

THE LIFE MANDALA
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I marvel at the intricate sand mandalas that Tibetan monks create. These elaborate designs can take a week or more to assemble. When they are finished and the offering made, they are then swept into a pile of colored sand and scattered into a nearby river or stream, certainly a gesture of impermanence.

Mandalas are offerings, which is why they are often called “mandala offerings.” We too make offerings all the time in everything we do. Ours may not all be made well or last long, but they are our offerings all the same. They are all the things we try to do and care about.

Carefully constructing a mandala (doing something with love and care) is a way or an attempt to make our life sacred, to somehow consecrate our efforts and ourselves. Consecrate to whom and why?

Mandala offerings are not made to a god or someone up or out there. Offering is a mudra or ritual action that itself (the act) creates or focuses space and this act of offering is what makes it sacred. The making sacred by our skillful action is the goal and that being-made-sacred (whatever we want to call it) is the act of offering. The merit (whatever is good and of benefit to life) arising from offering is usually dedicated by monks for the benefit of all beings.

Our every effort and action has an effect, signifies who we are and what we are doing, something like our personal signature written in space and time – skillful means. Written to whom? As pointed out earlier, written not to anyone at all, but it is the writing itself, the mudra or gesture (if done properly) that is the offering and the offered. The manner of offering makes that moment and that space sacred or clearer and is the reason mandalas are made.

We are offering mandalas to focus the mind and that focused mind and the ensuing awareness clarifies and makes our space and time sacred. In other words, we can bless ourselves by our skillful actions as we make them, by how we do things. You and I do this every day, more or less skillfully.

A group of monks gather and collectively create a sacred mandala, blessing that space and time, and when the offering is made and complete, the sand mandala is swept up and cast into a stream to carry the blessed sand everywhere else. The blessed sand or even the finished sand mandala is not the offering. That is the result of the offering. The offering is the care and mindfulness we make in creating the mandala. That is the mandala.

When we create a mandala in our own day-to-day we focus our attention and build that part of our life more carefully and with greater detail than elsewhere. We do it with love, concern, and care. Like a perfectly made guitar or lute, whatever is made with love and care somehow reflects the special attention that went into making it. Perhaps the guitar plays better, lasts longer, “exists” more or “shines” in some difficult-to-describe manner.

There are things in life that we pour all our self into and it shows. They shine. We each make mandalas all the time whenever we take the time to do anything with care. I can't prove it, but I know that the things I do in life with my full attention and with great love and care to me are

more meaningful and worthwhile than what I do mindlessly and with no care. I make parts of my life sacred by how I go about doing them. And they last or exist somehow more strongly. Again, they “shine.”

The Zen Buddhists are way into the idea of doing everything with mindfulness and great care. And it can happen all the time and anytime. That is what meditation, chanting, mantras, and all ritualized gestures are all about – clarifying space, making it sacred and special, making it shine.

As I look back over my life, it is clear that I created some pretty elaborate spaces or mandalas myself. My whole bachelorhood in Ann Arbor, my singleness, years as a musician, years as an intellectual, and so on were like an elaborate mandala or ceremony enacted to draw forth from the universe my life partner Margaret, like a great song or chant. I did not know this at the time.

I find it amazing that within about a month of being married I left the house where I had lived for some seven years, I stopped playing music professionally (after over six years of performing), I sold my enormous collection of books and music albums, AND I moved out of the town of Ann Arbor completely. Gone. My entire Ann Arbor mandala was swept away in a few short weeks. How was that possible?

My view is that it was possible because the moment Margaret appeared in my life, the reason I was performing the ritual of searching for her, waiting for her, and calling her forth from the cosmos was fulfilled. I may not have even been consciously aware of what I had been doing. My single life as an eligible bachelor and man about town was a question in itself, a question being asked of the universe that was answered by Margaret. At that point, the entire mandala was finished and quite naturally dissolved.

In the last thirty years I have created another very large mandala with our center here in Big Rapids. It is extremely detailed, worked out, and it shines. The day will come when that mandala too will deconstruct and vanish from the world, just as it once appeared.

Mandalas really are like flowers that bloom and then fade. They are their own reason to be. These are grand gestures made to bring a little eternity into time, like great calls echoing across time that bring forth a response commensurate with how carefully they were made. Mandalas offerings are their own reason and reward – the simple clarity of being present.

