ON ‘MEDITATIONAL ART’
AND MAṆḌALAS AS OBJECTS
OF MEDITATION

Gudrun Bühnemann

The Buddhist art of Nepal and Tibet is a visual system of presenting symbols of enlightenment and also the way of inducing the experience of enlightenment.

(Kramrisch 1960: 23)

Introduction

Buddhist art from Tibet and Nepal has become widely known through display in museums and exhibitions. Images of esoteric deities, maṇḍalas and ritual objects, previously seen only by practitioners, have been exposed to the public’s gaze. Tibetan art has attracted particular attention and has been idealised as ‘meditational’ and ‘enlightenment art’. Although for the past two decades scholars have exposed such western fantasies about Buddhist art, these notions are still prevalent, especially in popular books. The maṇḍala is a case in point. Mainly used in tantric initiation rituals in the past as a surface whereon to invoke divinities, it has more recently been described too uniformly as a tool for meditation. It has entered still other contexts – being interpreted, for example, by psychologists and art therapists – and correspondingly has taken on new meanings.

In this chapter I will explore the widespread association of art from the Himalayan region with meditation and enlightenment – as evidenced, for example, by the opening quote by art historian Stella Kramrisch (1896–1993). In particular, I will critically examine the notion that the maṇḍala necessarily serves as a tool for meditation. In the first part I will interrogate the notions of ‘meditational art’ as presented in some exhibition and sales catalogues. In that connection, I will briefly discuss techniques used in displaying religious art in museums in ways that seek to create a sense of the numinous for the museum-goer. I will then turn to some widespread misconceptions regarding Tibetan (and Newar Buddhist) art. These include the notion that it necessarily constitutes sacred art, is sublime and transcendent in nature, and has been created by an artist who is himself a mystic. In the second part of this chapter I will present a case study of the maṇḍala.

On the notion of ‘meditational art’

Exhibitions of Tibetan and Nepalese art regularly attract large numbers of visitors. The shows usually display a wide range of objects, including statues of Buddhas belonging to esoteric
tantric traditions, exotic objects such as skull-cups and ritual daggers and, inevitably, scroll paintings featuring divinities and colourful *manḍalas*. Art from Tibet is especially popular. Often classified as sacred art in exhibition or sales catalogues, it has been idealised as ‘meditational’ and ‘enlightenment art’ (Rhie and Thurman 1999: 15).

Objects of the lesser-known Tantric Buddhist art of the Newars in Nepal were the focus of an exhibition jointly organised by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Columbus Museum of Art in 2003 and 2004, and memorialised in the volume *Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art* (Huntington and Bangdel 2003). While the main title, *Circle of Bliss*, is explained as one interpretation of the tantric deity Cakrasamvara’s name, the expression ‘meditational art’ requires clarification. Did the art objects (or artefacts) function as supports for the meditation practices of practitioners? Or did they serve even more saliently as objects of practitioners’ meditation? Or did the mere viewing of them perhaps induce a meditative state? Or else were the works of art created by artists while they themselves were immersed in meditation?

The catalogue explains that ‘meditational art’ denotes art works which are of central importance ‘in the context of Buddhist meditations’ (Huntington and Bangdel 2003: 12) and which ‘reflect the religious practices that lead to … [an] illumined state of being’ (ibid.: 19). In other words, these art works are objects relevant to (or tools used by) practitioners while engaged in meditation in pursuit of enlightenment. As is evident from the illustrations in the catalogue, ‘meditational art’ is a term used to designate, for instance, statues of divine beings, *manḍalas* and ritual implements. The last of these, which are not created for mere aesthetic enjoyment, could perhaps better be classified as artefacts. As is often the case, the word meditation remains a term not clearly defined in the voluminous exhibition catalogue. The context suggests that the word is used to refer to Buddhist tantric rituals that involve the use of external objects as well as complex visualisation practices in which practitioners create a mental image of a divinity.

The exhibition set itself an ambitious goal, namely to mediate a religious experience and bring the visitor face to face with the deepest realisations of Tantric Buddhism. Thus, we are told that ‘[t]he art is a subtle vehicle of teaching and guidance’ for practitioners ‘along the meditative path’. ‘Combined with practices transmitted through textual and oral traditions, the artistic works serve to express both conceptual and non-conceptual realizations. These realizations, achieved through Tantric Buddhist meditation, are the subject of this exhibition’ (Huntington and Bangdel 2003: 21).

We further learn that the show was ‘not about the works of art as material objects so much as how the art communicates both the process and goal of attainment’, namely ‘the process and aesthetics of human perfection’ (Huntington and Bangdel 2003: 19). In other words, the exhibition’s ‘aim has been to convey the beauty of the envisioned goal of Tantric Buddhist practice and the means by which the art communicates and guides the practitioner in this quest for perfection’ (ibid.: 19). Thus, the ‘Circle of Bliss’ show, exhibiting Newar (and many Tibetan) art objects in the secular space of a museum, sought to convey the highest goal of tantric Buddhism to persons outside the tradition who had little familiarity with the specific religious framework and ritual context of these objects. Its aim was to mediate an experience of transcendence by relying on the objects’ aesthetic appeal and the way they were arranged in the exhibition space.

The exhibition had a similar goal to, and was likely inspired by, the large ‘Wisdom and Compassion’ show, which was first mounted in San Francisco in 1991, travelled to London in 1992 and — in a reorganised and enlarged form — continued on around the world from 1996 to 1997. That show aimed to ‘introduce Tibet’s compelling and mysterious art *on its own terms*’ (Rhie and Thurman 2000: 12), a goal the curators sought to reach by arranging the exhibits in a specific way, inspired by the structure of the Kālacakra (‘Wheel of Time’) *manḍala*. 
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Issues concerning the display of religious art in museums

The general approach captured in the exhibition Wisdom and Compassion conforms to a trend in contemporary museum practice which seeks to bring objects to life. It is only in recent decades that scholars of museum studies and museum anthropology, reflecting on techniques of display in museum spaces, have acknowledged that art installations entail interpretations and evaluations of art in so far as the selection of the objects, the lighting used and the ways in which objects are arranged in the galleries to tell visitors a particular story are concerned. In the past, museums exhibited objects stripped of their cultural contexts – as carefully labelled lifeless museum pieces. Staff classified them by applying standard art historical approaches that focused on the identification, provenance, style and date of objects. The decontextualisation of exhibits, sometimes referred to as museumification or museumisation, went hand in hand with the aestheticisation of these redefined objects, namely, the process in which exhibits are presented in an aesthetic rather than social or religious context, and so acquire the status of art objects. In contrast, contemporary museum practice seeks to recreate the objects’ cultural context through settings, carefully selected sounds, light effects, colour patterns or even scents. The aim is to provide an immersive and multisensory experience, beyond mere vision, that engages visitors and enables them to experience the objects more fully.

More recently, discussions have focused specifically on strategies that might be appropriate for the display of religious objects in museums. As a result of these considerations, many museums have moved away from a purely aesthetic, art historical presentation of religious objects which fails to acknowledge the fact that they are objects used in devotional practice, treats them as ‘the other’ and does not engage with them (Paine 2017: 218). Instead, museums now often make efforts to recreate the ritual context of the exhibits through sophisticated display techniques that are designed to bring these objects to life, thereby seeking to engender a sense of the numinous for the museum-goer. Curators and exhibition designers working for state-supported museums, however, face some challenges, having to tread a fine line between the secular and the sacred (Sarma 2015: 28). Moreover, some critics have characterised such installations as ‘theatrical’ shows that lack a scholarly component (Durham 2015: 83) and promote a ‘voyeur spirituality for outsiders’ (ibid.: 92).

While the general display strategies of ‘Wisdom and Compassion’ thus align with the goals of contemporary museum practice, the specific portrayal of Tibetan Buddhist art in the exhibition catalogue has provoked considerable criticism.²

Misconceptions about Tibetan art and the role of the artist

In their catalogue, M. M. Rhie and R. A. F. Thurman explicate Tibetan art and its significance for the general public. In that context, they frequently offer idiosyncratic interpretations, introducing concepts such as ‘archetypes’ (Rhie and Thurman 2000: 15) and ‘Tibetan depth psychology’ (Thurman in ibid.: 36). Speculating about the nexus between art and meaning, they ascribe to Tibetan art the potential ‘to break the ‘veil of illusion’ and offer a complete, instantaneous vision of the radiant beauty and power of pure reality’ (Rhie in ibid.: 39). The authors even hold out the prospect of an enlightenment experience through an encounter with Tibetan art. Thus, Rhie asserts that

[the aesthetics of Tibetan Buddhist art is based upon revealing the Buddhist understanding of the way things truly are. Because of this, Tibetan art … possesses an intensity, a power, and a reality that appear more penetrating, more beautiful, and
greater than ordinary. Deities whose forms have been revealed to those whose minds have a purified, clear vision are portrayed to assist others in attaining this same vision and thereby become acquainted with the possibility of complete enlightenment.

(Rhie in ibid.: 39)

Interpreting an image of the tantric deities Cakrāsāṃvara and Vajravārāhī in sexual union, Thurman suggests that ‘[i]f we let ourselves observe and experience this image as Tibetans do, we can be inspired about the possibility of attaining enlightenment for ourselves’ (Thurman ibid.: 18).

Scholars have criticised these and similar statements for constructing an idealised notion of Tibetan art as sublime, transcendent, therapeutic, as ‘a delight for the eyes or a balm for the troubled soul’ by overstating the link the art has to ‘spirituality and psychological improvement’ (Harris 2012: 21). In the past, religious statues were installed in shrines and temples as objects of worship. They were not, however, expected to function as catalysts for an enlightenment experience. Frequently, they were commissioned to generate merit on behalf of deceased family members, to cure illnesses or to ameliorate the effects of unfavourable astrological constellations (Lopez 1998: 150). While one will not want to deny the affective power of Buddhist images, their ability to evoke emotions and uplift people, the viewing of a religious object in a museum or art gallery will at most evoke an aesthetic emotion, but is unlikely to lead to a religious experience, such as a vision of ultimate reality or an experience of enlightenment. Thus, the art historian P. Pal subtitled his 2003 exhibition of art from the Himalayan region more cautiously, as ‘an aesthetic adventure’.

Focusing in more general terms on widespread misconceptions about Tibetan culture, Lopez observed that ‘Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism have long been objects of Western fantasy’ (1998: 3). In his seminal study Prisoners of Shangri-la, the author devotes one entire chapter to misconceptions pertaining to Tibetan art, which range from portrayals of wrathful tantric deities as monstrous figures to notions about male and female deities in sexual union functioning as symbols of a transcendent reality (1998: 140). Critiquing art historical engagement with Tibetan art, Lopez identified

some of the assumptions and interpretative flights of fancy that were launched when Tibetan works came under the art historical gaze during the present century, flights of fancy that through the power of repetition came to acquire the status of knowledge.

(Lopez 1998: 136)

In particular, this author challenges the following assumptions, again encountered in the ‘Wisdom and Compassion’ and ‘Circle of Bliss’ exhibition catalogues, namely

1. that meditation is ‘the motivating aesthetic of Tibetan painting, rendering it somehow more sublime than other art forms’ (ibid.: 139);
2. that Tibetan art is ‘an evocation of (and hence a conduit to) a transcendent reality, inexpressible in words but not in art’ (ibid.: 143);
3. that the statues of divine beings are merely symbols (ibid.: 143–145), an assumption contradicted by textual records that provide clear evidence that a statue becomes the deity through a ritual of animation; and the assumption that the mandala ‘is ultimately neither Tibetan nor even Buddhist, but a symbol of something ancient, universal, and timeless’ (ibid.: 147);
4. and, finally, that the Tibetan artist is also a mystic (ibid.: 144).
Despite the criticisms by Lopez, Harris and other scholars, misconceptions and misrepresentations regarding Tibetan (and also Newar Buddhist) art and its meaning and function persist. Thus, Paine observes in his recent study, *Religious Objects in Museums*, that ‘[i]n Tibetan Buddhism, the purpose of art is to aid devotees in their search for enlightenment’. The author further asserts that Buddhist images ‘are intended to help others to share the artist’s or patron’s meditation experience’ (Paine 2013: 62, paraphrasing Reedy 1992: 42). These statements reflect the still widespread notions of this art as ‘meditational’ and ‘enlightenment art’ created by artists who are also mystics. In a similar vein, the 2019 exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts titled ‘Awaken: A Tibetan Buddhist Journey Toward Enlightenment’ invites the visitor to ‘join a voyage into the visionary art of Tibetan Buddhism’ and ‘also to take part in the narrative it presents of a quest for enlightenment’. ‘The exhibition catalogue reiterates the familiar statement that ‘Tibetan Buddhist art is meant to catalyze awakening’ (Rice and Durham 2019: lx).

**Case study: the maṇḍala**

**Introduction**

The *Wisdom and Compassion* and *Circle of Bliss* volumes and the corresponding exhibitions have provided the general public with unprecedented access to images of esoteric Buddhist deities and ritual objects. Exhibiting such objects in public, however, is at odds with traditional tantric notions of secrecy, which require that sacred objects be placed in private spaces such as shrine rooms, where they can only be seen by practitioners who have received the tantric initiations. Some of these secret objects of veneration that were exposed to the public’s gaze have become widely known, reinterpreted and been assigned new functions. Maṇḍalas are a case in point. Mainly used in the past as a surface to invoke divinities down upon in tantric initiation rituals, they have been described too uniformly as a tool for meditation. Furthermore, interpreted by psychologists, art therapists and others, they have been drawn into extraneous contexts and have taken on new meanings.

Maṇḍalas from the Tibetan and Newar Buddhist traditions painted on canvas surfaces have been displayed in exhibitions worldwide. The 2014 show ‘Enter the Mandala: Cosmic Centers and Mental Maps of Himalayan Buddhism’ in San Francisco’s Asian Art Museum provided visitors with an opportunity not only to view such maṇḍalas, but also to experience them as three-dimensional architectural constructs. The curator thereby sought to simulate the experience of a skilled practitioner who has perfected his ability to visualise maṇḍalas after many years of meditative training. This show was perhaps an extreme example of an attempt to recreate what was assumed to be the original context of maṇḍalas and the experience of the numinous as part of contemporary museum practice (discussed above), which in this case served to perpetuate certain stereotypes about the function of maṇḍalas.

In recent decades, Tibetan Buddhist monks have constructed the Kālacakra (‘Wheel of Time’) and other maṇḍalas from coloured grains of sand in a large number of museums and galleries around the world. This laborious process has been interpreted as a form of meditation (Paine 2013, caption to figure 6). These performances, accessible to a wide audience of non-initiated individuals (Figure 29.1), contributed to the appropriation and commodification of maṇḍalas. It is now possible to construct small sand maṇḍalas at home ‘for meditation, healing, and prayer’ (Rose and Rose Dalto 2003), using commercially available kits. Brauen has termed these kits as ‘misused ritual objects’, noting that ‘[w]hat was hitherto reserved for trained monks can now be produced by every Tom, Dick and Harry: a personal sand mandala’ (Brauen 2004: 201, 202).
Admired for their captivating designs with a central focal point, maṇḍalas have become popular tourist souvenirs in Nepal, with new patterns emerging at regular intervals. Once appropriated by popular culture, they began to appear on T-shirts and bags, and to serve as body tattoos and home decor wall art. As we will consider more closely below, popular uses now also include the colouring of templates in maṇḍala colouring books, part of the recent adult colouring book trend. These developments have led to entirely new interpretations and a wide application of the term maṇḍala.

**Basic characteristics of maṇḍalas**

In Buddhist tantric traditions, the word maṇḍala generally refers to a structured space into which Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and other divine or semi-divine beings are invoked and made present by means of the recitation of mantras. The basic structure of many maṇḍalas calls for an image or symbolic representation (an attribute or a seed syllable) of a Buddha in the centre, surrounded by his court like a king. The figures in his entourage, usually emanations, attendants and protectors, are grouped around him in one or several concentric circles or enclosures, and are arranged in a specific order. Important figures are placed close to the centre, while others, such as gatekeepers, are positioned further away on the periphery. In this way the maṇḍala structure functions as an important device for representing a hierarchy in a pantheon of divinities of a certain doctrinal system or school. The number of residents within a maṇḍala depends on the teaching of a specific school, but the directional orientation is – in addition to the hierarchical order – a standard feature of all schools when it comes to the act of invocation. A basic maṇḍala...
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structure may feature one central deity with four surrounding deities placed in the four cardinal directions. This pattern can be expanded by adding four divine beings in the intermediate directions. Maṇḍalas depicting a seated Buddha surrounded by eight Bodhisattvas are among the earliest examples of maṇḍalas, and were popular in Dunhuang between the eighth and tenth centuries. In complex maṇḍalas, several hundred or even more than one thousand deities can be invoked. There are certain common patterns found in maṇḍala structures. In some maṇḍalas, the divine figures inhabit a palace structure with four entrances and outer courtyards; in others, they are invoked onto the petals of a large eight-petalled lotus flower, into an eight-spoked wheel or into a grid with nine panels (Tanaka 2018: 263–266). The maṇḍala space is enclosed by an outer circumferential line, separating the divine from the mundane sphere.

A maṇḍala is the realm of one particular deity and not a timeless universal symbol, as often claimed in secondary sources. As Lopez noted:

> When the art historian portrays the mandala as an abstract symbol of an archetypal universe, he ignores the fact that a mandala is a particular palace of a particular deity who occupies the central throne, a palace decorated in a particular way and inhabited by particular buddhas, bodhisattvas, gods, goddesses, and protectors, that there are many different mandalas, and that the initiate seeks to memorize the palace in all of its aspects in order to become that particular deity.

(1998: 147)

Some Buddhist tantric authorities distinguish between the maṇḍala structure, which functions as the locus of or receptacle for deities, and the actual group of divine beings which are invoked and placed in it – that is, the maṇḍala’s inhabitants. Most authorities, however, use the term maṇḍala with reference to the animated surface that includes the divinities as an integral part. For them, the maṇḍala provides a surface onto which deities are invoked, their assumed presence transforming the maṇḍala into a sacred space. Thus, maṇḍalas should not be considered as merely colourful designs.

In the course of time, Buddhist authorities began associating various theological and philosophic concepts with the maṇḍala. By the eleventh century many different interpretations were in circulation, with texts displaying considerable sophistication in the way they distinguished between different categories of maṇḍalas, depending on their ritual use.

In exhibition catalogues and popular books, we encounter widespread confusion regarding the use of maṇḍalas, which are too uniformly designated as tools for meditation, although visualization of them (a practice discussed below, which can be subsumed under the term meditation) is among their uses. In fact, maṇḍalas have been employed in a variety of ways within tantric traditions. They can decorate sacred spaces, such as the interior walls or ceilings of temples and caves; they can be visualised in rituals, as explained below; and they can become the objects of veneration by laypeople. Most importantly, however, maṇḍalas are used in initiation or empowerment (abhiṣeka) rituals.

In one of these rituals, known as the garland empowerment (mālāabhiṣeka) in (Indian) tantric Buddhism, the blindfolded disciple is made to cast a flower (or flower garland) onto the maṇḍala, into which a pantheon of deities has already been invoked. The blindfold, symbolic of the practitioner’s nescience, is then removed and the practitioner finds himself beholding the maṇḍala. The viewing of the maṇḍala constitutes the climax of that initiation. It is the dramatic moment in which the initiate comes face to face with the maṇḍala as the realm of the Buddhas. The ideal viewing of a maṇḍala entails not merely beholding its design or appreciating its beauty, but rather seeing and experiencing the maṇḍala as an animated sacred space. To return
to a distinction referred to above, it is the experience of the manḍala not as a mere locus of or receptacle for divinities to be invoked into, but as the structured space animated by the manḍala’s inhabitants. The ritual of the garland empowerment often entails an identification of the initiate with the manḍala deity. In later tantric texts, the candidate’s Buddha family is determined on the basis of the deity who resides in the section of the manḍala where the flower has fallen.

This ritual also forms part of East Asian Buddhist traditions and is documented, in particular, for the Japanese Shingon and Tendai schools. In the contemporary practice of the Shingon school, the kechien kanji, as it is called, is an entry-level initiation meant to ‘establish a bond’ or a connection between the candidate and a divinity inhabiting one of the two great Shingon manḍalas: the Diamond-Realm (vañjadhātu, Sanskrit; kongōkai, Japanese) and the Matrix- or Womb-Realm (garbhadhātu, Sanskrit; taiōkai, Japanese) manḍalas. The ritual is performed at the central temple complex of the Shingon school on Mount Kōya near Osaka for laity once a year for each of the two great manḍalas (Nicoloff 2008: 175–177; Winfield 2012). The ritual of casting a flower onto a manḍala is attested in Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava texts from India and can thus be considered both trans-sectarian and transregional.

One noted Indian scholar and authority on manḍalas, Abhayākaragupta (late eleventh to early twelfth century), presents a breakdown into two kinds of manḍalas. He distinguishes manḍalas for visualisation, on the one hand, and powder manḍalas, which are drawn or painted manḍalas, on the other. His work Nispannaoṣvātī focuses on the three-dimensional forms of these manḍalas for visualisation, in which a large number of divinities are envisioned, each with distinct iconographic characteristics. Such visualisations can be subsumed under the rubric meditation, understood as the practice of creating a mental image and holding it in one’s mind. In contrast, the author’s Vaijñavīti explains the construction and ritual use of two-dimensional manḍalas, which are drawn or painted on the ground and used for initiation. In the drawn manḍalas, the divinities are usually only represented by corresponding symbols.

The visualisation of divine figures (occasionally in three-dimensional manḍalas) is a constituent part of tantric sādhanas, which are methods employed for the worship of particular divinities. They are described in sādhanas texts, such as the collection of short texts published under the title Sādhanamālā. Three-dimensional manḍalas, however, have not only been visualised; they have also been made – in different sizes and using different materials, such as wood or metal – for ritual purposes. Two-dimensional manḍalas painted on a canvas surface are known as paṭa (Sanskrit), thaṅka (Tibetan) or paubhā (Newari) (Figure 29.2). They were (and still are) often commissioned in order to gather merit for a deceased relative.

As an organisational principle, the manḍala concept has also had an impact on town planning, and has been projected onto natural landscapes. Manḍalas have been conceptually applied to the human body as well; these are then spoken of as body manḍalas.

**Interpretations by psychologists and the use of manḍalas in therapy**

For the modern understanding of the manḍala concept in the West, the interpretations of C. G. Jung (1875–1961) have been particularly influential. The Swiss psychologist is well known for his studies on what he termed ‘archetypes’ (primordial images) and the ‘collective unconscious’. He was familiar with selected manḍalas from the Tibetan Buddhist and Hindu traditions, and included among them auspicious designs drawn by women in South Asia on the ground in front of buildings (Jung 1959: 71). Jung was not concerned with the development and function of manḍalas in a historical context. For him, the manḍala is ‘the psychological expression of the totality of the self’ (1959: 20) and a therapeutic tool that he tried out himself. Thus, he reports that
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Figure 29.2  A two-dimensional maṇḍala painted on a canvas surface, showing the goddess Mahāpratisarā at the centre.
56-deity Pañcarakṣa-maṇḍala commissioned by Lhachog Sengge (1468–1535 CE) of Ngor Monastery, Tibet. See Himalayan Art Resources (HAR) no. 8049. Photo courtesy of Sanjay Kapoor, Kapoor Galleries Inc.
Gudrun Bühnemann

I had painted the first mandala in 1916 ... In 1918–19 ... I sketched every morning in a notebook a small circular drawing, a mandala, which seemed to correspond to my inner situation at the time. With the help of these drawings I could observe my psychic transformations from day to day ... My mandalas were cryptograms concerning the state of the self ... In them I saw the self – that is, my whole being – actively at work ...

(Jung 1965: 195–196)

Jung had noted that Tibetan Buddhist maṇḍalas served ‘to assist meditation and concentration’ (Jung 1959: 3). This understanding of the maṇḍala’s function is later reflected in the writings of Jungian analysts, such as von Franz, who – speaking of ‘the contemplation of a mandala’ – characterises maṇḍalas and maṇḍala-like paintings as devices ‘to enable one to plunge into deep meditation’ (von Franz 1964: 230); or Jaffé, who calls maṇḍalas ‘instruments of meditation’ (Jaffé 1964: 267).

Influenced by Jung’s psychology, the Tibetologist G. Tucci (1894–1984) wrote his widely known study, The Theory and Practice of the Maṇḍala, subtitled ‘with special reference to the modern psychology of the subconscious’. The scholar describes the maṇḍala as ‘a support for meditation’ (Tucci 1961: 37) and as ‘a means of reintegration’ (ibid.: 21) He also referred to it as a ‘psycho-cosmogram’ (ibid.: viii), a term which he explains as ‘the scheme of disintegration from the One to the many and of reintegration from the many to the One’ (ibid.: 25). Tucci’s interpretations, sometimes in the form of generalisations, have influenced many later authors who follow him in calling the maṇḍala a ‘cosmogram’. Although applicable in certain contexts, these labels are often misleading. It is essential to distinguish between types of maṇḍalas, their specific ritual functions and the interpretations of the term maṇḍala offered by individual Buddhist authorities in different time periods.

Also influenced by Jung’s depth psychology are Thurman’s interpretations of Tibetan art in the ‘Wisdom and Compassion’ exhibition catalogue. Thurman presents us with idiosyncratic translation choices, such as ‘archetype deity’ for Sanskrit iṣṭadevatā (chosen deity) (Rhie and Thurman 1999: 27, 37; 2000: 15).

Inspired by Jungian ideas of individuation, J. Kellogg (1922–2004) promoted the use of maṇḍalas in art therapy. She was mainly concerned with the diagnostic interpretation of colours, shapes and the placement of shapes in the maṇḍalas that her clients drew. Based on her experiences with clients, Kellogg developed her own therapeutic tool, the ‘Mandala Assessment Research Instrument’ (MARI®) in the form of the MARI® Card Test®. Her system, in its mature form, distinguishes thirteen stages of ‘The Great Round of Mandala’ and thirty-nine design cards. Each stage is associated with a specific mental state and ‘illustrated by three designs of the MARI® Card Test®’ (Kellogg 2001: 49). She instructed patients in hospitals to draw a circle and ‘[m]ake something in the center, put something there, then meditate on it or think about it’ (ibid.: 17). Kellogg placed the creation of a maṇḍala in ‘an almost contemplative framework’ (ibid.: 15) and handled the patients’ maṇḍalas ‘in a very sacred way’ (ibid.: 17). As a result of her work, maṇḍalas have now become tools used in art therapy settings.

In addition to Jung and his followers, proponents of New Age spirituality have played an important role in the reinterpretation of the maṇḍala. Critiquing these adaptations of the maṇḍala to new contexts, Lopez has spoken of the ‘psychologization’ of the maṇḍala (1998: 146), and Davidson of its ‘idealization’ (2002: 131).
**A typology of modern maṇḍala meditation**

Described too uniformly as aids to or tools for meditation and designated as ‘meditation diagrams’ and ‘meditational art’, maṇḍalas have indeed become central to the various kinds of modern maṇḍala meditation (Bühnemann 2017). In popular writing on maṇḍala meditation, however, neither the term maṇḍala nor the word meditation is clearly defined. The word maṇḍala is broadly used in the sense of a geometric pattern with a central focal point, and variously understood to represent or relate to the cosmos, the subconscious or unconscious. Usually no distinction is made between Buddhist and Hindu maṇḍalas, or between them and maṇḍala-like designs said to derive from Native American or other traditions, or from non-traditional sources. The word meditation is mostly understood to refer to an activity that focuses and calms the mind, leading to a state of relaxation, concentration or contemplation. The term maṇḍala meditation, finally, is used to designate a range of activities involving different uses of maṇḍalas, focusing on the structures’ designs (without an invocation of divine beings into their parts). The activities most commonly include the following (Bühnemann 2017: 267–268):

1. The slow and attentive process of drawing, painting or creating a maṇḍala design
2. The colouring of a maṇḍala template
3. The focusing and resting of one’s gaze upon a maṇḍala design

In the present typology, the first category comprises free-form maṇḍalas. These were highly valued by Jung and are now often created in art therapy settings. The therapeutic intervention may involve the spontaneous drawing or painting of a maṇḍala, which is then analysed and interpreted by both client and therapist.

The activity in the second type, the colouring of a template featuring a maṇḍala-like design, often from a maṇḍala colouring book, is widespread. It can be considered part of the larger and recent adult colouring trend, which uses templates with different types of patterns and designs. Maṇḍala colouring has also been taught in many schools. However, in recent years the practice has come under criticism and efforts have been made to remove it from school curricula since some parents consider it religious indoctrination, along with mindfulness and yoga (Brown 2019: 1). In South Korea, big companies such as Samsung hire instructors to teach employees and their family members relaxation techniques to manage work-related stress. The stress management activities include the colouring of (not necessarily Buddhist) maṇḍala templates.

The colouring of traditional Tibetan or Newar Buddhist maṇḍala templates sketched by a teacher is a more specialised activity, currently taught as a meditative process by some individuals in Asia, Europe and North America. As one instructor asserted, ‘[d]rawing a Mandala … is a meditation in itself and creates inner peace and joy’. The format is usually that of a workshop providing instruction to small groups. Each participant colours one template, working mostly in silence for up to several hours a day over the duration of about one week (Figure 29.3). One artist reported that she teaches her students to paint or colour in maṇḍalas while being aware of their inhalation and exhalation (but not to hold the breath while drawing a line, as is sometimes taught). She emphasised that she feels a profound inner peace when drawing maṇḍalas and that her students experience the week-long activity of maṇḍala colouring as a deeply transformative process.

For many people, colouring in maṇḍalas is a more accessible activity than formal sitting meditation. It does not require the same amount of discipline and patience as counting or observing breaths or repeating a mantra, and enables practitioners to focus their attention and centre themselves more easily without experiencing mental fatigue and exertion.
One practice involving colouring in maṇḍalas can be compared to the ‘image copying’ (shabutsu) currently taught to laypeople in some Buddhist temples in Japan. The practitioner places thin copying paper on the image of a Buddha or Bodhisattva or divine figure and traces the lines. The practice is advertised not only as ‘a form of meditation, to clear the mind and focus on beauty’ but also as an easy way to relax. The practitioner buys a package, which includes the entrance fee to the temple and the use of the drawing tools required for the session. The activity lasts between thirty minutes and two hours, depending on the complexity of the image. At the beginning a religious text, usually the Buddhist Heart Sūtra, is recited, and at the end of the session, green tea and a sweet are served.

The teaching of maṇḍala colouring or painting as a meditative activity has been criticised by some. It has been argued that a painter, given his lack of religious authority, is not qualified to pass on tantric teachings, including those pertaining to the structure of Buddhist maṇḍalas into which tantric deities are invoked. Even if the painter were empowered to dispense such esoteric teachings, he would not be allowed to instruct individuals who have not received the required initiations. Furthermore, some painters consider the painting of maṇḍalas (and of images of divinities) a craft unrelated to meditation and criticise the activity of colouring or painting of maṇḍala designs by persons outside the tradition as an inauthentic New Age practice that has
no precedents in the past. This point of view finds support in a statement from the Tibetan meditation master Chögyam Trungpa (1938–1987), who discussed painted images on a canvas surface – known as thangkas (Tibetan) – and concluded with the following observation:

It is widely thought that thangka painting is a form of meditation. This is not true. Though all the thangkas have religious subjects, most of the artists were and are lay people … Naturally, also, artists have a sense of reverence for the sacredness of their work. Nevertheless, the painting of thangkas is primarily a craft rather than a religious exercise. One exception is the nyin thang (‘one-day thangka’) practice in which, as part of a particular sādhana, while repeating the appropriate mantra, uninterruptedly, without sleeping, a monk paints a thangka in one twenty-four hour period.

(1975: 18)

Trungpa’s statement is of particular interest since it addresses the role of the artist, who has been idealised as some sort of mystic or yogin in western art historical literature, as in the following statement by Thurman:

The artist has to be a person who is open enough to enlightenment to serve as a selfless vessel for its manifestations; who has to participate in the creation of a work of art out of dedication to the higher realm, and not primarily for fame and profit.

(Thurman in Rhie and Thurman 2000: 37)

The notion that the Tibetan artist, or rather – applying a modern distinction – craftsman, is also a meditator or even mystic has been challenged by scholars such as Lopez (1998: 149–150) and is addressed above. But the matter is more complex, since some texts specify in considerable detail how an artist should prepare himself before creating a work of religious art – a process that entails receiving an initiation, taking a bath, observing a specific diet, etc. It appears, though, that these prescriptions were rarely followed (Lopez 1998: 150), due to the pressures and time constraints of everyday life. In short, while some meditators have also been artists, few artists have been meditators. An example in the first category is the Sherpa monk, hermit and thangka painter Ngawang Lekshey, known as Au Leshi/Leshey (c.1900–c.1978) (Berg 2002).

The third category of maṇḍala meditation, the focusing and resting of one’s gaze upon a maṇḍala design, is described in the literature as follows: The practitioner’s gentle gaze focuses on a maṇḍala design, specifically its centre, while the body stays relaxed. Whenever the mind wanders, one gently refocuses one’s concentration on the maṇḍala. When the eyes get tired, one shuts them while attempting to create a mental image of the maṇḍala. After a period of rest, one resumes the practice of gazing at the maṇḍala. The time recommended for this practice ranges from five to thirty minutes a day. Dahlke (2001: 201) recommends that practitioners spend fifteen minutes gazing at a maṇḍala while listening to music, and provides the following instructions:

Put up the colored mandala about two yards away from you, direct a strong light onto it, and then gently gaze down to its center. Listen to some appropriate meditation music. You will soon feel that the mandala is alive and can hold you under its spell.

Allow about fifteen minutes for this excursion to the center of being. ..

This author claims that ‘[t]here is evidence that, due to its shape and a person’s readiness to be drawn into it, the mandala can actually put people in a trance when they are meditating on it or even just coloring it’ (Dahlke 2001: 28).
One author summarised the benefits of mandala gazing in the following statement:

As we rest our gaze upon a mandala, the mind becomes as still as the surface of a pool of water. From the profound depths of tranquillity emerge insights that help us to tap into and develop our innate healing powers.

(Tenzin-Dolma 2008: 9)

This description is particularly interesting, since the author claims in the first sentence the outcomes that calmness or tranquillity (śamatha) meditation is assumed to produce, while she cites the benefits commonly attributed to the practice of insight (vipaśyanā) meditation in the second sentence.

It is very likely that ‘mandala-gazing’ meditation developed from the notion of the mandala as an instrument with which to meditate, as discussed above. This practice must have been popular already in the 1970s, since Chögyam Trungpa dismissed it as non-traditional in 1975, asserting that ‘[i]t should be understood that mandala representations are not used as objects of contemplation in an attempt to bring about certain states of mind’ (1975: 23). Citing Trungpa’s statement, two decades later Lopez asserted that: ‘[t]he mandala is not, then, a diagram that one stares at to induce altered states’ (1998: 146). In other words, mandalas do not constitute designs that serve as foci of concentration with the aim of bringing about meditative equipoise.

Technically, one could classify ‘mandala-gazing meditation’ as a type of tranquillity (śamatha) practice. It could be considered a technique in the tradition of the kāśīna (Pali, ‘sphere’) devices of early Buddhism, as described, for example, in the Visuddhimagga (‘Path of Purification’) by Buddhaghosa (c. 370–450 CE). This work details how the practitioner perfects concentration and attains different absorption (jhāna, Pali) stages by gazing at a disk until he is able to reproduce a mental image of it. Mandala gazing could also be compared to some extent to the meditation on the a-syllable (a-jiśan, Japanese), which has a profound meaning in Buddhism. The syllable is written on a disk and gazed at by practitioners of the Japanese Tendai and Shingon schools of Buddhism. Historically, however, mandala gazing is not related to these practices.

In this chapter I have explored the notion of art from the Himalayan region as ‘meditational’ and ‘enlightenment art’, often invoked in museum catalogues and popular books and created during museum exhibits, sometimes with new display techniques that may contribute to reinforcing such stereotypes. In this context I critically examine widely held misconceptions regarding Tibetan art and the role of the artist. The case study of the mandala sheds light on the intersection of tradition and modernity. Here I provide an overview of the traditional use and significance of Buddhist mandalas and show that the modern, widespread understanding of mandalas as solely tools for meditation fails to characterise adequately the complexity of their functions. Although the visualisation of mandalas in tantric Buddhism can be subsumed under the term meditation, there are many other uses of mandalas, most frequently in initiation rituals. The case study further addresses the discourse on mandalas in Jungian psychology, the mandala’s use in art therapy and in popular culture, and the mandala’s commodification. I also introduce a typology of modern mandala meditation.

When one contrasts the contemporary use of mandalas with traditional applications of Buddhist mandalas, it becomes obvious that modern mandalas serve very different purposes to those forming part of Buddhist tantric practice. The interpretation of mandalas has clearly
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undergone significant change over time, and one goal of this chapter is to trace these new developments in their historical and cultural contexts. Another goal is to highlight modern misconceptions, distortions and stereotypes regarding the significance and function of manḍalas. However, I do not want to write them off as deviations from some static, ancient and original concept underlying manḍalas. Already in the eleventh century, Buddhist authorities were providing more than a single interpretation of manḍalas.

Considering the contribution of art historians and curators to the study of manḍalas, one can note that the display of manḍalas in museums and art galleries and the depiction and description of them in art books and exhibition and sales catalogues has, despite some shortcomings, stimulated an interest in these objects in the general population.

Art historical study, focusing on the structural patterns of manḍalas and on the figures depicted in them across different regions and time periods, has contributed significantly to our knowledge of the development of the pictorial forms. Here the discipline has favoured the study of the objects’ provenance, identification, function, style, date and their material and social context (such as questions of patronship and the implications of trade routes). Some of these issues are equally relevant to and overlap with current discussions in Material Religion. This subdiscipline of Religious Studies explores religion within the framework of material culture, by examining the interaction between humans and objects used in religious practice. A mere art historical approach, however, can provide only a limited understanding of the significance and function of manḍalas. It needs to be supplemented by a study of the rich extant textual material that can shed light on the theological interpretations and uses of manḍalas in Buddhist tantric traditions in different regions and time periods.

Notes

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3 On the ‘mystification’ of the Tibetan artist, see the discussion below.
5 Part of this paper is based on Bühnemann 2017.
7 For a recent study of the Maṇḍala of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas, see Wang 2018.
8 For a discussion, see Brown 2019: 64, 96–97, 121, 205.
9 Interview with Kim Tae Hee, a researcher at the Research Center of Yoga Philosophy, Won Kwang University, Iksan, Korea, 5 June 2018. Hee instructs Samsung employees in manḍala colouring.
11 Interview with Dr. Renuka Gurung, a paubhā painter from Kathmandu who leads manḍala meditation retreats/workshops; Kathmandu, 10 August 2018.
14 See Kapstein 1995: 258, 260; for a discussion of Kapstein’s ideas, see Wallis 2002: 92–95.
Bibliography


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