Amazing journeys

Of mandalas and the spiritual imagination

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IN THE STRANGE WORLD OF TANTRIC BUDDHISM the *mandala* ranks as the most exquisite example of a highly sophisticated artistic tradition. Yet these highly intricate cosmograms, multi-coloured maps of the spiritual universe, are not just Buddhist versions of mazes and labyrinths – abstract illustrations of the spiritual path. The mandala does enable a process of personal integration through the practice of meditation which it supports, but the Buddhist path is never anything but paradoxical. To follow this maze is indeed to become 'amazed', not to surmount a capricious world through an act of sublime intuition but to enter into a variety of relationships with images of the Ultimate which stimulate and test the spiritual imagination. This is particularly apparent in a practice which Tibetan Buddhists call *dul-tson-kyil-khor*, literally the 'mandala of coloured powders'.

This practice is part of a complex process of initiation. It includes the memorizing of the texts which specify the structure of the mandala as well as the 'inner teaching' of Buddhism which the mandala serves to illustrate – and, of course, the manual techniques of artistic production. Over a period of some weeks grains of coloured sand or rice are laid with immense care on to a flat surface. The finished object is quite breathtakingly beautiful. But it has no inner strength of its own; a gust of wind can ruin the fragile structure. As if to illustrate the point, no sooner is the mandala finished than it is gathered up with a small scoop into a bag and poured with great ceremony into a nearby river. When I witnessed the ceremony at a Tibetan cultural exhibition in London some years ago, I well remember the horrified in-drawing of breath from members of the audience as so spectacular a creation was instantly destroyed. Like death, we know it is coming, but the finality of that moment is always a shock. So much work, so much investment of effort, for little more than a fleeting memory. A few minutes later, with a dispassion and matter-of-factness which were almost as impressive as the skill with which the mandala had been built, a little stream of golden powder was solemnly poured into the dirty old Thames. It was

impossible not to appreciate the power of religious symbolism to move the heart.

Such a vivid and shocking image of creation and destruction makes the 'mandala of the coloured powder' much more than a mere artefact. Here was an object of rare beauty deliberately reduced to its rough raw material, thus pointing to the fragility of creation – and to any human attempt to create lasting meaning. What I witnessed that afternoon was a profoundly moving initiation ritual, nothing less than a re-consecration of the Universe in which the world of human experience is freed to return to its origins. That may sound somewhat portentous. But it is only to make explicit what is contained within that singularly obscure and misunderstood term Tantra. This article does not presume anything like a commentary on Tantric Buddhism. I will first sketch something of a context for the ritual meditation associated with the mandala. This, I hope, will open up the richness of the spiritual journey described by one particular example, the mandala of the five Buddhas.

Tantra – the continuum of creative energy

Tantric Buddhism is often disregarded as the preserve of a few privileged initiates – an obscure antinomianism in which the adept deliberately confronts the sources of ritual impurity. Modern Buddhist scholarship seeks to rescue Tantra from this fate.[1] Far from representing a degeneration from the original pristine tradition, the tendency now is to emphasize continuity. Indeed the word 'tantra', from a Sanskrit root meaning 'stretch' or 'extend', can be translated precisely as 'continuum'.[2] Tantra refers in a specific sense to certain texts which can be said loosely to 'expand' the meaning of the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching. In Buddhist terms, the possibility of such an 'expansion' or continuum is easily justified. The Mahayana tradition established the principle of an infinite number of omniscient Buddhas who teach through an infinite number of *sutras* or discourses. The Tantra does no more than develop the principle further, with an emphasis on the immeasurable number of practices and ways to enlightenment. But there is also something new. Tantric texts have a mystic aura about them, an aura which is deliberately cultivated by the esoteric style of the teaching. It is, therefore, not surprising that the emphasis on a secret initiation involving teacher and pupil makes the business of interpretation hazardous – a process not helped by what appears to be a concern for the pursuit of the *siddhis* or 'special powers' as an intrinsic element in the path to enlightenment. On the other hand,

it would be a mistake to separate these elements from the wider context of what can loosely be called the 'tantric ethos' which pervades so much of Indo-Tibetan religion. Put more generally, a tantric vision of creation underlies so much of Hindu and Buddhist popular cult, temple ritual and public festivals. More specifically, as far as the Buddhist tradition is concerned, Tantra simply assimilates to the limitless wisdom of the Buddha what was, in its origins, a separate cultural movement with its own semi-philosophical vision.

Governing this current of thought is a vision of the whole of reality, macrocosm and microcosm, world and body, as pervaded by a creative (and destructive) energy. The key concept, in many ways as old as the Indo-Tibetan tradition itself, is the worship of *śakti*, the essentially feminine power behind creation. Tantra handles this creative energy in a particular way, with a practice which refuses to separate an 'inner' from an 'outer' journey. Doctrine and ritual are one. This means more than the fairly obvious, that theory has to be practised; the point is that truth has to be allowed to permeate into all areas of human experience, to transform the whole person and the whole of created reality.

The correlation of the two, that is to say the ritual enacting of correspondences and analogies between micro- and macrocosms, is typical of Tantra. Tantric temple ritual, for instance, is perhaps best understood as acting as a sort of 'grid' which fits the one to the other. Thus by entering into the innermost sanctuary through a whole series of courts, passages and gateways, the pilgrim returns to the centre of the world, a centre which is at one and the same time his or her own innermost centre. Tantric Buddhism tends to make the physical pilgrimage more abstract. But the essential purpose remains the same: a practice of 'centring' brings about an integration of the different levels or aspects of one's personal existence. Mandalas may look like diagrams or maps of the inner journey but they are better understood as three-dimensional projections of the drama of human liberation. The three outer rings, for example, represent successive barriers – the circle of fire, which stands for purification and wisdom, the 'Vajra-circle'[3] which symbolizes initiation, and the gentle lotus-circle which speaks of a newly-acquired purity and transformation. Beyond these three initial barriers, however, there rises what is, in effect, a divine mansion, a four-sided structure which, just like the temple structure from which it originates, is richly decorated with intricate walls and gateways. The seeker after enlightenment must be prepared to go through a number of different stages, overcome different obstacles, and engage in a variety of practices in order to attain that deliverance from bondage which is Nirvana.

Visualizing the Buddhas

Amongst the yogic practices of Tantric Buddhism perhaps the most important is the art of visualization. What brings the mandala alive is the presence of a Buddha who acts as a focus for the imagination, injecting a much more human quality in to what might easily become an arid and self-regarding quest. Each Buddha can be understood as expressing one of the major qualities or virtues which are necessary for enlightenment – not just wisdom but compassion and generosity, beauty and action. Mandalas very often centre upon one major Buddha, but the most common of Tantric practices is based on a classic group of five Buddhas: Akshobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi and Vairochana. These figures each have their own rich mythology and inspire devotional as much as directly meditative practice. As 'Buddha-families' (each has an attendant goddess or consort and a number of bodhisattva-figures) they are also linked with various other sets of five – gestures, colours, directions, mantras, as well as more specifically Buddhist concepts, such as the 'aggregates' and 'taints' or poisons.[4] The 'mandala of the five Buddhas' brings together not just the major Buddhas themselves and the qualities which they embody, but links together all the many diverse aspects of the one experience of enlightenment – or, in short, the possibilities of being human.

In a wonderfully lucid and distinctly non-esoteric guide to the mandala of the five buddhas, Vessantara speaks eloquently of the practice of imaginative identification with the Buddhas as, more profoundly, a confrontation with oneself.

> Meditating on a Buddhist mandala can enable us to go beyond all limited, unsatisfactory ways of being and to unfold the full potential of our consciousness. In the process, it can make us more aware of undeveloped aspects of ourselves. In spiritual practice there is a tendency to keep on developing one's strengths without addressing one's weaker faculties . . . In an ideal mandala all spiritual qualities will be represented in a harmonious pattern. This encourages you to develop all those qualities in a balanced way. It is a basic principle of Buddhism that whatever you set your mind and heart upon, that you become. So if you repeatedly meditate on an ideal mandala, your mind increasingly takes on that harmonious pattern and eventually becomes in accord with reality itself.[5]

The associations which the journey develops are intended to transfer the qualities of the Buddhas to the meditator. Vessantara notes that this

can be rewarding in the way it encourages a certain 'spiritual intuition'. But it can also be frustrating; what emerges is never a 'neat logical scheme'. Just when you think your experience can be fully understood in terms of the qualities of four of the Buddhas, the fifth turns out to be 'bafflingly inappropriate'.[6] This suggests that the very attempt to pattern experience, while it may be essential to any sort of self-understanding, is also fatally flawed. The mandala stimulates the imagination to make connections. To that extent, it allows the meditator to place everyday experience *within* an overarching Wisdom. But Wisdom can never be surmounted, still less isolated, any more than we can 'know' our own beginning or our end. As my opening account of the liturgy of construction *and* destruction of the 'mandala of coloured powders' was meant to show, the mandala is a spiritual exercise to be *made*, not a consoling symbol of ultimate harmony to be contemplated. The temptation is to remain content with standing above the mandala rather than entering fully into the myriad challenges and questions which it may unlock. The all too human desire to achieve mastery needs itself to be mastered.

Patterns of experience, forms of wisdom

What are the patterns of experience which the five buddhas support and ultimately subvert? In what follows I will be guided by Vessantara's account which follows the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.[7] The principle which he enunciates is that the rich mythology which attends each of the five buddhas describes a particular form of Wisdom. In the Tantra everything, rightly understood, is a reminder of the truth of reality. I will provide no more than a taste of what is clearly an enormous topic. But even these few hints may illustrate an important truth about the spiritual value of an 'amazement' which crosses religious boundaries.

Four of the Buddhas dwell in the four directions, east, west, north and south, with the fifth, Vairochana in the Nyingma version, at the centre. Akshobhya, 'the unshakeable', occupies the east and is associated 'not just with wisdom, but also with dawn, water, and even with hatred and the hells'.[8] This is the Buddha who confronts the demons who assail human living with a serene self-confidence. Why is Akshobhya associated with water? Because the still unshakeable surface of water acts as a mirror which accurately reflects what is there. Akshobhya's wisdom lies in seeing and accepting things just as they are

– neither beautiful nor ugly, just unadorned. Such a Wisdom counters hatred by teaching a dispassionate acceptance.

Ratnasambhava, literally the 'jewel-born', the Buddha of the southern realm, shifts attention from the sharp, still clarity of dawn to the much more brilliant yet hazy light of noon which blazes down upon the earth. Ratnasambhava treats all people, rich and poor alike, with the same overflowing generosity. This does not reduce this buddha to some 'ceaseless benefactor', a symbol of a prodigal superabundance. Rather, to recognize a Wisdom which is all gift counters the poison of pride, that confidence in self-achievement which rejoices in one's 'own' riches and ignores those of others. In short, the Wisdom associated with Ratnasambhava sees nothing but gift, and therefore the equality of all things and all people upon this single earth.

Moving to the west is to encounter Amitabha, 'infinite light', or Amitayus, 'infinite life'. As his position suggests, this is the Buddha of the setting sun. Just as we can look directly into the magnificent yet gentle power of the sunset, so Amitabha is 'all warmth and gentleness. He is the colour of ruby . . . the blushing colour of delicate emotion . . . Through him, all one's emotional energy is led into the quest for Enlightenment'.[9] But this is also a 'timeless' Buddha who inspires a 'timeless' Wisdom, a Wisdom which overcomes greed and grasping because it is content with the present moment and is prepared simply to wait. As if in counterbalance to Akshobhya's stoical facing of the roots of evil and to Ratnasambhava's Wisdom of equality, Amitabha inspires a more discriminating sense of the uniqueness and the distinctiveness of each and every phenomenon of creation. Nothing is ever totally profane; careful discernment is guided by a Wisdom which knows that – in the final resort – there is always something worth waiting for, to be welcomed with gentle calmness.

In the northern realm of the mandala dwells the most mysterious of the five buddhas, Amoghasiddhi – a title Vessantara translates as 'unobstructed success'. Associated with Amoghasiddhi is the time of darkness, the element of air, the 'poison' of envy and a quality of Wisdom as 'all-encompassing'. This is the most 'active' and out-going of the buddhas, yet his activity is rooted in the stillness of the night, a symbol, perhaps, of the innermost depths of the psyche with all its naked ambiguities and contradictions. Underlying all engagement with the world are mixed motivations. To contemplate this Buddha, therefore, is to see the world in a 'more complex, less one-sided way'.[10] Amoghasiddhi, associated with the twin-pronged doubled vajra, acts to remind us that, in the last resort, the main impediment to enlightenment

is fear. That fearlessness which would unite particular and universal, self and other, is learned through coming to terms with the two major causes of fear – our consciousness of a deep-felt vulnerability and our desire for a self-acquired security. How to do this? In a sense the figure of Amoghasiddhi represents both sides of a common dilemma – do I rely on my own self or respond to the initiative, or grace, of 'the other'? He shows us how, correctly understood, the one tendency of our human nature can complement the other. His activity, which pervades reality like the air we breathe, springs from mysterious depths where, rather than operate either from 'pure' self-confidence or from an obsessive envy of the other, Amoghasiddhi teaches us a balance, an equanimity.

The pattern of four Buddhas, each one supplementing and completing the qualities of the Wisdom taught by the others, offers multiple connections and levels of meaning. No one on its own is adequate. As Vessantara says, each Buddha gives us a gift, 'something we needed to help prepare ourselves for a "meeting" with ultimate Reality'.[11] Akshobhya held up an uncompromising mirror to ourselves; Ratnasambhava added a sense of wonder, gift and beauty; Amitabha, the Buddha of compassion, brings out the unique value of each and every person; Amoghasiddhi builds up the quality of courage and fearlessness which is prepared to work energetically for the enlightenment of all sentient beings. But beyond the complementarity of the four lies another Buddha, the one who draws us, perhaps uncomfortably, away from our pursuit of enlightenment and into the centre where all privilege and sense of personal extension in 'space' collapses into a single point. In the Nyingma system of practice, this is the position held by Vairochana, 'the illuminator', the 'white' Buddha who holds the *cakra*, the wheel – at once the symbol of the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching, and, of course, another mandala.

The sun has acted as a guiding metaphor through the mythology of the first four Buddhas. When we turn to the fifth Buddha, Vairochana, we encounter a radical shift in astronomy – and psychology. The sun no longer moves above a static earth; now the sun, like the Buddhadharma, is the central axis around which all creation turns. If the colours appropriate to the first four Buddhas are blue, yellow, red and green respectively, Vairochana's is white – the single light which melds the rainbow into one. Such a simple truth is, however, the most difficult to grasp; the tendency, once again, is to stand above the truth, rather than enter fully into it. The Second Noble Truth – *samudaya* or 'arising' in the early teaching – identifies the cause of the suffering which afflicts the human condition as ignorance. To be more precise, this is ignorance

of the Buddhadharma itself, the Four Noble Truths; the Venerable Narada notes that '. . . it is the not-knowingness of things as they truly are, or of oneself as one really is'.[12] The heart of the problem is the ignorance which clouds understanding; more precisely, the subtle but destructive obsession with an all-powerful, all-seeing 'I'. The cure, the Third Noble Truth, lies with a practice which recognizes that all things are interconnected. To put the point another way, even the 'I' has to be given away, in the only way possible for human beings, by being given or communicated to the other. As Vessantara nicely puts it, '[k]eeping the truth to ourselves is a form of ego-imperialism'.[13]

The mandala depicts the dwelling-place of the Buddhas, a harmonious arrangement of complementary models of Wisdom, all focused on truth, the Dharma itself. But as a graduated liturgical practice of entry, communion and departure, it is also a never-ending journey, a movement or evolution which can never be finished until all things, and all sentient beings, have found their due place in relation to each other.

Learning how to be amazed

I began this article with an image of creation and destruction. Mandalas are not just artefacts to delight the heart; they are also exercises to stimulate – and confound – the spiritual imagination. As such they have an appeal which crosses all religions and cultures. When I visited Nepal some years ago, I came across a tiny Christian mandala which still fascinates me. Printed on a piece of orange-coloured cloth, about ten inches square, it has little of the grandeur of the Buddhist version. The structure of circles and squares, gateways and passages, is not dissimilar from the Buddhist version. The outermost square, the 'walls' of the structure, are buttressed by various Buddhist symbols. Within the inner court, however, we encounter symbols from the Old Testament: the broken tablets of the Law, a flaming sword, the Red Sea. The lotus-circle, the symbol of creation, has been taken inside the square; it is guarded not by the Buddhas of the four directions but by the four Gospels; at the centre, set between an Alpha and an Omega, is an abstract monstrance-like representation of Christ as the light of the world. The aim, of course, is to 'read' the Christian story, now existing in active dialogue with the Buddhist story, from the periphery to the centre, and to fix the mind and heart on God.

What is immediately striking about this little exercise in inculturation is the relative poverty of the symbolism employed. At best it

provides one or two helpful reminders of significant events; at worst, it remains at the level of a hotch-potch of disparate and disconnected signposts. Is it, perhaps, a reminder that Christian culture, at least in the West, has lost touch with the visual? And, if so, is there a tradition of visual representation which can be reclaimed? Can Christian mandalas be developed on the basis of what has been described above?

Undoubtedly – and there will be plenty of evidence in other articles in this issue of *The Way* that Christianity is not devoid of its own tradition of mazes and labyrinths. All that I propose here, by way of conclusion, is a couple of preliminary comments. In the first place, Buddhism is as much a 'religion of the Word' as Christianity – at least in so far as the fully enlightened Buddha is not content with a purely 'personal' Nirvana but preaches truth out of compassion for suffering humanity. Buddhism, however, has a much more highly developed sensitivity to the myriad ways in which ignorance can be overcome and truth understood – and communicated. The mandala form, with its basic technique of anchoring the ever-wandering mind, is not specific to Buddhism, or even to tantric culture. There can be little objection, therefore, to portrayals of the 'inner journey' in the mandala form. At the same time, the Buddhist 'story' is not the same as the Christian; nor is the way in which the stories have come to be told. As with all exercises in inculturation, care has to be taken not to descend into a form of uncritical colonizing of the other.

Having said that, the mandala does remind us of an important truth. Visualizing the Buddhas is not an exercise in pure fantasy. The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, is never an isolated instance of Buddhahood; the transcendent Buddhas are just as real and their influence as vital and immediate as anything that a Christian would expect from the Spirit of Christ. But the energy comes from the constant practice of the ritual of meditation and from the wider liturgy and life of the community. The great symbols of faith do not exist in some sort of spiritual vacuum. Nor are they intended to lock people into a world of predictable and comforting outcomes. Symbols give life precisely because they are polyvalent, raising possibilities for human living, not cutting them off. Privileged and particular they may be, but their creative power comes not from some intrinsic capacity to 'contain' all meaning, but from the wider engagement with the other which they enable. In short, the mandala as a configuration of familiar symbols uses the familiar precisely to confront the unfamiliar. To be 'amazed' is to learn how to wonder.

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NOTES

1 For an excellent overview see Alexis Sanderson, 'Vajrayana: origin and function' in *Buddhism into the year 2000* (conference proceedings) (Bangkok and Los Angeles: Dhammakaya Foundation, 1994); and Donald Lopez, *Elaborations on emptiness* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996). In a recent and very comprehensive introduction to Buddhism, Tribe notes that '[s]exual elements come to play a role comparatively late in the development of the tradition'; Paul Williams with Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist thought* (London: Routledge, 2000), p 194.
2 See Donald Lopez, *Buddhism* (London: Penguin, 2001), p 272.
3 The Vajra is the most important symbol of Tantric Buddhism. Usually depicted as a flattened ball supporting two lotus flowers from which issue two balancing four or eight-barred circular structures, it represents the central concept of *sunyata* or emptiness which supports the whole of empirical reality. Originally understood as the thunderbolt of Indra, the Vedic god of rain and storm, which breaks through reality, the Vajra is often likened to the diamond – the hardest of substances which cuts but cannot itself be cut. Seen from above, of course, the Vajra is a mandala. See Hans Wolfgang Schumann, *Buddhism* (Rider, 1973), pp 157 ff.
4 'Aggregate' translates the Sanskrit 'skandha'; according to a consistent Buddhist teaching the human person can be 'analysed' into five aggregates or elements: form/matter, sensation, perception, volition and consciousness.
5 Vessantara, *The mandala of the five buddhas* (Birmingham: Windhorse, 1999), pp 9–10. The author is a member of the Western Buddhist Order; the book is an abbreviated version of a much fuller study of the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition, *Meeting the Buddhas* (Windhorse, 1993).
6 *Ibid.*, p 14.
7 The Nyingma school traces its roots back to the 'first diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet and the legendary figure of Padmasambhava, many of whose teachings were said to have been concealed as "hidden treasures" to be subsequently found and taught by a series of "treasure finders"'. Rupert Gethin, *The foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), p 270.
8 Vessantara, *op cit.*, p 20.
9 *Ibid.*, p 38.
10 *Ibid.*, p 50.
11 *Ibid.*, p 58.
12 Narada Maha Thera, *The Buddha and his teachings* (Singapore, 1980), p 240.
13 Vessantara, *op cit.*, p 67.