

The Priory Mandala

Meditation practice at the Priory can be viewed as a mandala, a map of training showing the relationships of the people training here. It's come home strongly to me lately that it is not up to me what part or role any particular individual plays in the life of the temple. Each person participates at the level of commitment or relationship that they themselves choose. Buddhist training depends on our free will to make choices that shape our future. If we wish to model the Unborn, then certainly we want to exhibit the unconditional love that does not bind or restrict with attachments. It loves only with a Purity we can only sometimes glimpse, though we can deepen our inner certainty of it through faith and training.

A mandala is a map or diagram of training. It's actually a three-dimensional relief map, although we may only be familiar with two-dimensional, flat versions, such as Tibetan sand mandalas or Japanese wall paintings or scrolls. In both of these two-dimensional forms, we're looking down on the mandala from above. Three-dimensional mandalas are rarer because they require more space or entail more complex construction media, such as sculpture. The huge stone monument at Borobodur in Indonesia is an example of a three-dimensional mandala. The large Chinese temple in Richmond, British Columbia, near Vancouver, has a small one set up on a table in a side hall of the temple, complete with all the various figures who "inhabit" the mandala.

The mandala is a city, if you will, with various houses or "mansions" in which Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Dharma guardians, and other beings in training reside or function. Mandalas can be viewed as dynamic when a key Buddha or Bodhisattva sits in the center, around which, in increasing large concentric circles, all the other beings, such as us, move—train. We can also view a mandala as a fixed pilgrimage route, through which we make a journey visiting and training with all the various residents. These two views can exist simultaneously and don't stand against each other.

In a Buddhist temple, the abbot or prior is viewed as “the Buddha,” the center of the mandala. Around this buddha is the rest of the mandala, all of whom are training with her or him. We can take up and play many different positions or “roles” in such a mandala, depending on our inclination, motivation, and karma. We can be a bodhisattva in one of the four quarters, an acolyte or assistant to a buddha or a bodhisattva, a guardian of one of the four main gates or on the exterior “wall” of the mandala, and so forth. Some traditional mandalas have more than 1000 figures, so there is a great variety of training opportunities possible!

Although each of us functions around “the Buddha” in the center of the priory mandala, our temple is also a small mandala turning and training within successively larger mandalas. For example, the temple is part of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, in which Rev. Master Haryo, our elected Head, is “the Buddha.” Or we can view our lineage family as centered around Rev. Master Jiyu, our Founder. (These two don’t stand against each other.) In addition, our Order is part of larger mandalas, such as Soto Zen temples and then the Greater Sangha, made up of all Buddhist sanghas. This last constitutes the mandala of “Buddhism,” with the Buddha as central, whether we view Him/Her as the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, or the Cosmic Buddha, Vairochana. These two buddhas can be viewed as, and in essence are, the same. And since the Cosmic Buddha represents Total Reality, the Dharmakaya, the Unborn, we’re all functioning as an essential part of What Is. In truth, none of us can leap out, or exist outside, of the Mandala.

Our particular temple is also a part of other mandalas, such as the community of faith traditions in our local area, and the collection of Buddhist sanghas in our state, region, and nation. These relationships create the net of Indra, a Buddhist image which is similar in concept to the Internet, a great living web in which every part is connected to, and affects, every other part.

Then going down in scale, each of us as an individual is a part of many mandalas. We play a part/role/relationship in our homes and families, in our workplace, in our neighborhoods and community, in our state and nation. Each of us is also the central figure in many mandalas. Everyone we know

and contact comprises the mandala that forms around each of us as the central figure. Simultaneously, in whose mandala do you sit and train, and for whom do you serve as the Buddha?

The important point I want to make here is that within the priory mandala there are many different “roles” or parts people can play, positions they can take up, relationships they can develop. As I get older, or perhaps just more experienced as a prior, I’m coming to see more clearly that the part any particular person plays in the Priory is not up to me. Everyone chooses of their own free will what part they wish to play. With some people, such as lay ministers, I have a responsibility to ensure they are fulfilling their responsibilities. But with most folks, it’s entirely up to the individual. That’s why we don’t chase after people or pressure people to join as members, to attend activities, or to donate. Training has to come of our own free will.

We meditate and train because we long to know the love of the Unborn. We want to know our true inheritance, the Buddha Nature. Forced love is an oxymoron. If love is forced, it can’t be real love. How can the Cosmic Buddha, the Eternal, which is Pure Love, conceivably force us to love It? We can only return to or reunite with It through our personal, individual endeavors and choices. Likewise, we cannot establish that relationship for anyone else. Each person their own karma makes, and each will carry the consequences thereof. We cannot do other people’s training for them. To do so is to violate the principle of free will, which, as Rev. Master Jiyu once wrote in an article entitled “Perfect Faith,” we view as absolute in our tradition.

So how one participates in the temple is up to each individual. Some members may wish to be close to the center and to train closely with the resident monk. Other members practice regularly, get here when they can, and provide solid support through donations and attendance at activities. Some people may wish to play a smaller part, perhaps only coming for workdays, Dharma school, or special events. Others may not wish to be members, but choose to support the temple through financial contributions or donations of service, skills, time, food, or other gifts-in-kind and requisites. Donors in Buddhism are considered *Dharmapalas*—Dharma protectors. When we

support the temple, we provide protection for those who train within: we're the guardians of the mandala. Our kindness, goodwill, friendship, training, practice, and merit are all forms of protection, and are vital and equal in sincerity and value. The priory mandala needs all these different sorts of participation in order to be whole and complete. The temple's life is dependent upon many causes and conditions. Nothing exists in isolation.

These roles are not set or frozen: we are not locked into playing any particular part. We can move about within the mandala and various roles at different times depending on our circumstances. In life, the mandala's form, including the number of trainees and their arrangement, is not limited or set as in a diagram. The mandala is a representation of relationships—how people interact, how things work, how energy flows and moves in training.

The mandala is dynamic. It is always growing, changing, evolving. We create the mandala as we do our practice and training. In this way, the priory mandala is an expression of this particular group of people's practice and spiritual life. It is similar, and yet different, to all the other Order of Buddhist Contemplatives temples that follow Rev. Master Jiyu's teaching.

To sum up, a mandala can illustrate our relationships with other beings, our interdependence and our interconnectedness. The mandala shows Life, through and in which we all exist. Meditation and training are what makes us aware of these connections and the True Life within and around us. This True Life is the Blood of the Precepts, the awakened Buddha-seeking Heart that can guide us in life and in death, both of which are part of the Mandala.

Rev. Oswin

July 25, 2008

