

“Sand Mandala Brings Cultural and Religious Recognition During UNC’s Asia Week”

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During the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Asia Week, a Tibetan Buddhist monk built a sand mandala, demonstrating a Buddhist perspective on the beauty, harmony and impermanence of life and the universe.

The Carolina Asia Center celebrated Asia Week during the last week of February, hosting lectures and presentations throughout the week to highlight Asia and Asian culture. The sand mandala event, beginning Wednesday, was a primary function of the first pan-Asia celebration week at UNC.

Thupten Norbu, interim director for the Carolina Asia Center, said, “I believe that learning about other cultures is very crucial if you want a holistic view of the world, and the Carolina Asia Center’s mission is to positively transform our understanding of and relationship with Asia, and to equip students with the knowledge of Asia.”

Lauren Leve, associate professor and director of graduate studies for the Religious Studies department, described the sand mandala project as a “display and invitation.” Observers of this project will see an ancient and sacred ritual that is important to the culture of Tibetan Buddhism, but will also be invited to more fully learn about Buddhism and its complex cultural forms.

“I think an event like this is great for UNC because it really lets you see the cultural, religious, and artistic domains of, in this case, Tibet, but really life in general, and the way they all interpenetrate,” Leve said.

Standing near the back of the crowd of students was a UNC sophomore named Jason Troutman. He was at the event because of a requirement for his Asian Religions class and he said that he greatly appreciated the event and the ritual.

“It provided a field experience to associate with the information that we are currently learning. It showed that these religious traditions aren’t as far from home as they seem and that UNC embraces diverse cultural practices. This demonstration provided a sense of cultural connection for us, as students, to experience things we normally wouldn’t,” Troutman said.

As the ceremony began, dozens of students gathered in the atrium of the Fedex Global Education Center to hear Norbu and Leve give brief presentations on the purpose and meaning of this event. When their presentations were finished, Geshe Palden Sangpo of the Kadampa Center in Raleigh began a ritual chant, in a process Leve described as “ceremonially preparing the space.”

Geshe Sangpo, the visiting monk who performed the ritual, was born in Tibet and escaped into India over the Himalayan mountains where he joined a monastery in south India. “That’s where many of the large monasteries of Tibet have been recreated,” Leve said. After receiving his Geshe degree, he studied for an extra year during which time he specialized in elite tantric texts and practices.

After performing the chants, Geshe Sangpo began working with small metal cones called Chak-pur to arrange colored sand, which Leve said was actually finely ground marble, onto a table. The table was engraved with the outline of the final mandala.

A sand mandala, as described by the informational sign next to the table, is “an ancient, sacred form of Tibetan Buddhist art. At its deeper levels, a mandala represents the wholeness and harmony at the heart of the Tibetan Buddhist universe. The geometric patterns and colors are in one sense a blueprint for an existing spiritual structure.”

The specific mandala Geshe Sangpo was creating was a Green Tara Sand Mandala. Green Tara is, as the sign read, “a female Buddha of Compassion and Peace. She is an Enlightened Being who has attained the highest wisdom, capability and compassion, and remains in oneness with every living being. She is also known as the Liberator, The Great Compassionate Mother, The Embodiment of Wisdom and The Great Protectress.”

A sand mandala takes several days to create, and is a way of “transforming an ordinary mind into an enlightened mind,” and “seeing the universe through the eyes of a bodhisattva, which is a highly compassionate enlightened being,” Leve said during her presentation.

By transforming an ordinary mind into an enlightened mind, this is another kind of display and invitation. A viewer is able to see the display of enlightenment, and invited to become more fully immersed in it.

On Saturday afternoon, the atrium of the Global Education Center held the Asian Culture Festival, which included the sand mandala closing ceremony, led by Leve, Norbu, and Geshe Sangpo. After thanking the university and the participants of the festival, Leve explained the process and purpose of destroying the sand mandala, and Geshe Sangpo began clearing the sand and gathering it into a vase.

Leve explained that the sand was going to be taken to a river and sent back into the world so that, according to Buddhist belief, its peace and power could be spread throughout the world.

With the closing ceremony and Asia week over, participants and administrators seemed optimistic about Asia week's success. Norbu especially was excited about the opportunities that Asia week's positive reception would mean, affirming that "this will be the first of many."

