

Cover Artists: Venerable Lama Tenzin Yignyen and Venerable Lama Ngawang Gyatso



Need a sand mandala?

Commission your own
by contacting:
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This issue's cover art is a bit out of the ordinary. What you see is the nearly-completed Sand Mandala of the Buddha of Infinite Compassion, constructed in the Currier room of the Michael S. Currier Center by two Tibetan Buddhist monks who lived among us last May for the ten days it took to complete the work. Oddly enough, the art no longer exists and the sand now lies at the bottom of the Puddle (read on to learn why). Venerable Lama Tenzin Yignyen was ordained by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, and entered Namgyal Monastery in Dharmasala, India in 1969. Tenzin is currently a visiting professor at Hobart and William Smith College, where he has taught Tibetan Buddhist Studies since 1998. Tenzin has created sand mandalas in many museums and educational institutions throughout the U.S., including the Cleveland Museum of Art, The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles and the Asia Society in New York City. Venerable Lama Ngawang Gyatso is Tenzin's old friend and fellow monk, also trained at Namgyal. Though normally posted in Mongolia, Gyatso (as he prefers to be called) was in Toronto receiving teachings from the Dalai Lama and stayed on to assist Tenzin with the sand mandala here. Less is known about Gyatso because his English is limited. But Gyatso is so joyful and pleasant to be with, who needs details really? This mandala was commissioned to honor Michael Currier's devotion to the plight of Tibet, expose our students to a foreign culture and offer the greater Putney community an experience they just won't get at the local library or general store. Each morning began with meditation and chanting and the monks were available during rest breaks and meals to teach us more about their culture, customs, religion and art. As word spread, more people attended the morning sessions. By the time of the dismantling ceremony, it was standing room only. Here's a bit of what we learned:

“A mandala is a cosmic diagram that represents the dwelling place or celestial mansion of a deity. Both the deity, who resides in the mandala, and the mandala itself are recognized as pure expressions of Buddha's fully enlightened mind. It can be visualized, painted or constructed from wood, precious jewels, rice, flowers and so forth. Sand is considered to be a superb medium because of its abundance and the great skill required to create the mandala's exquisite details.”

“Mandalas are created for rituals of initiation and for meditations, they are also created to purify the environment and its inhabitants and to promote harmony in the world. According to Tibetan Buddhist history, the purpose, meaning and techniques involved in the spiritual art of sand mandala painting were taught by Buddha Sakyamuni in the 6th century B.C. in India.”

“The artist will chant before starting the mandala creation. Then the blueprint of the mandala's design is outlined. Then the artist will begin constructing the mandala from the center to outward.”

“The colored sand is applied through a long metal funnel, called a Chakpu, which is rasped with another funnel in order to release a fine stream of sand. The hollow ringing sound is the sound of emptiness—the absence of independent self-existence. Just as there is no sound with one funnel alone, there is nothing that exists on its own.”

“Since sand mandalas are created in the spirit of impermanence and non-attachment, after they are completed they are dismantled with a ceremony and the blessed sand is offered to a body of water for the benefit of marine life, the environment and all sentient beings. But it's okay to take pictures, if you wish.”