

Mandala of the Buddhist deity Chakrasamvara

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[Enlarge this image.](#) Mandala of the Buddhist deity Chakrasamvara, approx. 1700–1800. Thangka; colors on cotton. Tibet. *Courtesy of the Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B60D50.*

What is a mandala?

A mandala is a schematic diagram that portrays the sacred environment of a particular deity. The deity in the sacred space is a direct reference to the presence of the divinity in the world. The mandala is used by practitioners as a guideline for meditation. It helps people visualize the way in which they will restructure the world in a manner to bring about universal salvation. Mandalas can be three-dimensional, but the most common form is painted in colored sand or pigments in two-dimensions. They consist of a complex of circles, enclosures, auspicious signs, and a vast central platform, from which the deity sends forth his powers of salvation.



Enlarge this image. Mandala of the Buddhist deity Chakrasamvara, approx. 1700–1800 (detail). Thangka; colors on cotton. Tibet. *Courtesy of the Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection*, B60D50.

Which deities are depicted here?

The center of this mandala shows Cakrasamvara (pronounced "Chakra-some-vahra") in a militant pose, firmly embracing his partner, Vajravarahi. Cakrasamvara is a powerful god (wrathful deity or *vidam*) of Buddhism and he is immensely popular in Tibet, Mongolia, and Nepal. Depicted above are the first three lineage holders of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism—Buddha Vajradhara (middle), the Indian Mahasiddhas Tilopa (left), and Naropa (right). Vajradhara is a Buddha who is revered as the quintessential teacher of the Tantras. Mahasiddhas are often very ordinary persons who had the fortune to meet with a qualified Tantric teacher (lama) and reached enlightenment in that very lifetime through the energetic application of Tantric technology (Vajrayana practices).

Among the Mahasiddhas were men and women, scholars, kings, wives, farmers, and even thieves, drunks and outcasts. The Eighty-four Mahasiddhas all came from India. Tibet has its own Mahasiddha tradition that continues to the present day. Famous Tibetan Mahasiddhas include such women as Yeshe Tsogyal, Trashi Tseringma, Machig Labdron, Achi and contemporary women such as Drikung Tashi Dolma. Of the thousands of male Mahasiddhas, some of the more famous are Milarepa, Ra Lotsawa, Drom Tonpa, Je Tsongkhapa, Rigdzin Chodrak, and contemporary Mahasiddhas such as Ngakpa Yeshe Dorje.

How do you view a mandala?

Below the mandala are tantric offerings, the guardian Mahakala, and the dancing skeletons known as Masters of the Cemetery. The latter are worldly protectors of Buddhism, as are the figures in the outer most ring of the mandala known as the Eight Great Cemeteries, which represent samsara in its transitional phase towards enlightenment at the center. After passing through this level, one must pass through fires of purification and the other levels as one nears enlightenment in the center of the mandala.

