CHAPTER 2
Mandala As A Reduced Model of Cosmology

This chapter will seek to locate the theoretical framework of the mandala/ khilkhor as a reduced model of cosmology within the Buddhist world-view. It will begin with a brief look at Buddhism in general and will then examine the three main traditions of the Hinayana, the Mahayana and the Vajrayana schools of thought. It will also look at Tucci’s The Theory and Practice of the Mandala with Special Reference to the Modern Psychology of the Subconscious, as this book provides the basic guideline to the study of mandalas/ khilkhors and the belief system attached to it. It will also shed light on the spread of Buddhism in Tibet as well as Bhutan.

BUDDHISM

Gautama Buddha the founder of Buddhism was born in 623 BC. After attaining enlightenment he based his teachings on the Four Noble Truths¹ and the Eight Fold Path². The teachings of the Buddha caught the imagination of the people who welcomed these observations and accepted them as a way of life, above that of caste, and creed. The Bhikhsus that joined the monastic order or the Sangha were required to go far and wide to different places, in different directions/maekene due agamittha³ so that the teachings of the Buddha could be disseminated far and wide.

The Buddha evolved his own doctrine of personal and social ethics as a response to the call of the socio-cultural and religious demands of his time and Buddhism began to rely heavily on popular support. Over the years, Buddhism was to develop many different practices as it spread to different countries. However, the basic teachings of Buddhism are the same and the different schools of thought agree on the negation of the idea of a named God. They refuse to define or even speak about it, as if by doing so they would mislead or limit the idea of the Ultimate Being. The accepted belief for all Buddhists is that a person has to undergo several continuous rebirths through successive lifetimes in his/her pursuit of enlightenment and Buddhism as a religion believes in wiping away the bad Karma that is an impediment to enlightenment. Enlightenment therefore, may
be explained as the clarity of mind or freedom, which comes about as a result of doing away with desires, longings, beliefs, habits and false perceptions, that arise from attachment or Maya-Mohaa. Buddhist practitioners commit themselves to a process of mental and physical discipline and concentrated meditation in order to escape the series of birth-death and rebirth.

Most Buddhist practitioners therefore, meditate continuously, and lead exemplary lives, through physical and mental control as well as self-criticism, by developing "prolonged introspective concentration, and the ability to ignore distractions of every kind"4, in order to strive for enlightenment/freedom from the cycle of birth-death and rebirth. To be successful in such practice, one would need to acquire and adopt the right instruments, and the right means by rejecting all experience and phenomena as being illusory and by countering each illusion in order to arrive at the ultimate reality that defies all names and categories by following the Four Noble Truths and the Eight Fold Path.

Buddhists often felt that it was not correct to represent the Buddha in ordinary human form as the Buddha had already attained Nirvana. This means that he has passed beyond the limits of humanity and therefore cannot be represented by art forms. Hence, simple objects were used to symbolise his presence in art forms, for instance Theravada Buddhists still depict the Buddha with a "cushion on his seat, a pair of lotus marked footprints, or the archaic symbol of a fiery pillar".5 However, this was before the onset of the first century AD. By this date, the earliest Indian images of the Buddha had begun to be carved and painted.

Throughout the centuries various thinkers developed a range of images to meet people's needs to realise and visualise the Buddha, as common men and women would need something to focus their thoughts and feelings on. All the images and the doctrine behind these are based on the concept that the Buddha has three bodies/the Trikaya. The three Buddhas/ the Trikaya Buddha puts an end to several philosophical and artistic problems. It needs to be pointed out that the three Buddhas are not Bodhisattvas but are what is called the Ku-Sung-Thuk/ the three representations of the Buddha. The first
body being, the *Nirmanakaya* the physical manifestation, represented by the *Gautam Buddha* and his incarnations and other manifestations of *Buddhahood*. The third of these bodies is the *Dharmakaya* the Enlightened Buddha Mind. This aspect of the Buddha embodies all the “existence and phenomena, selflessness, wisdom, void.” The second body is the Body of Glory the *Sambhogakaya* an ideal body composed of symbolic attributes. The *Sambhogakaya* is visible in many Buddhist icons. But it must be noted that all these manifestations in art as well as the doctrines are meant as *upaya* 'skilful means' for leading peoples minds away from the world of *Samsara*, towards the right path. Through the centuries, Buddhism has developed a vast array of “figurative imagery to symbolise the Buddhist goal”.

**THE THREE YANAS: HINAYANA, MAHAYANA AND VAJRAYANA**

With the passage of time Buddhism developed three different schools of thought i.e., *Hinayana*, *Mahayana*, and *Vajrayana*. These three schools have been analysed by Trulku Thondup as follows:

*The characteristic of the Common Vehicle (Hinayana) is to develop a desire to renounce Samsara for one’s own sake. The characteristic of the Great Vehicle (Mahayana) is to develop beneficial thoughts towards all beings. The characteristic of the Esoteric Vehicle (Vajrayana) is to purify perception and to perceive the world and its beings as the pure land and its deities, in order to attain the absolute nature.*

**HINAYANA TRADITION**

When Buddhism began as a way of life in India, it was largely the *Hinayana* tradition. *Hinayana Buddhists* consider the *Buddha* to be their religious teacher and propagates an austere way of life. As K Krishna Murthy puts it, “Part of the wisdom is the clear realization that all things in the world including the human personality are characterized by three marks: Impermanence/*Aniccha*, Pain/*Dukkha* and Impersonality/*Anatta*. The latter implies the denial of any permanent self or soul entity in man, the human personality being analysed into five *skandhas* groups, body, feeling, perceptions, habit-
patterns/Samskaras and consciousness. Yet there is a continuity from life to life in the series of rebirth to which only enlightenment can put a stop.  

But how does one attain enlightenment? The question may be answered very simply. One needs to follow the Eight Fold Path wisely and through meditation. If one is morally wise and can train his/her mind through meditation then a high degree of mental and internal calm will be achieved as the level of calm and awareness of one's own body, feelings, states and contents of mind become more acute. Thus, as one progresses along this chosen path, the chain of all action Samsaral Moha-Maya are shed till the day arrives when one may soon become an Arhat/ Enlightened being who is free from the cycle of birth – death and rebirth from the Wheel of Life/ Serpa – Khorlo (in Tibetan). Exoterically the world Arhat means, “one worthy of or deserving divine honors” but esoterically it means “ an initiate of the fourth degree”. Arhatship is by and large the most immediate goal of anybody aspiring to be a Buddha/ an Enlightened Being.

Individual enlightenment or Arhatship is the main concern of the Hinayana Buddhists as well as the Theravada Buddhists of Sri Lanka and parts of Thailand. The Arhat would eventually become a Bodhisattva and then a Buddha.

MAHAYANA TRADITION

The Mahayana Buddhists worship the Buddha as a God and Mahayana Buddhism is rich in ritualistic practices. While Hinayana Buddhists strove for individual enlightenment, Mahayana Buddhist considered this method of attaining enlightenment to be very selfish as the watch-words of Mahayana Buddhism are wisdom (represented by Manjushri) and compassion (represented by Ava Lokitesvara). Mahayana Buddhism therefore, lays stress on the concept of the Bodhisattva or the pre-destined Buddha, who pledges to save innumerable lives before attaining Nirvana. The Lotus Sutra that gained momentum in Japan too declares the “Nirvana of the Hinayanists (to be) a temporary resting-place, not the final goal.” Mahayana Buddhism acquired an immense pantheon of gods and goddesses as well as Bodhisattaavas/ideal beings one
step away from attaining liberation/ Nirvana, (but they do not opt for Nirvana in order to save other sentient beings). With the growth of these Bodhisattvas, the historical Gautama Buddha/ the Adi Buddha as he is often called receded into the background. However, it must be remembered that all these ideal figures were once human thereby declaring that all humans can strive for the same dignity by living in the right manner. We may need to keep in mind the fact that the historical Buddha/ Gautama Buddha became a Buddha/ Enlightened One as a result of his having understood the Truth/ the Ultimate Reality/ the Void/ Sunyata.

In the Mahayana Tradition the concept of the Bodhisattva is very crucial. A Bodhisattva as the word implies is the last incarnation before one attains Buddhahood or becomes a Buddha. The term itself means “he whose essence/ sattva has become intelligent or wise knowledge/bodhi.” A Bodhisattva begins his/her spiritual journey with three events associated with the ‘production of the thought of bodhi/ bodhi-citta-utpad. The three events are (i) he thinks of becoming a Buddha for the welfare of all living beings, (ii) he takes certain great vows, (iii) his future greatness is predicted by a living Buddha.” These three events according to K Krishna Murthy “mark the conversion of an ordinary person into a Bodhisattva to be.” After this, the person concerned enters a stage of probation and acceptance after which s/he becomes a gotrabahu/ someone endowed with conditions that are decisions for the advent of the first great initiation/ sotapana. It is not a mere jump from one level of consciousness to the next. The Bodhisattva’s spiritual journey is marked by various stages. S/he has to advance from one level to the next till s/he attains enlightenment. These levels are termed bhumis or viharas. At the literal level it translates into “earth, place, region”, in a metaphorical sense it denotes range, sphere, station, condition and function among other things.” There are ten such levels/ bhumis that a Bodhisattva has to attain.

It must be noted that Gautama Buddha himself was a perfect example of a bodhisattva in his past life and the stories of these were narrated to propagate and explain the historical facts of his life. Bodhisattvas are believed to have descended of their own accord and to chose their own mothers, not being born as a result of Karma. A
Bodhisattva's earthly father is therefore, not really related to him as the Bodhisattva concerned is not born of a natural association between his earthly parents. S/he is not contaminated by the impurities of birth. S/he is a most distinguished and highly accomplished person, free from passions but who gets married in order to conform to normal earthly society. S/he wins against desires of all kinds and is constantly and continuously aided by the celestial beings in his /her pursuit of enlightenment. Some Mahayana Buddhists believed that enlightenment could be attained through one life time itself, following the path of Tantric teachings and may be achieved in such a manner that it benefits many sentient beings. This esoteric practice was to gradually emerge from within the Mahayana tradition as the Vajrayana tradition.

VAJRAYANA TRADITION

The third phase of Buddhism is known as the Adamantine Vehicle/ Vajrayana. This tradition is an esoteric tradition, the teachings of which may be known only to those who have received initiation or Wang from his/her spiritual guide/guru. Moreover, this tradition being rich in symbolism makes the interpretations of the texts produced by this tradition incomprehensible without the aid of a guru. The Tantrayana/ Vajrayana tradition “consisted of a movement towards the employment of ritual magic and yoga, or meditative techniques, in an antinimian spirit, to gain secular and religious goals.” Vajrayana Buddhism is largely based on magical ritualism, and this aspect is its chief distinguishing factor from the other two schools of thought. The “basis of [Vajrayana Buddhism] is the symbolic identification of the body and actions of the initiate with aspects of the cosmos, both mundane and spiritual.” Vajrayana Buddhists believe that the initiate can manipulate the 'outer world' through ‘the manipulation of the physical and subtle body’.

It is difficult to trace the early development of Vajrayana Buddhism as archeological findings indicate that most of the high level tantric practises were kept a zealously guarded secret for almost five centuries (till about the 10th-11th centuries). It must be noted, however, that when the Buddha came to the world he preached a different doctrine as he had come as Dipankara Kasyapa/ Mar-me-mdzad Hod-srun, because he
discovered that the people of those days were not fit to receive tantric instructions. Later, as the people were found fit the teachings in the Guhyasmajha Tantra were made known to them. Not only this but there was also a lot of opposition to tantric teaching then. Hence, it was kept a secret for several centuries. This information is the hypothesis conjectured by K Krishna Murthy in his book Studies in Buddhism. Whatever, be the reason for its suspension, tantric instruction in Buddhism flowered pretty late. But once it became prolific, it travelled swiftly to Tibet and from there onwards to Bhutan. The meditation on the Mandala is a part of this vast esoteric body of knowledge. In course of time, Mahayana Buddhism underwent a great change and came to be known as Mantrayana Tantric Buddhism. It began to contain “Mantras, Dharanis, Mudras and Mandalas and other Tantric rites”\textsuperscript{15} as well. Along with these changes, a vast body of literature began to develop. For instance in the Jnanasiddhi, a work on Vajrayana, it is clearly pointed out that bodhicitta/ the thought of enlightenment is really the Vajra/ the Invincible. When a monk’s bodhicitta/ Buddha nature, attains the nature of the Vajra/ diamond, a meditating monk would then attain enlightenment/ bodhi.

Since the concept of meditating and visualising the deity of the Mandala emerges form this third tradition, it would be pertinent to look at the origins of this tradition a little more explicity next.

**THE ORIGINS OF TANTRIC BUDDHISM**

The word tantra is derived from the root word tan meaning to spread. Scholars are divided over the meaning of the word. Some believe it to have been derived from the root Tatri or tantrı/organisation or knowledge. According to K Krishna Murthy it connotes “the scripture by which knowledge is spread”. He also defines Tantra as an “actual discipline in a wide sense, and when used in a limited sense, it is a spiritual knowledge of a technical nature”.\textsuperscript{16} In Tibetan Buddhism tantra came to be established as distinct class of Literatures in the 7\textsuperscript{th} Century and individual Vajrayana texts are called tantras. The primary examples of tantras are those attributed to the Buddha. These tantras are supposed to have reached the historical Buddha from the esoteric
turning of the *Karma Wheel* that is perceptible only to highly evolved beings. These tantras are also to be found in the Tibetan collections of *Buddhavacana*.

The Tibetan canon common to both Tibet and Bhutan contains more than five hundred *tantras* and over two thousand commentaries to these works. These are largely concerned with detailed instructions for elaborate rituals and meditations. The *Kriya Tantras* form a very large body of texts thought to have appeared between the 2nd and 6th Centuries CE. These *tantras* like the *Mahamehga Sutra* are among some of the oldest in the world and were the first to be translated into Chinese (around the 3rd Century). This *tantra* is concerned with making rain, and is to be utilised only for secular purposes. Since then the *Tantra* tradition has undergone a lot of changes and a large member of texts have been compiled on *tantras* as well.

The *Vajrayana* Buddhist tradition is the tradition that is by essence extremely important to this thesis as the concept of the *Mandala* emerges from it. Liberation from the Cycle of birth – death and re-birth as the *Vajrayana* Buddhist saw it, could be achieved even within one life span. The *Guhyasamaja Tantra* was the doctrine that made this belief possible. The *Guhyasamaja Tantra* declares that, “emancipation does not depend on bodily sufferings and abstinence from all worldly enjoyments”\(^{17}\). This *tantra* also introduced the woman figure as a manifestation of divine energy in the form of *Sakti*. By introducing the notion of *Sakti*, all *Tantras* then came to be divided into two broad dimensions. The first dimension being those free from the elements of *Sakti* while the second division advocated her worship. Buddhist *Tantra* is divided into four classes: *Carya, Kriya, Yoga* and *Anuttara Yoga Tantra*. Broadly speaking the various tantric deities of meditation may be divided into four categories. The four categories are:

(a) *Ja –rGyud*/*Kriya*/Action *Tantra*
(b) *Spyog – sGyud*/*Choi – guyu*/Carya*/Performance *Tantra*
(c) *R Nal – L Byor –r Gyud*/Neljor guyu*/Yoga*/Cohesive *Tantra*
(d) *R Nal – Lbyor Bla – Med rGyud (Neljor Lame Gye)*/Mahayoga*/Anuttara* 
*Yoga*/Higher Cohesive *Tantra*
The first two *Carya Tantra* and *Kriya Tantra* are preparatory *tantras* and do not contain the element of *Sakti*. The latter two—*Yoga Tantra* and *Mahayoga/ Anuttara Yoga Tantra* contain the elements of *Sakti* as they are higher *tantras*. The *tantras* are distributed between four families or *Kulas*, namely:

(a) *Tathagata Kulas*
(b) *Padma Kula*
(c) *Vajra Kula*
(d) *Samanya Kula*

These *Kulas* center on the worship of a large number of Buddhas, *Bodhisattvas* and deities.

The *Carya Tantras* form a small class of texts that emerged from around the 6th Century onwards. The *Mahavairocanabhisambodhi Tantra* (C 600) and a few other texts are included in this category. This is dedicated to the worship of Buddha *Vairocana/ Rnam-par-snan-mdzas*, and the attainment of *Siddhis/ mundane powers*. These *Siddhis* are obtained through a process of visualisation of one’s self as *Vairocana*. The *Yoga Tantras* too are dedicated to the worship of *Vairocana*. The *Sarvatathagataattvasamgraha Tantra* is also included in this class. This *tantra* reflects a cult of the *Bodhisattva Manjushri*. The Japanese *Tantric School*, the *Shingon*, is a combination of the *Yoga* and the *Carya Tantras*.

The *Anuttara Yoga Tantra* appears to have originated in India and incorporated at least two classes of *tantra*. The first of these is the *Yogattara Tantra/ the higher tantras* of Union, the *Father Tantra/ Upaya Tantra* that is dedicated to the worship of the Buddha *Akshobhya/ Mi-bskyod-pa* and his consort *Mamaki/ Lha-mo ma-ma-ki*. This *tantra* utilises the imagery and the ritual of sexual intercourse. Another class of *tantras* superseded the *Yogottara Tantra*, this *tantra* was known as the *Mother Tantra/ Prajna Tantra*. This too is centred round the worship of *Buddha Aksobhya*, but this time the worship is centred on his wrathful forms/ *Herukas*, complete with the *Dakinis/ Hgro-
His female consorts. He is normally visualised in a cremation ground, akin to the Mund Mala Dhari/ the Shiva manifestation that guards the crematorium.

These four classes of tantras are regarded as forming a hierarchy through which the practitioner has to rise in due order. The underlying message however, is that one would require proper initiation by a qualified master to pray to, or to meditate upon, or visualise these deities in the mandala/ the tantra tradition. When an individual takes initiation from his/her Guru for the visualisation of a deity, elements from early Buddhist as well as Mahayana practice are included in the act. These tantras are in books/manuals meant for the exposition/visualisation of the deities in simple/complex mandalas/ khilkhors. These mandalas/ khilkhors are dedicated to specific Buddhas and their entourages. These mandalas/ khilkhors in their pictorial depiction would contain a central figure flanked by four other/more at the cardinal points. The tantra tradition is said to have traveled to Tibet from India, after the collapse of north Indian Buddhism under Muslim rule. The Chinese did not accept the tantra, whereas it found a firm footing in Japan, and flourished as the Shingon School.

THE BUDDHIST DIASPORA TO TIBET

Though Mahayana Buddhism/ the Greater Vehicle was predominant in India, the revival of Hinduism under Harshvardhana (606-647) AD and repeated invasions from the North West by the Huns caused immense ideological pressures on Buddhism. For the religion to survive, it had to look for greener pastures elsewhere. Tibet in the Trans-Himalayan region proved to be the right choice as it was suffering under the primitive and savage practices of the Bon religion. Before the land of Tibet was exposed to Buddhist teachings the people of Tibet were believers of a Shamanic form of religion, called Bon-po. These types of religion are to be found all over the world particularly in older societies. In Tibet these Shamanic rites and myths made use of “powerful and noble symbols and imagery”. The word Shaman is derived from the word Shama, and a Shama could be a man or a woman with access to the world of the dead, of spirits and divine beings. S/he becomes a Shaman by “experiencing a call, enduring a profound sickness, and dying to their ordinary personality. During a period of solitary endurance
in the forest or desert, he or she is visited and initiated by spirits, and meets a particular spirit who will be the contact in the spirit world". Most conceptions of spirit are based on the idea of the dead, usually the ancestors. Shamamistic rituals involved a lot of animal sacrifices as well.

When Buddhism reached Tibet these Shamamistic rituals/ the Bonpo Bon religion as it was called, did not die away immediately. During the time when Bonpo rituals were practiced in Tibet, the instruments of worship were made of human bone and the magicians wore aprons and ornaments made of carved fragments of bone, blew trumpets made of human thigh-bones and drums made of human skull and bones. With the passage of time these old Bonpo equipment and rituals such as bloody sacrifices came to be interpreted metaphorically and the form of Buddhism practiced and propagated there too incorporated some of the elements of the Bonpo tradition.

Under the royal patronage of King Tsongtschen Gampo (617-650 AD) who was influenced largely by his two wives - (Queen Bhrikuti from Nepal and Queen Wen-Chong of China), Tibet embraced Buddhism. King Tsongtschen Gampo’s wives brought with them Buddhist teachings and converted the erstwhile Bonpo land into a land of Buddhist practice. Many Indian saints like Marpa, Naropa and Guru Padma Sambhava, visited Tibet to spread the teachings of the Buddha there. King Tsongtschen Gampo’s fifth successor King Thrisong Detchen (755 -797 AD) was successful in establishing institutionalised Buddhism in Tibet as a result of the endeavours of Santaraksita (c. 705 -762 AD) and Guru Padma Sambhava (c 750 – 800 AD). The first monastery to be built in Tibet was the Samya monastery consecrated by the great Indian saint Guru Padamsambhava in 749 AD. Buddhism continued to flourish in Tibet for over a period of 150 years (from 749 -899 AD). But the propagation of Buddhism was doomed with the ascension of the new monarch Lang Darma (899 –902 AD). Lang Darma revived the ancient Bon practices of Tibet and did a lot to damage the work done towards the propagation of Buddhism in the first stage (749 –899 AD). He destroyed monasteries, killed monks, burnt religious scriptures and massacred Tibetan Buddhists. He was assassinated by a Buddhist monk pretending to be a dancer, who had a bow and
arrow hidden in the folds of his voluminous sleeves. This assassination scene is enacted even today as the triumph of good over evil in the form of a masked dance. In fact, it was the first masked dance in the Buddhist world.

**PROPAGATION OF VAJRAYANA BUDDHISM IN TIBET AND BHUTAN**

*Guru Rinpoche/Guru Padma Sambhava*, the great Indian Saint (AD. 750-800) is believed to have introduced *Vajrayana* Buddhism to Tibet. He is also said to have carried along with him famous *tantric* texts from India. He preached the old *tantras* and founded a new school of thought called the *Rinim-ma School*. The second phase of Buddhist activity in Tibet took place between 982-1054 AD. This second wave was the result of the pioneering efforts of the great Indian Buddhist Saint *Atisa* who arrived in Tibet from Vikram-sila in 1038 A.D. He was the one responsible for synthesising the higher ideals of the *Hinayana* and the *Mahayana* traditions. Once Indian Buddhism was able to shake off the narrow path of the old *Theravada/Hinayana* School of thought by including various other practices and philosophies, Buddhism became a pan Indian phenomenon and traveled to Tibet and from there, on to other Himalayan countries like Bhutan, Nepal and the erstwhile Kingdom of Sikkim (Sikkim became a part of the Indian Republic in 1975), Ladakh (in the state of Jammu and Kashmir), Himachal Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh. Tibetan Buddhism as it is popularly known is ritualistic and hierarchical.

The official state religion of Bhutan is the *Drukpa Kagyupa/ Followers of the Oral Transmission*. The oldest school of thought in practice even today is - the *Nyingmapa*, founded by *Guru Rinpoche/Guru Padma Sambhava*, in the 7th century AD. Towards the end of the 10th Century and before the end of the 12th century, three major schools of Tantric Buddhism were prevalent in Bhutan. These were the: (a) *Kadampa*, (b) *Sakyapa*, (c) *Kagyupa*. The third school had numerous branches and the official state religion of Bhutan owes its origins to the ‘Phagmo group’ one of the four main branches of the *Kagyupa* School. The Drukpa School was created in Tibet under the spiritual guidance of Gyare Yeshe Dorje (1161-1211). It was to spread to Bhutan towards the early years of the 13th century when Phagmo Drugom Shingpo introduced the teachings
of this school of Buddhism to parts of western Bhutan. It was however, due to the Shabdrung and his adeptness at bringing religiosity to its peak once he was able to unitfy Bhutan that actually helped the propagation of the Drukpa Kagyupa School in Bhutan.

THE MANDALA/ KHILKHOR

Skyil – h khor (pronounced Kilkhor) is the Tibetan/ Dzongkha word while the Mandala is a term used in Sanskrit usually associated with Tibetan Buddhist Tantric practices. According to Giuseppe Tucci in The Theory and Practice of the Mandala (1961):

A mandala delineates a consecrated superfcies and protects it from invasion by disintegrating forces symbolized in demoniacal cycles. But a mandala is ... above all, a map of the cosmos. It is the whole universe in its essential plan, in its process of emanation and of reabsorption. 

Mandalas, according to Denise Patry Leidy, the co-author of Mandala, The Architecture of Enlightenment (1997), are the most “well known Buddhist icons in the world today,” and they are synonymous with “sacred space in western scholarship.” Leidy opines that “the Sanskrit word Mandala means any circle or discoid object such as the sun or moon.” If we try and trace the meaning of the word etymologically, then, the Sanskrit word may be divided into two: ‘manda’ meaning ‘cream, best part, highest point’ and ‘la’ meaning ‘signpost or completion’. Similarly, if the Tibetan word Khilkhor is divided into two words: khil: means ‘central’ and khor: means ‘lhatsho/ place of worship, family, group.’ The word Khilkhor may also be interpreted as ‘Lha ghi Phodrang/ Abode of the Gods’ according to Lopon Tashi Penjore.

Mandalas are most commonly depicted as brightly coloured paintings on scrolls adorning the walls of homes, or painted on the ceilings, or walls of monasteries/ goenpas. Mandalas are usually represented as a series of concentric circles, within which a square palace with four gates is enclosed. Inside the square palace is a smaller inner circle in which resides the main/principal deity of the mandala/ khilkhor. The other deities who may form a part of the retinue of the main deity (deities) will always
be outside the inner circle/sanctum sanctorum. Mandalas/khilkhors are also understood to be 'diagrams of the cosmos' or as a 'cosmoplan' or as a 'macrocosm of the cosmology'. Mandalas/khilkhors are used as visual aids to meditation. In Leidy's words:

Fundamentally, however, mandalas represent manifestations of a specific divinity in the cosmos and as the cosmos. Their very presence in the world, remind the viewer of the immance of sanctity in the Universes and its potential in himself. They thereby assist his progress toward enlightenment.

*Mandala The Architecture of Enlightenment, 1987, p. 17*

For Buddhists the world over, the Mandala/khilkhor serves several functions:

(a) it not only adorns the walls of monasteries and homes but also sanctifies them,
(b) it is used for the initiation of monks and monarchs (abhisheka),
(c) it is a visual aid to meditation, and
(d) it is also used during the cremation rites of high lamas and eminent laity.

*Mandalas/khilkhors* are pictorial representations of several underlying notions of Buddhism such as, the use of a "sacred space for a spiritual process, the existence of innumerable Buddhas, some of whom are not bound by time and space; the ability of these desities to create and maintain their own worlds; and the importance of Mandalas as symbols of those worlds and the processes that occur within them."³²

The *Mandala/khilkhor* as we know it will then be looked upon and analysed as a macrocosm of the universe/as a reduced model of cosmology that exists for a certain purpose. The purposes are both religious and secular, as we may have discerned from the ongoing discussion. The *mandala/khilkhor* has a unique nature as, it lends itself beautifully to a semiotic analysis for the mandala/khilkhor itself, if we recall, is about the creation of world/universe/cosmos, the very act of maintaining that world/universe/cosmos, and about the processes that occur within that world.
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Tucci also calls the *mandala*, a “geometric projection of the world reduced to an essential pattern.” The term *mandala/ khilkhor* has essentially two different meanings in *Tantric Practices* – namely:

(a) *Skyil – hkhor/ Mandala* and  
(b) *Mandal*

The first meaning implies the celestial abode of gods and goddesses or the mystical palaces of the Tantric deities of meditation. The second meaning of *mandala/ mandal* is the term used for offering a *mandala/ khilkhor* or a practice associated with the seven offertory practices that is followed in millions of households throughout the Buddhist world. *Mandal/ khilkhor* therefore, means - by offering the *mandal*, one visualises offering the entire universe and its precious contents to the deity one is meditating to.
This is a very common practice among lay followers of Buddhism as well, for instance people perform the long – life / tshe-rimku pooja, by offering the mandal or sTen-gSun.

The mandala/ khilkhor is a visual aid to meditation on the one hand and a means to enlightenment within one single lifetime, on the other. Mandalas/ khilkhors usually consist of a series of concentric circles, enclosing a square palace, and an inner circle within the four-gated square palace that houses the main/ central deity/ deities as the case may be. In a book on the History of Bhutan, (found at the Nyingmapa Monastery in Dehradun, Uttranchal, India), it is mentioned that, “the mandala or the mystic circle murals represent the metaphysical concept of the Universe/the Bhutanese Buddhist’s concept of the cosmogeny of the universe”. Different mandalas/ khilkhors depict the universe in various ways. For instance, some mandalas/ khilkhors depict Mt. Meru with its 7 mountain circles and 7 ocean circles, the 4 main continents: Videha (in the east), Jambudwipa (in the south), Godhanya (in the west) and Uttara Kuru (in the north). These mandalas also depict the 33 heavens of Indra, the 3 heavens of Brahma and the highest of all paradises, that of the Adhi/ Primordial Buddha/ the Kuentuzangpo.

The mandala/ khilkhor is not just a ‘cosmoplan’ or a visual aid to meditation, it may also be looked upon as a means through which, microcosmic man can be brought into harmony and synthesized with the macrocosmic universe through a “visualization of the divine pattern”. It has therefore, been described as a “psychocosmogram, a means towards the re-integration of the human personality”. Several scholars also classify mandalas into two kinds – one a transitory one in which mystic patterns are traced during initiation and meditation. The other is the permanent mandala/ khilkhor drawn in the form of frescoes on the walls and ceilings of monasteries. The former are effaced after the ceremony is over, the latter are believed to confer blessings on those who look at it or even pass under it. Mandalas/ khilkhors are an essential part of both religious initiation as well as meditation.

Geshe Alexandra David –Neel, (one of the first western women to visit Tibet and to learn about Tibetan Buddhism in the early decades of the last century), called the practice of the mandala/ khilkhor an aid to liberation, the Short Path or the Direct Path,
which is to say that the practitioner attains *Buddhahood* in one life or one body. In the language of the scriptures it is called *tse gchying sang rgyais/ lam chung* the Short Road. This would imply that the practitioner attains liberation/ nirvana in the very life that one has begun his/her spiritual training. This *Short/ Direct Path* however, is a dangerous one. One does not need to be an ordained monk/nun to enter this *Short Path*. What is important here instead, is the need for initiation. For this method is a closely guarded esoteric tradition. It is handed down only from teacher to taught, by word of mouth. The initiation process is also called the receiving of *loongh* initiation, the single thread that is to be passed on from one generation of masters to their students, without revealing the secrets of that Gnosis to one and all. It is very important for the intended initiate to chose his/her master with extreme care, for the *Short Path* as mentioned earlier is a dangerous and difficult one, complete with illusions and mirages that cheat.

The initiate would therefore need a very adept and skilled master to guide him/her along this mystic path. The initiate will be completely dependent on his/her master for guidance, so it is extremely important that s/he choose well. Once the practitioner has been granted *loongh* by his/her master s/he will, have to undergo a probation period of considerable time, during which the master will test both the initiate’s character and his/her will power. After the initiate has fulfilled all his/her studies, period of meditation, whatever task (no matter how arduous or difficult it is), s/he has been assigned, the master may teach the initiate a few treatises on philosophy or could even explain some simple symbolic diagrams on *mandalas/ khilhors* while teaching the initiate the methods to meditate upon these symbolic drawings. It is only when the master deems the initiate capable of carrying on his/her study of the *Short Path* that he will then explain the entire path of the mystic training towards the attainment of Buddhahood in one’s life time. The second path of the indoctrination includes three stages that David - Neel classifies as:

a) *Tawa* – to look, examine

b) *Gompa* – to think, meditate

c) *Cyod pa* – to practice, realize
The third stage is obviously the natural culmination of having achieved the earlier two stages. David Neel goes further to explain the process, this time using a three-stage structure – with four terms.

The First Stage has two parts
(i)  *Ton* – 'meaning' 'reason'. That is to say investigation of the nature of things, their origin, their end, causes upon which they depend.
(ii)  *Lob* – 'study' of various doctrines.

Second Stage: *Gom* – Thinking or meditating on that which one has discovered and learnt.

Third Stage: *Togs* – Understanding.

For an initiate to practice meditation and to achieve his/her goal, the initiate would require a lot of peace and quiet. The Lama/ master would definitely require the initiate to shut him/herself in solitary retreat/ *tsam*. *Tsam* means or rather signifies a boundary; a fence, a barrier and if someone where to go into *tsam* would mean that s/he is in solitary retreat. The word *tsam* would also imply that it is a line akin to the *Lakshman Rekha* not to be crossed by either parties – the people not in retreat and the initiate in retreat. While an initiate would require complete seclusion, the more adept mystics may not require any such confinements. Needless to say there are several types of *tsams*. While some of them are extremely severe, there are others less austere. David - Neel has also classified these *tsams* in accordance with their security and austerity.

The first of the *Tsamspas* *The One who is in tsam* may shut him/herself up in his/her room or a private apartment. S/he may go outside only during fixed times, to either offer some prayer, or to circumambulate a religious edifice or to make full-length prostrations around a sacred space or object. In such a *tsam*, the initiate has chosen not to stay in complete isolation. S/he is still within the familiar territory of home and hearth but is apart from the day-to-day business of living. Not only those seeking the short path but even lay devotees of the *Dharma*, occasionally undertake such periods of mild seclusion for a certain purpose.

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The second in line is the tsamspa who may not see anyone else but his/her attendant whose chief duty is to serve the recluse. The third tsamspa would be the one who will not speak at all, but convey his/her communications through the medium of writing. The fourth in ascending order of rigidity is the recluse who covers his/her windows partially. This is done to ensure that the tsamspa does not see either the surrounding landscape or any other object of distraction outside. The partial outlet/hole in the window is meant for the tsamspa to look at the blue sky. The fifth category of tsamspa would be one who covers his/her window totally or takes refuge in a windowless room. But even if the tsamspa should choose a windowless room, it should be one that admits daylight obliquely.

The last and the sixth type of tsamspa would be one who retires into complete, solitary refuge and does not see anyone at all. The tsamspa may not be seen by anybody as per the regulations of his/her tsam. So when the tsamspa needs to go outside the room, the other members of the family are required to leave all adjacent rooms, corridors in his/her path empty. While some convey their wishes/needs by writing instead of speaking, the others do away with this as well. They do not communicate with the outside world and even if their attendants forget to serve them, they do not remind them of their acts of omission and commission.

It has normally been observed that those who observe tsams in their own houses do not manage to observe the tsam for too long. Tsams can be undertaken for a day, three days, three weeks or three months. Ordinary people who observe tsams at their own homes cannot do so for more than a month. The reason why these tsams observed at personal residences do not really last is because no matter how much care is taken, the movement of people around the house, will reach the tsamspa and his/her meditation will be disturbed.

Some tsamspas do not find even the quiet environs of the monasteries sufficient and many monasteries or goenpas have their own special small houses built for this purposes. These houses are called tsams khangs/ the house where one may live in seclusion. Most of these meditational huts are built far away in scheduled hill - sides at
some distance from the main monastery. The monastery under study in Bhutan has *tsams khangs* at a distance from the main monastery. But these *tsams khangs* have to conform to certain rules and requirements. When these meditational hamlets are built far away from the main monastery, usually at a day or two’s march from the former, then they are called *ritoas*. There are various requirements that need to be met with when establishing a monastery as well as a *ritoa*. It must be noted that Alexandra David Neel made most of these case studies in Tibet at the turn of the last century but some of the practices are followed even today.

Stringent rules govern the type of food to be served to the *tsamspas* as well. Regularly, only one solid food meal is served in a day. But the recluse is served plenty of buttered salt tea or country brewed liquor as the case may be. The recluse/ *tsamspa* is allowed to keep with him/her a bag of roasted barley flour or *tshampa*, and is entitled to eat some with his/her tea or beer, as and when s/he likes. As a rule only ordained monks seek such meditation/ *tsams*, as these *tsams khangs* are built only for meditation purposes. Some *tsamspas* meditate in *tsam* for several years. While some attempt this retreat twice or three times in their entire lives, some even shut themselves up for life. This last case as mentioned by Alexandra David Neel is not such a regular phenomenon now. While listing the various types of *tsams*, we probably never discussed one of the most austere forms of *tsams*. This type of *tsam* is that of dwelling in complete darkness. Once again, there have been a few *tsamspas* who have “buried themselves for years, and even till death, in such grave-like dwellings.”

When the retreat undertaken is not of an extremely austere nature, a flag is planted on the door of the recluse’s cell, with names of those people allowed by the guru to visit or to even enter his/her room. In case, a recluse goes into *tsam* for life, then a “dry branch is driven into the earth or stuck in a pot” near the *tsam khang*.

We have already talked at some length about what a *mandala/ khilkhor* is. These diagrams are made on paper/cloth/engraved on stone, metal or wood. Some other *mandalas/ khilkhors* are made with flags (miniature), altar lamps/ *kami*, incense sticks/play and vases containing grain, water flowers etc. The deity to whom the
mandala/khilkhor is dedicated resides in the khilkhor and their needs/requirements are met by offering ritual cakes/torma/toms. The word itself means circle, but there are numerous other kinds of mandalas/khilkhors often square, rectangular and triangular in form and shape. The mandalas/khilkhors used for black magic or for coercion or destruction of malignant entities are very often triangular in shape. Some of the major monasteries teach the art of drawing mandalas/khilkhors. The esoteric mandalas/khilkhors used for mystic training or for black magic are not taught to all monks. These must be learnt privately only by the initiate from his/her personal guru. The mandala/khilkhor is a magic instrument that could cause grievous injury to these who may not know how to construct the drawing.

It should be mentioned that those who are not empowered to construct or even draw a mandala/khilkhor should not attempt to do so as it cannot be animated and therefore is powerless, moreover, the true meaning and understanding of the symbolic meaning of the mandala/khilkhor, or even awareness about its use in psychic training and mediation are known to very few. As most of the tsamspas need to invoke and animate the mandalas/khilkhors and as these are very large, magnificent drawings, they would not fit into the tsam khangs, hence, the drawings that are used in these tsams khangs are very simple.

When the tsamspa who is a novice begins, his tsams, his/her teacher may teach him/her how to construct these diagrams which is to be used by the novice to focus his/her attention during meditation. At this stage, the initiate (for one has to be initiated and empowered to work with mandalas/khilkhors) has to begin a new kind of training – a training in which s/he has to image and visualise the deity s/he is invoking in the mandala/khilkhor. Initially s/he imagines invokes just the central deity after that s/he has to imagine other forms emerging from the body of the central deity. In some practices of meditation, there are only four other forms in other cases there are eight, twelve or even hundreds. Once the initiate has evoked all the deities and they appear before his/her eyes distinctly around the central deity, then they must be re-absorbed
into the central deity one at a time. Once that happens, the initiate has to imagine the gradual disappearance of the central deity as well.

Even when it comes to letting the central deity disappear, the feet have to be imagined/visualised as disappearing first, then slowly the whole body and finally the head has to disappear till only a dot remains. This dot could be dark, light or luminous. When this happens it is interpreted as advancement in the degree of spiritual progress attained by the initiate. The dot then moves towards the initiate and sink within him/her. This is then followed by deep meditation. Some gurus require their initiates to follow this exercise several times. Sometimes the initiates may imagine a lotus instead of invoking just the central deity. This lotus will open one petal at a time in which is to be found seated a Bodhisattva; while the main Bodhisattva is to be found enthroned in the very centre/the epicenter of the lotus itself. Through the course of his/her meditation the lotus will then begin to close one petal at a time. But as each petal folds, a ray of light is emitted which eventually sinks into the very epicenter of the lotus. Once all the petals have folded inwards and the lotus is closed, a light is released from its centre that then penetrates the person meditating on it.

These are just two practices observed by Alexandra David Neel through her travels in Tibet. There are many more other practices for evoking the deities of the Khilikhors. Many initiates stop at this stage, while others continue in this practice. The real aim of these exercises apart from leading the initiates to nirvana also serve to make the disciple realise that the “worlds and all phenomena which we perceive are but mirages born from our imagination.

They emanate from the mind.
And into the mind they sink. 29

The mandala/ khilkhor is one of the principal layouts used in all Tibetan mysticism and art, and in a broader sense of the word all Bhutanese mysticism as well. It consists of a circle with divisions radiating out from the centre, often interpreted as the petals of a lotus. This shows that the figures/features in the periphery fold outwards from the centre
and once the mandala/ khilkhor is visualised and initialised, it may be folded inwards and returned to the centre. Once the initiate or the practitioner begins his/her meditation, s/he will sit on a covering of grass or a rug that is laid on his/her own ground. After which s/he will have to establish the four directions of the compass. S/he will then have to visualise the four furious Guardian deities, sometimes with their equally fierce female counterparts and try and place/imagine the central channel of his/her own subtle body as the central axis of the entire universe. Just as the four Guardian deities guard the entry gates of the mandala palace/ khilkhor, these guardian-protectors also protect the initiate meditating on the mandala/ khilkhor from the influences of external phenomena that may not only control but also adversely affect his/her energies.

The study of the mandala/ khilkhor is not just the practical aspect, it involves a lot of theoretical background and a look at all the religious, and cultural aspects of the theory as well. The mandala/ khilkhor is also referred to as a ‘diagram of the world’ used as an aid in religious practice. This diagram of the world came to be called a ‘cosmogram’ and with the evolution of time, this drawing was soon enclosed within a square palace. A circle of flames, a circle of lotus petals and a circle of vajra chains also surrounded the mandala drawing/ khilkhor. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were then arranged within the square palace surrounded by the four gates of the square palace.

The philosophical conceptions related to the study and visualisation of the mandala/ khilkhor is extremely complex and profound. In the kingdom of Bhutan, the mandala/ khilkhor is made for the purpose of initiating and conducting religious ceremonies. These mandalas/ khilkhors are usually made with coloured powders on a flat surface on the day preceding the rites that are to be taken and is always disassembled/washed away after the conclusion of the rite. The mandala/ khilkhor is depicted as a means through which human beings who are but microcosoms are brought into harmony with the macrocosom or the universe through the visualisation of the divine pattern of the mandala/ khilkhor.\[77\]
Sometimes *mandalas/khilkhors* are to be found painted on the walls of temples as frescoes at other times the *mandalas/khilkhors* are preserved once the consecration rites are over with. These permanent *mandalas/khilkhors* bestow blessings on the believers of the Buddhist *Dhamam*. These *mandalas/khilkhors* may be found in the *chortens* (or stupas) that are erected along the roadside in Bhutan. These are built in the form of gateways. It is believed that when the *mandalas/khilkhors* are painted on the ceiling inside monasteries the *mandala/khilkhor* is said to bless even those who look at the ceiling or pass under it.

Nearly all monasteries have *mandalas/khilkhors* painted on the wall or ceilings. The difference in *mandalas/khilkhors* would arise mainly as far as the execution of the *mandala/khilkhor* is concerned. For instance, the design of a particular *mandala/khilkhor* could be extremely complex, or its colour scheme could be difficult to execute and the deity at its center would obviously differ. The *mandala/khilkhor* of the 16 *Arhats* for instance, with the *Buddha* in the centre and the four guardians in each of the four gateways that is to be found painted on the ceiling of the central hall of the *Tashichhodzong* is not only complex and difficult to execute but also extremely beautiful.

To draw or paint a *mandala/khilkhor* is not just the simple act of drawing. The *Mandala Master/Khilkhor Lobay* and all the other monks associated with the drawing of the *mandala/khilkhor* have to prepare themselves before they begin drawing. They have to purify themselves both physically and spiritually and then meditate on the task that they are about to perform for the sake of all sentient beings. These days however, professional male artists paint and draw *mandalas/khilkhors* and other sacred objects of art such as statues etc. Culturally, in Bhutan, or for that part any other Buddhist country it is the male who is trained in the arts and crafts of religiosity. Women participate as *anims/nuns* who may offer prayers as part of their individual worship or together as part of the fellowship of other *anims/nuns*. But the main monastic body as well as the artists who paint and draw *mandalas/khilkhors/statues* etc is all male.
The technique of applying colour on the walls and the manner of line drawing and composition in Bhutan are supposed to be very similar to those in other parts of the Himalayas according to Madanjeet Singh*. The line drawings of the Ajanta Caves in which the entire composition of the painting is built around the central figure, are believed to have influenced the technique adopted in Bhutan.

The colours used in painting are usually classifiable into three types. The Bodhisattvas are always painted in very mild colours while slightly stronger colours are used for demi gods and godlings. Strong, bold dark colours such as black and blue are used for the wrathful deities such as Guru Dorjee Drolo.

Buddhist art exists for a purpose and the purpose is to highlight certain spiritual experience. The artist therefore, is not just an artist per se he, has the important task of transmitting the experience through his work. The conventions that need to be followed in Buddhist iconography are therefore very strict, and the artist does not have much freedom as a creative being.

The National Museum housed at Paro, Bhutan, is a treasure house of information as it gives the iconometric rules and proportions as laid down in old records. A painter therefore has to know the exact unit of measurements of the deity he is trying to draw/paint. There are six major proportional classes the Thig Chen - great lines – that are to be followed while painting these six and which apply to mandala/khilkhor drawings as well:

The Buddha Shakyamuni
The Bodhisattvas
The Goddesses
The Tall Wrathful Deities and Figures
The Short Wrathful Deities and Figures and
The Human Beings that figure in religious art
Each of these has certain measurements depending on their postures/ *asanas*, which need to be adhered to very strictly. Moreover, each gesture/ *mudra* signifies a certain principle. It goes without saying that the rules of iconography and iconometry are extremely strict and firmly established and need to be scrupulously respected and followed. Each deity also has a particular colour and special attributes that may not be changed, for if they were changed the entire meaning and significance of the religious function would have to change as well.

Each and every God in the pantheon is assigned a special shape, a special colour(s) and special attribute(s) for instance some hold lotuses, some conch-shells, some hold a thunderbolt, while others begging bowls. All the deities and other figures have to be made as per the specifications and these dictates have remained unchanged for centuries. The sizes/proportions of religious works have been accurately detailed in the scriptures and has remained till date.

Sometimes *mandalas/khilkhors* are made into *thangkhas* scroll paintings mounted on brocade. It needs to be remembered that the colour of the brocade will be dictated by the colour of the *thangka* scroll paintings. Every *thangka* scroll painting will also have a *sherimasi* a yellow and red border around the *thangka*, and a *shekhep* a piece of cloth to cover the *thangka*. The *shekhep* is traditionally in two colours - yellow and red.

The Bhutanese believe that a *thangka* scroll painting needs to be consecrated in a special ceremony, once it is complete, whereby they come alive and personify the deity they depict. The Lama /monk has to then consecrate the painting. This he does by signing on the back portion of the *thangka* scroll painting and then impressing his seal on the signature. It is only then that a *thangka* scroll painting will possess the kind of spirituality that it actually contains.

There, is however, a distinction. The term *mandala* as used in *tantrayana* is not merely a map of the world or of even the Universe. It is in fact endowed with a religious value
and “scared” connotations. Once the “sacredness” is attached to the diagram of the world, it takes on a larger than life form for those who invoke it in prayers – and it becomes a manifestation of the scared. The element of sacredness gets attached to the mandala/ khilhor only when it is within the religious framework/praxis. Without the element of religiosity and sacredness, it is nothing but a drawing. But how does it acquire this religiosity? The mandala/ khilhor becomes religious once the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas are arranged systematically within the mandala palace/ khilkhor and the worshipper begins praying and meditating on it. The worship of the mandala/ khilkhor takes two forms, one performed by the monks and other professionals and the other by lay believers. When the monks worship the mandala/ khilkhor, it is used in initiatory/ consecratory/ abhishekas and for visualisation/ bhavana. Lay believers also worship the mandala/ khilkhor along with offerings such as flowers, and rice. Mandalas/ khilkhors were also used during the inauguration of Kings and believed to signify a type of initiation. For instances this practice was carried on in the city of Patan in Nepal. The mandala/ khilkhor is also placed under a corpse while cremating a Tibetan Buddhist monk. This mandala/ khilkhor was called the Sarva Durgati Oavisodhana Mandala. This laying the mandala below the corpse of a monk serves two purposes –

(a) it is a gesture towards the monks who has died and
(b) it is a second initiation for the deceased monk.

As mentioned earlier there is one main difference between the mandalas/ khilkhors that are worshipped by the lay worshippers and those by the monks. Hence, even the symbolism, the significance and the function the mandala/ khilkhor fulfills are different. Simply put, a mandala/ khilkhor is the celestial abode the mystical abode of tantric deities of meditation. According to Tibetan scriptures and Tshokey/ the language of the Scriptures, the mandala is called a khilkhor. It is often painted on paper, scrolls, carved on wood or drawn with colored sands. Mandala/ khilkhor paintings on cloth supports are often made into thangkhas/ scroll paintings and framed in brocade, but when mandalas are used for Vajrayana consecration rituals and for meditational rites, they are unframed. The symbolism of the mandala/ khilkhor is extremely important, as we
have been emphasising repeatedly through our discussions in this chapter. The core however, is a coherent group of deities seated symmetrically around a main central figure within the framework of a divine mansion/ Lhayi Zhalyekhang. The mandala/khilkhor is the pinnacle of enlightenment. It is a dynamic integration of energies that complement each other. There are innumerable kinds of mandalas/khilkhors in the teachings of Vajrayana Buddhism.

To enumerate are a few examples given below:

1. Mandala of the Five Dhyanis Buddhas
2. Mandala of Vairocana/ Sangay Nampar Nangze
3. Mandala of Buddha Aksobhya/ Mithrulkpa
4. Mandala of Ratnasambhava/ Rinchen Jungden
5. Mandala of Amitabha/ Wodpamed
6. Mandala of Buddha Amoghasidhi/ Donyodrubpa
7. Mandala of Vajrasattva/ Dorje Sempa
8. Mandala of Chakrasamvara/ Demchogkhorlodhompa
9. Mandala of Kalachakra/ Duekhor

A mandala/khilkhor could be painted on a special silken scroll or a scroll made of brocade known as thangkha paintings. These mandalas/khilkhors made on thangkhas/scroll paintings are for visualising the deity to which it is dedicated or for performing tantric pooja to that particular deity. It must however, be remembered that one can practices the tantric pooja and meditation only after receiving empowerment or Wang from a Lama/monk who is already steeped in the knowledge of that particular deity and in tantric practice for sharing this gnostic and closely guarded knowledge, empowerment or Wang is sometimes given to other devotees as well for this purposes, the mandala/khilkhor is often made of brightly coloured sand. This sand mandala is called the Red-ri Khilkhor. Monks specialising in making this type of mandala/khilkhor have to study the mandala/khilkhor in great detail. They begin by painting the mandala/khilkhor on paper, then as scrolls and finally learn how to tap the brightly coloured sand from small pointed tapers to the scared space where the mandala/
khilkhor is to be drawn. Sometimes three-dimensional mandala/Loilhang Khilkhors are also constructed/raised. Hence, the mandala on the scroll/the painting of the mandala/khilkhor on the wall is very like the master plan on the blue print of a house while the three-dimensional mandala, the Loilhang Khilkhor is the miniature model. Having said that it would be pertinent to mention that there are more than six hundred deities of meditation in the Buddhist pantheon and each deity can/has a mandala/khilkhor of its own.

Most Buddhists cultures became familiar with the mandala/khilkhor early in their introduction to Buddhist art and culture. In Tibet, the mandala/khilkhor came into being during the first ruler of the historical period King Tsongshen Gempo (d. 649). The Buddhist paintings on cloth (thang – ka) dating as far back as the eleventh or twelfth centuries featured highly complex mandalas/khilkhors. The iconography and its associated liturgy are contained in texts known as tantras. If we go by the etymological definition, tantra signifies a process of weaving or bringing together, this probably refers to the process by which an individual initiate undergoes psychic transformations, which is to lead eventually to full enlightenment. As mentioned earlier, Mahayana Buddhist Literature laid emphasis on the Bodhisattva or the one who strove to assist others in the attainment of enlightenment and whose religious career was Prajnaparamita of “the perfection of wisdom”. This was so because the Bodhisattva was to cultivate through a series of life times – wisdom, compassion, generosity, and other such virtues. Tantric texts on the other hand promise spiritual liberation in one very life, sometimes in a few lifetimes, through highly sophisticated yoga practices. This sort of spiritual enlightenment that occurs in one life-time necessitates the guidance of one who has him/her self experienced the highest spiritual state. Tantric Buddhism thereof places immense importance on the teacher/the guru/the lama. The guru/lama has to ensure that the teachings are tailor – made to suit the requirements and the abilities of the initiate under him/her. The teachings may sometimes be incomprehensive to the uninitiated, thus making the teachings esoteric. The nature of these esoteric doctrines is such that it commands a, strong oral traditions. The guru/lama has to explain and teach his/her initiate the obscure prose and ensure that the
initiate is morally, intellectually and spiritually ready to receive the teachings of the esoteric tantric tradition.

All mandalas/khilkhors can be drawn with colored sands such as the Kalachakra Mandala or painted on ceilings of monasteries or raised in three-dimensional form. Then again apart from these mandalas/khilkhors are the Body, Speech and Mind mandalas of the Vajrayana tradition. To take an example, for instance if one were to meditate on the deity Tara/Dolma, the practitioners body will be transferred to that of the Tara Deity, hence, his/her body becomes the body mandala/khilkor of the deity Tara. If the mantra/magical formula/prayer of the deity Tara is recited by the practitioner then his/her word becomes the speech mandala/Ngagi Khilkor and if the Mind of the practitioner is contemplated on the entity of unification of great compassion and emptiness, his/her conceptual cognition will become the Mind mandala. These three mandalas take conceptualisation to be a path/yogic practice of transforming all thoughts, words and bodies into a higher plane of realisation by joining them with his/her practice. Philip Rawson in his book Sacred Tibet has an illustration to explain the concept of the Body, Speech and Mind mandalas/khilkhors. He explains the meditative system by saying that the meditative system copies the concept of the Buddha — nature, the Dharmakaya. This system has three main aspects of Kaya — Vak — Citta or Body — Speech — Mind, are believed to correspond with the “three inner-levels that the meditator formulates”. Hence, “Kaya responds with the heart level of the Dhyani Buddhas”, “Vak”/throat level is manifested” by the “severe knowledge holders”, and Citta/Head level is represented by the six tempestuous Herukas and their consorts.”

It must be remembered that all tantric deities of meditation belong to one of the above-mentioned categories of Tantras. For instance, the most popular higher tantric deity Dorje Jig Jeg/Vajra Bhairava belongs to the fourth category — the Mahayoga tantra, the wrathful manifestation of Manjushri/the Bodhisattva of Infinite Wisdom.
It must be pointed out that drawing a mandala/ khilkhor is not as Tucci puts it, “a simple matter. It is a matter which concerns a palingenesis of the individual and in whose details this individual must participate with all the attention demanded by the importance of the result to be obtained” 31. It needs to be executed with extreme caution and care for it represents the cosmos, the universe of the deity/ deities it is dedicated to. In our study, we will be looking at the symbolism of the Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala/Khilkhor as the ‘cosmogram’/ ‘cosmos’ of Gurur Rinpoche/ Guru Padma Sambhava himself. In Chapter 4, we shall examine the symbolism of the mandala in some detail and also look at what it means to meditate on the mandala/ khilkhor.
1 Murthy, K Krishna, Studies in Buddhism, (New Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan), 1996, p. 4 – The Four Noble Truths – (1) Pain / Dukkha Exists, (2) That it arises from Craving Attachment / Tanha, (3) That by Ending Craving Pain Will Cease, (and thus Nirvana may be realised) and (4) That this can be reached by Treading the Noble Eight Fold Path.


3 Handa, O C, Buddhist Monasteries in Himachal Pradesh, (New Delhi: Indus Publishing House), 1987, p. 17

4 Rawson, Philip, Sacred Tibet, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London), 1991, p.10

5 Ibid., p.12

6 Ibid., p. 13


8 K Krishna Murthy, Ibid., p. 5,

9 Ibid., p. 45

10 Ibid., p. 6

11 Ibid., p. 47

12 Ibid., p. 56

13 Ibid., p. 59

14 Skilton, Andrew, A Concise History of Buddhism, (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications), 1994, p 135

15 Ibid., p. 145

16 Murthy, K Krishna, Ibid., p. 135

17 Ibid., p 139

18 Skilton, Andrew, A Concise History of Buddhism, (Birmingham: Windhorse Publication), 1994, pp 141-142

19 Rawson, Philip, Sacred Tibet, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London), 1991, p.7


21 K Krishna Murthy, Ibid., p. 144


25 Ibid

26 Ibid., p. 228

27 Ibid., p. 230

28 Ibid., p. 240

29 Ibid., p. 242

* http://www.craftrevival.org/SouthAsia/Bhutan/Crafts/Painting1.htm
http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/things/mandalas.htm

* Madanjeet Singh, Himalayan ArtWall Painting and Sculpture in Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti, the Siwalik Ranges, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan, (Greenwich: New York Society Graphics), 1968

30 Rawson, Philip, Sacred Tibet, (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd), 1991, p. 92