



Life as Mandala: Creating Sacred Space



The Life Mandala

By Michael Erlewine

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 and not what is being offered.

The making sacred by our skillful action is the goal and that act of offering is what is sacred. The merit (whatever is good and of benefit to life) arising from any offering is usually dedicated by monks for the benefit of all beings. We can do the same in secular life, thus making it sacred.

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 the moment and that space sacred or clearer and is the reason mandalas are made.

The offering of a mandala itself is what focuses 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. We are doing it already in every action we make; we might as well do it consciously.

A group of monks gather and collectively create a sacred sand mandala, blessing that space and time and when the offering is made and complete, the sand mandala is usually 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 used in creating the mandala. That offering activity is the mandala.

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When we create a mandala in our own day-to-day life 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. A child is a mandala. 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 are more meaningful and worthwhile to me 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 I was doing this at the time. It was instinctual.

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 my much-loved 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 inject 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.

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Mandala – Offerings That Last

One of the qualities of mandala offerings is executing the offering skillfully in a “Zen Like” manner, with perfect mindfulness. This pertains to everything we do. We learn to make the things we do last by doing them carefully and mindfully. Great and lasting art is made so well that it lasts and fascinates us for a very long time, often far longer than the civilizations that produced it. We still read Homer’s “Iliad” and “Odyssey” thousands of years after the cities of the men he wrote about have turned to dust.

Shakespeare has defied the combined ears of centuries to fathom and to exhaust the ability of his words to last or hold our attention. They shine. Only absolutely ‘true actions’ hold together (cohere) long enough for us to see anything in them, for them to give off light. Real and lasting offerings are ones that endure.

Great art, poetry, or any true offering shines. Things done or made well emit light and are the solidified product of our actions. They shine and by their light we can see.

Proper offerings are like miniature suns shining. They light up our life and we can see. These sources of light, these

offerings that we have learned to do well are one of the esoteric meanings of the fixed stars. We each have those actions and rituals that we perform that never fail us, but ever last, giving off light. If we act skillfully and carefully, our whole inner awareness is ablaze -- enlightened by the light of the true offerings we have made. It is recursive.

Collecting Light

As we become more mindful in our actions, we learn to make more and more gestures and offerings that last and which in turn emit yet more light. The things we do well shine and by their light we can see. Every well-executed action and offering enhances our awareness and becomes like a star shining within our mind. Once we have made or found one star shining, we can see to make more by its light, and the more light we have, the more offerings we can make, bringing still more light, until we have built an entire body of light. This is what is called in the esoteric texts the “Body of Light.” We literally light up our life by our actions, by what we do and how we do it.

When we succeed in making one part of life really well, that section of our life mandala no longer demands attention and we can turn our awareness to other things. It is like breathing; once we learn it, we repeat that ritual automatically. Mind training is the process of taking permanent or perpetual care of more and more of our loose ends, tying these down so well that they don't require further attention – simple maintenance.

Great meditators are master craftsmen who teach how to make proper offerings. Everything of lasting value that I have managed to learn (and I am a slow learner) has been through the

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kindness of my dharma teachers, men and women who cared enough to distract me from my endless distractions and point out the true nature of the mind and how it works.

Here is a poem I wrote years ago about the things that last. It is one of what I call my “mantra” poems. If spoken out loud and with care, it actually means something and causes a concept to arise in the mind. Try it.

Everlasting Life

What will in words not wake,
Clear sleeps,
And clear, sleeps on.

What wakes stands watch to see that
sleep as sound.

What wakes will serve to set asleep,
Inset a sleep with standing words,
That wake, if ever, last.

And on that last, in overlay, our life.
Yes, to lay at the last a life that ever
lives,

To ever last that “last” of life,
And in ever ‘lasting’ life, everlasting,
We have a life that lives at last.



Summary

Every action we make (whether mindful or not) is an offering, sends a signal, and creates a signature or imprint in our mind stream. This is why many Zen and Tibetan lamas point out the value of being mindful in what we do in each moment. Learning mindfulness and being mindful is not at first easy, but, like all repetitive actions, becomes a habit through time, a habit worth having. Mindfulness itself is the offering or mandala, an activity the performance of which creates a sacred space or aura around us in which a more meaningful life is possible.

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