



*Losang
Samten
creating a
sand
mandala.
Photos
courtesy of
the artist.*

by Toni Shapiro-Phim

the witnessing of patience: Losang samten



A mandala (literally, “circle”) is an intricate diagram of the universe or cosmos in sacred terms. Ancient Buddhist and Hindu temples built as mandalas still dot South and Southeast Asia. In Buddhist Tibet, further north, mandalas have been painted on walls or scrolls since around the 12th century. Tibetan mandalas can also be made out of colored sand. Each of the numerous Tibetan mandala designs has its own complex iconography and its own purpose—to heal, to represent and teach compassion, to explore the roots of suffering, and so on.

Losang Samten has been painting mandalas with sand for more than three decades. Born in Tibet, and a resident

of Philadelphia for the past 18 years, Losang made his first sand mandala in the U.S. in 1988 after the Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhism’s highest-ranking spiritual authority, invited him to work on a piece at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Whether the site is a museum, a Buddhist temple, a library, or a school, artists of sand mandalas both share their understanding of the cosmos and create a temporary sacred space through their “paintings.” Artists may work on a single intricate design for weeks, painstakingly layering grains of colored sand. Yet, in keeping with the Buddhist principle of impermanence, ultimately the picture is wiped away, the sand ceremoniously poured into a lake or river or some other body of water,

where it becomes, again, one with the environment.

Losang is particularly intrigued by the design known as “The Wheel of Life,” which he has recreated many times over the years. “I have seen the power of this mandala to introduce ways for people to start asking questions about where the suffering of our world comes from and our individual and community troubles as well,” he says. “When they start to ask these questions, and to see the roots of suffering, they can act in ways that will change things for the better. The impact is on the individual, as well as the community.”

The Wheel of Life mandala, as Losang explains, focuses on the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. “There are four

[Continued on p. 26 →]

rings of images. The first one, in the center, consists of a pig (ignorance), rooster (greed and attachment), and a snake (anger). These negative emotions are considered the root of suffering. Together they lead to a cycle of rebirth. The Wheel of Life depicts this cycle through rings representing the realms of gods, demi-gods, human beings, animals, hungry ghosts, and beings in hell."

When Losang is working, small bowls of richly colored sand rest on a nearby surface. The color symbolism is complex, but, in general, it is related to the five elements, with white representing water, yellow for earth, red for fire, green for air, and blue for space. In order to create a detail, perhaps a cloud or a particular animal, he begins by concentrating on the overall meaning of the mandala and on the specific image he is about to craft. Back in the 1970s, when Losang was studying at a monastery in a Tibetan exile community in India, his teacher explained that concentration, along with memorization of iconography, helps the artist produce a precise expression of the intended design. Traditionally, sand mandalas were the focus of meditation, and precise imagery is critical when a mandala is to be used for such a purpose. It is still important, says Losang, when the mandala has an aesthetic or educational role.

After sketching the outlines of the design in white on a dark base, Losang fills his chakpo (metal tool) with sand of one color and slowly guides the flow of grains through its tiny hole onto the surface of what will become an extremely complex, sometimes three-dimensional, composition. In Tibet or India, an artist can wipe superfluous grains away with a yak-hair brush. Here, Losang uses a specially shaped piece of wood.

Losang has created mandalas throughout the United States and Canada, most often at

museums, galleries, and universities. He also works at schools. In all these settings, he discusses the local context with whom-ever has invited him, aiming to discern which mandala might be most appropriate for that place at that time. Onlookers not only witness the emergence of specific designs taking shape before them and learn something about a Tibetan Buddhist worldview; their experience also includes being in the presence of a remarkable depth of concentration, focus, and patience.

"First and foremost," according to Losang, "these mandalas are a form of communication through art. They tell stories that have meaning for Tibetans and other Buddhists, and for humanity in general. The witnessing of patience in the creative process helps observers find patience and perseverance within themselves. They also see how each tiny piece matters in the interconnectedness of life," as grains of sand and individual images combine to create meaning. "These are important lessons for the next generation, whether Tibetan or not. Whenever I dismantle a mandala, I ask some young people to help as a way of physically and spiritually passing on this tradition."

Losang's own journey as a practitioner of this tradition began with an intensive three and a half year training program at Namgyal Monastery in India from 1975 to 1978. This is the same Buddhist monastery at which he had been ordained as a monk in 1969, about a decade after escaping the brutal religious repression that began with China's invasion of Tibet in the 1950s. Buddhism, even though it is not monolithic in its practice in Tibet, has nonetheless been the defining essence of Tibetan civilization. It is estimated that of the half-million monks and nuns in Tibet prior to the invasion, more than half were tortured, murdered, or

disrobed against their will by the aggressors. Thousands of monasteries were destroyed. When the Dalai Lama left Tibet in 1959, tens of thousands followed, including Losang's family.

The Dalai Lama based the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India. To this day, more than 100,000 Tibetans live in refugee settlements in India and Nepal. Many have moved on to third countries, including the United States.

Most of the 50 or 60 Tibetans in the Philadelphia area have been here less than ten years. They come together for cultural events, often on Tibetan holidays, and participate in ceremonies and other activities with the larger Tibetan community in New York whenever possible. At these gatherings, dance is a central feature. Losang, in addition to his artistry with sand, is an accomplished ritual and folk dancer. As a monk, he studied and performed sacred dances at temples. He also mastered Tibetan folk dances and music as a high school student at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts. This was the first official institution the Dalai Lama established after his arrival in Dharamsala, a testament to the value placed on expressive culture in Tibetan life.

Losang received a Geshe (doctoral) degree in Buddhist Sutra and Tantra Studies at Namgyal Tantric University in Dharamasala in 1985. He has been a teacher of meditation and Spiritual Director of the Tibetan Buddhist Center of Philadelphia since 1989, still traveling often to conduct meditation retreats around the country. In 1994 Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, awarded him an Honorary Doctorate of Divinity, and a year later the Maine College of Art in Portland gave him an Honorary Doctorate of Art. Hollywood called in 1997: Losang served as religious technical advisor and

[Continued on next page →]

losang samten/continued from p. 26

sand mandala supervisor for Martin Scorsese's film *Kundun*.

He has been recognized with a 2002 National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship in honor of his accomplishments as a sand mandala artist, as well as a Pew Fellowship in the Arts in 2004.

Losang makes annual trips to India, where he continues to learn from the Dalai Lama and other spiritual leaders and artists, studies mandala imagery in caves and old temples, and meditates. Because of travel restrictions and his relatives' lack of access to phones and

computers, he cannot communicate with family members who remain in their small village in Tibet. He worries about them and about the future of Tibet and its rich culture. He attempts to better the world through his art and by leading others on meditation retreats, although he left the monkhood in 1994. Mandalas and spirituality are inextricably intertwined. As he explains, "The Buddha himself has been seen as a great artist, as one who has reached into deeper understandings of reality. I retreat and meditate to reach towards better under-

standing, too, and portray my point of view in my art."

This last quotation is from an interview by the author with Losang Samten published in PFA, the newsletter of the Pew Fellowships in the Arts (fall/winter 2004), p. 6.

Losang will be
artist-in-residence
at the
Folk Arts
Cultural Treasures
Charter School
this winter.

wobbly songs/continued from p. 11

change by members in personal taste, or in reaction to external issues. At times, behind-the-scenes debate on difficult pieces has revealed switches in position on large conceptual matters: job action, sabotage, lifestyle, gender, relations with other left-sectarian groups.

Although the IWW discouraged personality cults within its ranks, songwriter Joe Hill achieved legendary status initially among industrial unionists and subsequently in a larger group of CIO members, urban liberals, and unaffiliated radicals. Hill's life as a Swedish emigrant to the United States, his capacity to pen two dozen new Wobbly songs within a five-year span, his trial for murder and death by firing squad in Salt Lake City (1915), and unresolved questions of guilt or innocence combined to elevate him into the workers' pantheon.

The extensive literature on Joe Hill (by writers such as Ralph Chaplin, Joyce Kornbluh, Franklin Rosemont, Gibbs Smith, Barrie Stavis, and Wallace Stegner) leads readers beyond biography to searching questions on the nature of Wobbly lore and its "fit" as a chip in the mosaic of labor's heritage. IWW poets/composers

strove to nurture revolutionary consciousness. Each piece—whether topical, hortatory, elegiac, sardonic, or comic—served to educate, agitate, and emancipate workers. Songs were intended as arrows to penetrate bourgeois (in Wobbly parlance, "scissorbill") mentality, and to anticipate a new social order—the commonwealth of toil.

In everyday practice as Wobblies sang at jungle campfires, in meeting halls, and during free speech rallies, much of their repertoire melted away. Some lyrics proved too taxing to sing; in short, they were unsingable. Others had been set to tunes that lost out in style wars. Still others became irrelevant as the IWW declined. However, a handful entered tradition—a few as folksongs, some as labor-union classics. Not all IWW members have enjoyed sharing material across institutional lines, nor upon hearing treasures performed by rivals: pragmatic craft unionists, reformist allies, left partisans.

Wobblies known for militancy on the job and life-defying bravery on the strike front were powerless to control the trajectory of their songs, or to determine life or death for given

pieces. As their material reached large society, Wobblies responded ambivalently—happy that the Union had gone beyond its ranks; dismayed that strangers might distort the IWW's inherent message.

Three books in particular measure the spread of IWW songlore outside the organization's bounds. In 1909, Paul Brissenden, a California student in Economics, became interested in labor. In 1919, the Columbia University Press published his *The IWW: A Study in American Syndicalism* which included thirteen songs. In 1923, the University of Chicago Press issued Nels Anderson's *The Hobo*, an influential study of homeless men. It held four IWW songs.

Carl Sandburg's *The American Songbag* (1927) appealed well beyond campus walls with three Wobbly numbers. Sandburg conferred folksong rank for "The Preacher and the Slave." Under varied titles ("Long Haired Preachers," "Pie in the Sky") Joe Hill's parody of the hymn "Sweet Bye and Bye" moved out of labor's sphere to comment upon moral values in the American polity.

Ironically, a song introduced

[Continued on next page →]