the type the monks from Drepung Gomang Monastery constructed. The issue of balance addressed in the mandala was world peace and in that context, blessings for the Tallahassee community. It began with an opening ceremony in which the monks, dressed in ceremonial orange robes and feather headdresses, consecrated the site and called forth the forces of goodness by chanting mantras accompanied by brass horns and drums and symbols. Orienting themselves to the cardinal points on the compass, and using straight edges, strings, and circle-measuring tools, they drew an outline of the mandala. The monks then began to pour colored sand into place in the sections already drawn out, using hollow brass tools that looked like hand-rolled trumpets. They worked from the middle toward the edges, sitting on all four sides of the work.

As I watched, it became apparent that some were more skilled than others in this process, but no monk was in charge of any given task or area of the mandala. It was truly a collective, community effort of non-hierarchical relationships. Although as an outsider I could not understand the iconography, in process it felt like the construction of a world.

The construction process was accompanied by ceremonial rituals—Sings of a sort—including a medicine Buddha *puja*, a type of ritual ceremony, seeking blessings for the local community, a *puja* for world peace, and a *Milrepa* performance, all of which consisted of multi-note chanting accompanied by flutes, horns, and percussion instruments. The *Milrepa* performance was also accompanied by food and drink blessings shared with all in attendance.

All of these ceremonies contributed to the next stage in the mandala process: absorption. “Absorption involves the intense concentration and meditation upon the completion of the mandala so the contents of the work are transferred to and identified with the mind and body of the beholder” (Arguelles, 1985, p. 96). Through absorption of the constructed consciousness represented in the structure of the mandala, consciousness can be achieved and balance and order attained.



The head monk begins the process of ceremonial destruction.



The monks begin the procession to ceremonially disperse the mural.



The gray sand that was the mandala is cast upon the waters at Wakulla Springs.

After absorption comes ritual destruction (Arguelles, 1985). The point is to achieve detachment from the work created. At this point, the essence of the work—its energy, its understandings—has been absorbed already by those who have engaged it. The physical work has served its purpose of achieving an inner balance and harmony that affect and reflect the outer material world through the power of the energy contained within. Thus, there is no further need for the physical work. Having served as a point of departure for healing and understanding, the mandala now must be symbolically deconstructed, this process itself serving as a symbol of detaching from the material world of form for its own sake.

At Florida State, the head monk, wearing an elaborate feathered headdress and accompanied by ritual chanting, stood by the mandala. Then accompanied by a gasp from more than a hundred onlookers, he quickly and deliberately pulled his thumb through the sand from the center to each of the four cardinal directions at the edge of the work. He then stood back and let the others take over. With small whiskbrooms they began to sweep the colorful sands into piles on the mandala platform. As they swept, the sands turned gray. After sweeping them and assorted flower petals into a ritual brass urn, the monks rose, and still chanting and playing their horns and drums, carried the urn in procession out of the FSU Gallery and into a waiting Chevy Suburban for a short trip to Wakulla Springs. It is considered auspicious to deposit material used in a mandala into running water to disperse any negative energy it had collected. Many of us followed to see them deposit the sand into the huge springs that is the source of a short, broad river flowing into the Gulf of Mexico. The ritual was over.

But that isn't the end of the mandala process. There are, in fact, two more steps. I unknowingly engaged the next step by staying on at the diving tower to look into the water, watch the flower petals float downstream, and think about what had happened and what it meant to me. That was an act of reintegration. It's an intuitive attempt at wholeness, to walk in beauty, as the Navajo would say

(Anderson, 1990), to become attuned to the greater rhythm and forces of the universe (Arguelles, 1985).

Finally, there is the stage of actualization. The whole mandala process is really just a prelude to this stage. The goal is to renew and give energy to our life force, to bring order from chaos, to understand and accept that both are within us and part of our being in the universe. The whole mandala process is simply to remind us of and give us a guide to the on-going mandalic process in every living organism, so we can act in truth of balance and beauty in our everyday lives.

Making Meaning for Peace in Art Education

It was a bit of stretch for some of my art education majors to engage certain ideas and practices of the mandala project, but they rose to the occasion. After observing the monks' work, I described the purification process to the group. But in my public university context, we started as a group with centering, meaning that we sat quietly in a circle to think of the nature of what we were about to engage.

After some time, we began to get oriented to our task, discussing the idea that mandala making is instrumentalist. It's not art for art's sake. Rather it's meant to achieve something in the world from an aesthetically framed perspective using aesthetic means as the tools. So the first thing we had to do was decide on our issue. We talked about environmental degradation and various social problems in the world, but decided probably our project couldn't impact the world on a global scale, no matter how much energy we put into it. So we decided we'd follow the old Earth Day adage: think globally and act locally. Again we couldn't decide between social and environmental issues, discussing homelessness, crack cocaine use, prostitution, and the causes of these problems in the Frenchtown neighborhood, over-paving, lawn fertilizing, pesticides, and run-off in Lake Ella, and other local issues. Finally we came to the idea that it's all connected, the social and the environmental, and in another sense the social and the psychological, the practical and the spiritual. How can we learn to trust each other to address the common good, we asked. How do we integrate each of our individual desires, how do we address the various issues we thought were important? Ultimately, we determined that our theme be "balance in the red hills of North Florida."

We decided that each of us would go home, think about and feel the environment around us and bring mandala construction materials that reflected our issues

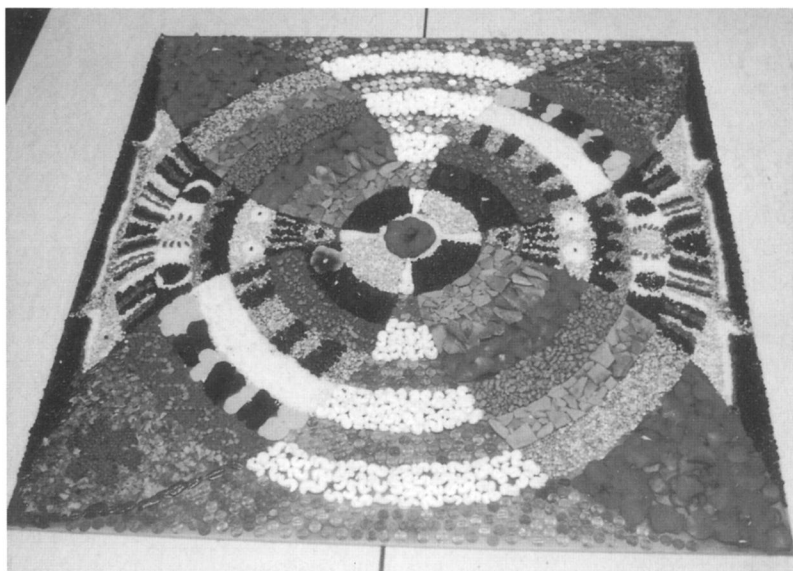
to the next class meeting. I supplied a large square piece of Masonite, painted blue, on which to construct our mandala. The next session began with discussion of the materials students brought. Jason, for example, wanted to bring the earth, itself. Sitting on his back porch, he noticed the terra cotta pots he was going to use for houseplants. The connection became obvious to him. He described his hammering of the pots into chunks as symbolic of the ecosystem: porous, easily broken down, resilient in its constituent parts.

Cooperation and compromise became important in designing and structuring the mandala itself, which represents a union between inner and outer reality. We didn't have the iconographic history in place to make either a cosmic fortress or a demonic transmutation mandala, so we had to design our own structure. We decided the eight of us would start by working with a partner, combining energies and materials across the axis of the mandala in four quadrants. As the barriers between individuals broke down during this initial process, materials were freely asked for and offered from throughout the group, so that eventually the beans brought by one person or the pennies or the pebbles were used by most of the rest of us.

We tended to work from the outside in rather than from the inside out, as the monks had done. When I saw this, we discussed how this was going to be physically more challenging with considerably more chance of



Florida State University art education majors constructing a mandala for "Balance in the Red Hills of North Florida."



Top: The completed FSU student mandala.

Bottom: The ritual destruction of the FSU students' mandala.

Next page: Putting the dismantled art education mandala into an urn for transport to the water. A Florida State University art education major casts dismantled mandala fragments upon the water.

destroying already-done pieces of the work. But the group decided that the energy was flowing from the edge to the center, that somehow they felt they wanted to take it to a point, to make a point. The mandala somehow wanted us to concentrate our energy. So on we went from edge to center in spite of my misgivings. It was the will of the group.

When construction was complete, we engaged in the stage of absorption in our own way. We didn't chant, play horns, or drum, but as we sat in a circle around the mandala we reflected quietly and then began to share. Almost everyone acknowledged that they had come together as a group, getting to know each other, accepting each other's choices and contributions. Pam, who started out skeptical, wanting to know the "right way" to do it, was very thoughtful in reflecting the value of the multiple contributions to the group process. Several students compared this to another group project we had started and faltered on, a Sandy Skoglund-style installation that somehow had felt emotionally flat and had descended into contentiousness about content and direction. From that previously held oppositional outlook, somehow the power of the mandala brought them together, they said.

As for ritual destruction, the group decided I was the head monk, so I pulled through the mandala from the center to the west (where my heart is) as the first stroke of destruction. It was surprisingly difficult. I—we all—had grown attached to our creation. We then proceeded, with everyone ritually sweeping portions of the mandala into a huge metal bowl. I couldn't convince the group to chant, but we did file out with the bowl full of our collected energy and walk six blocks and took turns casting our mandala and its energy upon the nearest running water.

In final reflection, leading to the stage of actualization, Pam said it was an important process as much in learning about each other and each person's values as it was an art project. She was also impressed by the energy collected and released. Jason felt our theme and our approach put him in touch with his north Florida roots. Nancy talked about how the project gave her an appreciation for her surroundings. She was impressed how eventually the power of the project, itself, changed attitudes from "I and mine" to "we and ours." She also felt saddened because we couldn't preserve the mandala and learned a lesson in letting go.



Postscript

Human beings are programmed to seek meanings. I can't help making a metaphorical connection, now, between the mandala peace project and the terrible destruction of the World Trade Center. The mandala, constructed beautifully and concisely according to an exacting plan, was ritually destroyed, quickly turned by human hands from a brightly colored construction of distinction and clarity into a dull gray heap, which was carted away and ritually disposed of. When the head monk delivered the first swipe through the mandala, shattering its color, compromising its structure, there was a gasp of disbelief by all who saw it.

As the gray dust was taken away, a friend of mine whose daughter had died a few years earlier began to cry. When I asked her about it, she said that the development of the mandala felt to her like a birthing project, a generative act of lovingly detailed kindness. The sharp onslaught of its destruction was not only a shock but something she had girded against, something she didn't want to see, something she didn't want to happen. But as the mandala turned from high structure to a heap of dull sand, she said she felt the energy coming from it, dispersing everywhere. "This is what people meant when they said to me 'Now Claire's everywhere.' I just got it!" she said. Somehow the ritual of perfect construction, destroyed almost in happenstance, helped her connect with her loss and made her own tragedy feel understandable at a deep level.

The World Trade center, too, was a mandala, holding the energy of a super power. In the horrible ritual of its destruction, and from the dull heap of its ashes that includes some 3,000 souls, maybe we can hope that their energies have dispersed everywhere. Maybe we can hope for some movement toward meaning, some deeper understandings toward the goal of peace within ourselves and with others. Maybe a primary function of art and its rituals is to help us find these deep places where meaning and peace exist.

*Tom Anderson is Professor of Art Education at Florida State University in Tallahassee.
E-mail: tanderso@mailers.fsu.edu.*

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