

Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies

Volume 19 • Number 2 • Winter 1996

On Maṇḍalas

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PREFACE

For many years Buddhist Studies has been dominated by research that has focused on particular "national" traditions on the one hand, and on written texts and textual traditions on the other. The project which has culminated in this Special Issue of *JIAS* represents an attempt to move beyond the limitations on our understanding that the dominance of these two components of the received Buddhological orthodoxy has imposed.

Stated in a more positive manner, there are two closely correlated hypotheses that the conference that spawned this Special Issue was designed to explore. These two hypotheses can be stated at a very broad level as follows. The first is that for a period that extends roughly from the 3rd century B. C. E. through at least the 13th century C. E., Buddhists were the proponents and bearers of a civilizational, "interregnal" religious tradition that gradually became more or less firmly established throughout most areas of Asia.¹ The second is that during this period, as in other periods of their history, Buddhists expressed, communicated, reconfigured and implemented their various orientations toward the world (including worldly power), and salvation beyond it, not only through the medium of written texts, but also—and very importantly—through a variety of sensory media as well.

For the purposes of this particular conference, the temporal scope and topical focus were necessarily delimited in a much more precise manner. The period from the beginning of the 8th century C. E. to the middle of the 9th century C. E. was chosen as an appropriate temporal span because it constitutes what is arguably the highpoint of the Pan-Asian spread of Buddhism as a dynamic interregnal tradition. *Maṇḍala* imagery, symbolism and practice was chosen as an appropriate thematic focus because during this century and a half various *maṇḍalic* expressions, along with associated forms of ritual practice, were emerging as especially prominent media

1. The strategy of substituting the term "interregnal" for the term "international" is explained and employed by Jonathan Walters in his superb but as-yet unpublished paper entitled "Finding Buddhists in Global History."



through which Buddhist orientations were being experienced, molded, and adapted to changing situations.

The immediate stimulus for organizing the "Maṇḍalas on the Move" conference that was held at the University of Chicago on April 21 and 22, 1995 came from a fascinating book by Geri Malandra entitled *Unfolding a Mandala: The Buddhist Cave Temples at Ellora* (State University of New York: Albany, 1993). Written by an art historian from the University of Minnesota, *Unfolding a Mandala* focuses on the central role of maṇḍala imagery and patterns at an important Buddhist cave site in the Indian Deccan; and particularly on the development of this imagery and patterning during the late 7th and early 8th centuries C. E. Using art historical methods (directly correlated written texts could not be identified) Malandra traces the emergence of a series of complex *mandalic* structures that she associates with an early form of Esoteric Buddhism.² In addition, she points to variety of interesting correspondences between the Esoteric maṇḍala imagery that she had discerned at Ellora, and the emergence—in the 8th to 9th centuries—of similar kinds of Esoteric expression all across the Buddhist world.

The original versions of the five essays published in this Special Issue were presented, along with a superb paper by Julie Gifford (Whitman College). In addition, important contributions to the discussion were made by four scholars who served as respondents to specific papers: Jonathan Walters (Whitman College), Richard Cooler (Northern Illinois University), Robert Campany (Indiana University at Bloomington) and John Holt (Bowdoin College).

Among the papers that were presented at the conference and included in this Special Issue, three highlight the emerging importance of Esoteric traditions and describe the meanings that Esoteric maṇḍalas conveyed, and the uses (both soteriological and mundane) to which they were put. Geri Malandra's paper sets the stage by placing the Esoteric / maṇḍala developments that can be discerned in the Buddhist cave temples at Ellora within the context of an Asiatic "world system" in which Buddhists were actively and creatively involved.

2. In the conference, and in the papers included in this volume, the terms "Tantric Buddhism" and "Esoteric Buddhism" are both used, and no attempt to formulate a systematic differentiation between them has been made. In this "Preface" I have chosen "Esoteric Buddhism" because it is the term which I take to be the more comprehensive and encompassing.

Charles Orzech follows with a paper in which he discusses the slightly later coming to prominence of Esoteric / maṇḍala elements in China, especially in the higher reaches of the T'ang court. He provides a fascinating description of the maṇḍalas that were employed, and analyzes the rich complexity and variety of the correlated practices generated by adept practitioners. David Gardiner, in the third essay, emphasizes both the very early presence of Esoteric elements in Japanese Buddhism, and the crucial role played by Kūkai—after his return from China in 806 C.E.—in establishing a systematic basis for the emergence of the Esoteric / Shingon tradition. In his discussion of the central role that maṇḍalas played in Kūkai's fascinating and highly complex system, Gardiner focuses special attention on the rich maṇḍala symbolism that he integrated into the construction of the important new monastic complex established on Mt. Koya.

The other two papers presented at the conference strike notes of caution. They warn us not to become too exclusively captivated by the emerging importance of Esoteric orientations and associated maṇḍala imagery during this period. They do so by pointing to extremely important and highly innovative examples of contemporary Buddhist imagery that are not Esoteric in character and not associated with maṇḍalas—at least with the kind of maṇḍalas that were so central in specifically Esoteric contexts.

Julie Gifford, in the conference paper that is not included in the present collection, made a strong case for her contention that Borobudur, the great Buddhist monument constructed during the late 8th / early 9th centuries in Java, is an architectural embodiment of an orientation that is not—despite the interpretations of several previous scholars—distinctively Esoteric and does not involve distinctively Esoteric maṇḍala symbolism. Rather, she argued, this great Buddhist monument displays and makes available a classically Mahāyāna soteriology of emanation and reabsorption in which specifically Mahāyāna visualization techniques play a central role. (Those interested in Gifford's very original and fascinating interpretation will have to wait until her University of Chicago dissertation on the topic is completed.)

Jacob Kinnard, in a paper that follows Gardiner's in the present collection, provides another cautionary example. Kinnard argues that previous scholars have greatly exaggerated the role that Esoteric traditions and Esoteric maṇḍalas played during the 8th and early 9th centuries in the Buddhist "homeland" in northeastern India. Rather, he contends, the Buddhists who lived in this tradition-rich area adopted a rather conservative iconographic stance. Following up on an insight of Paul Mus, and basing

his argument on contemporary archaeological, art historical evidence rather than the much later textual evidence from Tibet, he maintains that the historical Śākyamuni was the primary focus of iconographic attention. What is more, he demonstrates that the most prominent imagery involved local pilgrimage sites where, according to long established tradition, the major events in Śākyamuni's historical life had actually taken place.

Kinnard's argument leads him to suggest a major revisionist hypothesis that received much support in the discussion that followed his presentation. The hypothesis which he proposes is that Buddhist Esoteric / maṇḍala traditions, rather than developing at the "center" of the Buddhist world and spreading outward to the periphery, actually developed primarily on the periphery where they provided marvelously efficacious means for constituting a Buddhist world or worlds in contexts in which the traditions focused on the historical Śākyamuni were less accessible and less compelling.

John Strong's essay—which is a revised version of the "summary response" that he gave at the closing session of the conference—contains a series of brilliant reflections on the topic of maṇḍalas and the "moves maṇḍalas make." In this essay Strong identifies many of the central themes that were highlighted in the papers and conference discussions; he introduces a number of fascinating new insights of his own; and he weaves these various strands together in a way that provides not only a most appropriate conclusion for this Special Issue, but also a most exciting stimulus for further research and reflection.

All of those who have participated in the "Maṇḍalas on the Move" project greatly appreciate the financial support that we have received from three administrative units at the University of Chicago: the Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion (a research arm of the Divinity School), the Committee on Southern Asian Studies, and the Buddhism Workshop. We are also grateful to Donald Lopez who has presided over the publication of this Special Issue of *JIABS*.