

# Tibetan Sand Mandalas

## Buddhist Messages of Peace



High in the Himalaya mountains, Tibet became an independent kingdom in the seventh century, when the great king Songtsen Gampo defeated the armies of nearby China under the Tang dynasty. As his empire grew along the trading route known as the Silk Road, the king was introduced to Tibet's southern neighbor, India. Liking what he saw, Songtsen Gampo borrowed the Indian system of writing, laws and its religion, Buddhism for his own country. Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was born in India and started a faith based on peace and right action. Although Tibet already had a religion of nature worship called Bon, King Songtsen Gampo hoped that Buddhism's nonviolent teachings would help bring stability to his government. The two faiths began to mingle and make themselves felt in every aspect of Tibetan life.

For instance, new babies were named by the lama, the Buddhist priests, and the dates for important events like trading caravans were determined by the lamas according to the stars. But when the lamas couldn't give Tibetans the answers they wanted, they turned again to the older religion. In the movie *Himalaya*, which takes place in a Tibetan region of neighboring Nepal, an old chief gets a new name for his grandson so

that the mountain gods will not be jealous of his highborn family and destroy him.

Tibetan Buddhist monks become masters of many native art forms. One is a type of musical chant called throat singing or multiphonic singing, where they produce three notes of a chord at the same time. They learn to play traditional instruments including 10-foot long *dung-chen* horns, drums, bells, cymbals and *gyaling* trumpets. And some become wonderful painters of murals and sand mandalas.

Circular mandalas, or *kyilkhors*, are used in Buddhist ceremonies and meditation. They can be made out of sand, crushed flower petals or jewels, or even sculpted out of yak butter. Every line, shape and color has a meaning: a blue thunderbolt symbolizes compassion, a peach stands for the sense of taste, and a flowing silk scarf represents touch. Following the symbols inward from the edge of the



circle to its center, Buddhists find within the mandala the seed of inner enlightenment. It can take three years for a monk to memorize the different mandalas, learn about meaning of their symbols, and master the technical skill needed to create them. Up to eight feet in diameter or larger, a mandala can take several weeks to complete. Grain by grain the sand is poured onto the design base using a pair of thin metal funnels called

*chakpus*. Holding one sand-filled *chakpu* in position, the monk rasps its mate across the top, creating vibrations which can be adjusted to shake the sand out in a stream or a trickle. When finished, the mandala is ceremoniously swept up and deposited into the nearest body of flowing water -- a reflection of the fact that nothing in life is permanent.

In the 1950s, China took control of Tibet, and the country's spiritual and political leader, the Dalai Lama, was forced to flee. Happily, the thousands of Tibetans now living in exile around the world are preserving the art, religion and culture of their ancient land.

## Directions

*Unlike real sand mandalas, our small-scale version will be permanent, ready to be displayed on a shelf or hung on a wall. You can use actual mandalas as your inspiration or create your own design. Try to keep in mind the symmetry, interlocking patterns, and contrasting colors Tibetan monks use to express the Buddhist philosophy of wisdom, compassion and peace.*



## Materials



Colored sand (a multi-pack containing small bags of several colors, enough for 6-8 mandalas, costs only a few dollars)

White glue

Paper plates, one for each color sand and one for the glue

Narrow, pointed paint brushes

Heavy cardboard or wooden base

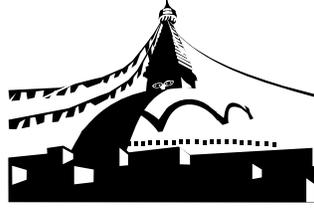
Plastic straw, cut on the diagonal at one end to make a scoop

Use a sharp pencil, sketch in the lines of your design. Don't make the spaces you need to fill too small, but try to make your design interesting and lively. Flowers, trees, and other shapes from nature as well as geometric shapes are all traditional. Look at the details in the Tibetan mandala photos to see how these objects are stylized. And don't worry too much about the lines – they'll all be covered up by the sand.

When your drawing's done, work as the monks do from the center outward. Pour some glue onto a plate and dip a small paint brush into the glue, wiping off any drips. Carefully brush an even layer of glue into the space you want to fill, spreading it around to reach all the corners. You may do more than one space at a time if they're the same color. Pour some sand onto a plate and scoop a bit of sand into your straw *chakpu*. Tap the straw to dribble sand onto the glued section. Let dry a minute, then tilt, blow or brush away stray grains of sand back onto its plate. Continue until your entire mandala is covered.



# Tibetan Prayer Flags



Tibetan Prayer flags or *lungta*, which means “wind horse,” are usually tied to the edge of a roof or strung between poles or trees. As the wind blows them, it carries the blessings and loving kindness for all beings. Over time, the sun, wind and rain will fade the flags, which like the brushing away of the sand mandalas represents the temporary nature of all things.

Prayer flags come in five colors: blue for space, white for water, red for fire, green for air, and yellow for Earth. On them are five animals: a flying horse, Garuda (a bird-like deity) eating a snake, a dragon, a tiger, and a lion. Each represents some aspect of Buddhism.

To make prayer flags, simply cut squares of fabric and decorate them with symbols and colors that are important to you. To attach them to the string for hanging, you can fold over the top of each square and staple or stitch it around the string.



# Sources and Resources



## Books

*Tibetan Designs* coloring book and *Mandala Tattoos* by Marty Noble

*Ruth Heller's Designs for Coloring: The Far East*

*Tibet, the Secret Continent* by Michel Peissel

*The Dalai Lama and Buddha* by Demi

*Tibetan Tales for Little Buddhas* by Naomi C. Rose

## Websites

The Minnesota Institute of Art

[www.artsmia.org/arts-of-asia/tibet/](http://www.artsmia.org/arts-of-asia/tibet/)

Shows a permanent sand mandala being built and preserved, with an explanation of its symbols.

Cornell University

[www.graphics.cornell.edu/online/mandala/](http://www.graphics.cornell.edu/online/mandala/)

3-D computer rendering of the "palace" in a sand mandala painting.

Girls Go Tech Mandala Maker

[www.girlsgotech.org/mandala.asp](http://www.girlsgotech.org/mandala.asp)

Design mandalas online at Girl Scout site



Mandalabre

[www.mandalabre.com](http://www.mandalabre.com)

Paper Mandalas [www.papermandalas.com/mandalas.htm](http://www.papermandalas.com/mandalas.htm)

Printable mandala coloring pages

The Tibetan & Himalayan Digital Library

[www.thdl.org/xml/show.php?xml=/education/tllr/manual/msttch\\_main.xml](http://www.thdl.org/xml/show.php?xml=/education/tllr/manual/msttch_main.xml)

Online Tibetan language videos

The Mystical Arts of Tibet [www.mysticalartsoftibet.org](http://www.mysticalartsoftibet.org)

Music, art and other Tibetan culture.

Dalai Lama's website

[www.dalailama.com](http://www.dalailama.com)

Tibet Tour

[www.tibet-tour.com](http://www.tibet-tour.com)

Interesting facts, including recipe for yak butter tea!



**Lama Karma Chopal creating a sand mandala at The College of Saint Rose**

