

Tibetan Buddhist Wisdom in Hildegard of Bingen's Visions

Laura Markwick

The comparison of Tibetan Buddhist wisdom with Hildegard of Bingen's visions came about here thanks to the shape of the circle. It was the dominating visual presence of the all-encompassing shape in the art of both which drew the two contexts together for closer inspection. On the face of it, the common shape of the circle in the art of each, and the monastic lifestyles in which they occur, are the only factors which seem to unite these two contexts in similarity. What else could possibly link the ancient practice of Tibetan Buddhism with the mystic visions of a twelfth century German Catholic Abbess? You may be surprised.

Tibetan Buddhist sand mandalas are created in ritual ceremonies, and their content is the illustrative equivalent of sacred text. Explained in advancing layers of significance according to initiatory level, laypeople are currently permitted to know of only as much as the Dalai Lama has more recently encouraged the divulgence.¹ This extension of such closely guarded information to the general public is promoted by His Holiness in the interest of raising awareness of the plight of Tibetans and the denial of their right to practice Tibetan Buddhism in their homeland since the invasion of the country by China. Among the consequences of this disclosure of some of the religious way of life's secrets is the documented detail which makes this paper's comparison possible.

By contrast, the content of Hildegard of Bingen's visions was divulged at any given opportunity by Hildegard, following their documentation at least. After overcoming her fear of persecution for describing her visions as coming from God, she shared them in sermons across Western Europe, and was not too shy to involve their content in letters of admonishment addressed to the Pope. There is a similarity with the scriptural nature of ritual sand mandalas and the nature of Hildegard's visions, which explain the significance and meaning of biblical scriptural stories to the lives of her fellow worshippers. After

¹ Martin Brauen: *The Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism*, Boston, 1991, 7.

her death the knowledge of her mystic works dwindled and practically disappeared from the Christian tradition, only to enjoy a resurgence of interest and popularity within the 'new age' of Western spirituality, perhaps due to the egalitarian principles which are embedded within her texts. Though the historical patterns of public awareness for the two contexts differ wildly, the global interest and knowledge of each is greater now than ever before.

Since Tibetan Buddhist wisdom in its entirety can not reasonably be encapsulated here, the example of the *Kalachakra* sand mandala ritual, thanks to the recent public elaboration of some of its secrets, will be used to illustrate some of the points of congruence between the spiritual concepts of its belief system of origin, and those within Hildegard's visions. As Hildegard's visions exist both in visual and written format, full use can be made of each form in the gleaning of Tibetan Buddhist wisdom from their content, as there is often more detail in the text than the image.

The embarkation upon such a comparison necessitates an introduction to the *Kalachakra* sand mandala, which is an intricate circular image representing a multidimensionality beyond the standard physical three of length, breadth and depth. The detail of the mandala, created out of carefully placed grains of coloured sand, is sufficient to use as a blueprint to build the mandala in three dimensions. The same detail illustrating further dimensions applies and, as is typical of this type of mandala, depicts 'a deity's body, emanations, palatial abode and grounds, and various rings of spiritual barriers around it'.²

Whilst the iconography differs in religion and artistic style, the same principles can be found in Hildegard's visions. The deity's palatial abode and grounds compares with their Christian counterparts; the house of God, or the Church. In the *Kalachakra* mandala the overall shape of the image is circular, and even the same shape is featured in Hildegard's third vision of *Scivias*, her first book of visions. In this vision, Hildegard sees God and the universe as a cosmic egg, containing various fiery globes which interact with each other. Hildegard then interprets these symbols and their interaction in terms of Christianity, explaining that the central globe of fire 'truthfully

² Peter Gold, *Navajo and Tibetan Sacred Wisdom: The Circle of the Spirit*, Rochester, 1994, 168.

shows the unconquered church which is shining white in the innocent brightness of faith.³

Hildegard's vision of the universe as a cosmic egg is developed in her final book of visions, completed more than twenty years after the first. In this elaboration of her early vision, the universe loses its egg-like description, and assumes an entirely circular form, aligning with the scientific opinions of the day. The first four visions of *De Operatione Dei*, (The Book of Divine Works), describe and illustrate the universe and its relationship with God. Without using the words microcosm and macrocosm, Hildegard describes a vision which defines the terms. Beginning with the figure of God, the universe is envisaged as a circle within His chest, so that the two are interconnected. Certainly, the universe is depicted as circular, but rather than being a figure with a circle in its chest, God is also described as being like a wheel which has 'neither beginning nor end. No one can grasp it, for it is timeless. And just as a wheel encloses within itself what lies hidden within it, so also does the Holy Godhead enclose everything within itself without limitation'⁴ This is just one example of Hildegard seeing God as circular, which compares with the *Kalachakra* mandala's representation of the *Kalachakra* deity. As the shape is associated with the divine in sixty per cent of Hildegard's visions, it would seem that the circle's dominance of her illuminations owes its presence largely to such attributions.

The same illumination contains Hildegard's visionary equivalent of the rings of spiritual barriers represented in the *Kalachakra* mandala, which in Hildegard's case take the form of various coloured rings of fire. Each of the six coloured rings of fire encircling the universe holds a different meaning, and whilst their description makes their placement sound to be concentric, they are 'bound together without any interval'⁵ seemingly like the chocolate of a divine Kinder Surprise.TM Hildegard's explanation of this is that 'If the divine order had not strengthened them through such an association, the firmament would have to come apart and it would have not stability. This is an indication that the perfect powers of virtue in a believer are

³ Hildegard of Bingen: 'Scivias', *Hildegard Von Bingen's Mystical Visions*, translated by Bruce Hozeski: Santa Fe, 1995, 32.

⁴ Hildegard of Bingen: 'De Operatione Dei,' *Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs*, edited by Matthew Fox: Santa Fe, 1987, 26.

⁵ *Ibid*, 31.

so bound to each other and strengthened by the infusion of the Holy Spirit that they can accomplish in harmony every good deed in their battle against the snares of the devil.⁶ These fiery rings also share a visual point of congruence with Tibetan Buddhist mandalas, which often feature rings of flame depicted around or near their circumferences.

This so far leaves the deity's emanations to address. Now, in Christianity, the concept of the deity's emanations is not exactly familiar. The two possible interpretations of such a concept are Jesus (as the deity's word made flesh), or angels (literally God's messengers, and sometimes described as the thoughts of God). Jesus is represented in the image described previously in the form of the male figure standing at the circle's centre with arms outstretched, so that all hands and feet all come into direct contact with the vision's outer fiery rings. Whilst this provides a possible interpretation of the deity's emanation, the same figure is simultaneously explained as representing the relationship between human beings and the earth, nature, the universe and God.

The angels which present the alternative interpretation of this comparison enjoy a circular image all of their own in the sixth vision of the first part of *Scivias*, in which the nine choirs are arranged in concentric crowns. In this illumination too, the concepts of microcosm and macrocosm feature in the image's interpretation, as the arrangement of the angels is described as illustrative of the relationship between the body, the soul, and the senses. Hildegard's reference to these angels as 'the blessed spirits'⁷ supports the notion that these could be understood as being divine emanations. Given the progressive nature of Hildegard's visions, the understanding of this inter-relationship between human nature and the angelic hierarchical structure is arguably implicit in the later vision from *De Operatione Dei*, referred to earlier.

Hildegard's subtitling of this later vision of 'On the Construction of the World'⁸ only hints at the universal representation within the image. Yet just as Hildegard's image shows God and the universe to be inter-related, so a *Kalachakra* mandala is also representative of the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hildegard of Bingen: 'Scivias', op cit, 73.

⁸ Hildegard of Bingen: 'De Operatione Dei', op cit, 22.

'entire sacred universe.'⁹ Likewise, the vision illuminating the world's creation compares with any Tibetan Buddhist mandala's symbolisation of 'a perfect world, in which you as an individual are already perfect.'¹⁰ The inclusion of the human figure at the centre of Hildegard's vision which is representative of both Jesus and humankind's relationship with the universe is matched in Tibetan Buddhist belief, in which 'the human body is also a mandala, a microcosm of the universe.'¹¹

Perhaps then the purpose behind the creation of Tibetan Buddhist mandalas will uncover a tremendous difference between their spiritual concepts and those within Hildegard's visions. The overarching reason for the ritual creation of a mandala in Tibetan Buddhism has to be the ultimate goal of the religious way of life, which is to attain enlightenment. Unlike some branches of Buddhism, the Tibetan belief is that with appropriate discipline and effort, enlightenment is a state which can be achieved in this lifetime by all. Since the state of enlightenment means the end of suffering, and all suffering is believed to be caused by ignorance, it is the removal of ignorance which alleviates suffering and leads to enlightenment. The purpose of the ritual construction of the *Kalachakra* sand mandala, as is the case for all Tibetan Buddhist mandalas, is thus the promotion of enlightenment.

Just as the intricacies of the image's visual detail represent multiple dimensions, so the mandala's spiritual method of construction is matched in complexity, and is integral to the function of the mandala. Bearing in mind the painstaking construction of the *Kalachakra* sand mandala takes approximately a week for several monks to construct, this allows a considerable length of time in which prayers can be recited to aid the proper construction of the mandala. It is the combination of the physical and metaphysical efforts which lead to the mandala's property of reducing ignorance. In a workshop on mandala art presented by two of the Gyuto Monks of Tibet at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2002, the accompanying notes handed out explained of such a mandala that 'anyone who beholds it with goodwill and faith will have the instinctive impure elements of ignorance, desire and anger transformed into the pure qualities of

⁹ R E Fisher: *Art of Tibet*, London, 1997, 67.

¹⁰ I and P Segal: 'The Gyuto Monks of Tibet,' *Living Now*, December 2002, 12.

¹¹ Fisher, op cit, 67.

wisdom, loving kindness and compassion' During the same workshop, the monks elaborated upon this, and explained that creating or contemplating the mandala promotes wisdom, and that wisdom, quite simply, burns ignorance.

Given the medieval Benedictine context in which Hildegard's visions were experienced and recorded, it is unsurprising to learn that her visions do not speak precisely of promoting enlightenment by removing ignorance, yet they are certainly principles which would have been embraced by the Abbess. The sheer fact that she shared the visions and used their content as material to support her quest to improve justice within the Church and strengthen the faith of her contemporary worshippers illustrates this clearly. Wisdom is, however, discussed within her visions, with an opposite of evil rather than ignorance. In her penultimate vision of *De Operatione Dei*, describing the completion of the cosmos, she states that 'Everything achieved by Wisdom is opposed to the wickedness of the Devil.'¹²

The property of wisdom promoting enlightenment thus finds its parallel in Hildegard's second visionary work *Liber Vitae Meritorum* (The Book of Life's Merits). In a lengthy discussion of wisdom, Hildegard states that 'all wisdom is from God', and that 'Wisdom also calls people to the height of heaven since man's knowledge makes him master of all creatures.'¹³ Since the opposite of wisdom is, for Hildegard, evil rather than ignorance, and she considers all wisdom to come from God, Hildegard's equivalent of the burning of ignorance takes the form of the zeal of God, as it is described as consuming 'all unjust things with the fervor of its judgment, just like a fire. It does this not because it cleanses all things with fire, but because it destroys all evil things by burning them up to nothing.'¹⁴

How, then, is the presence of wisdom, similar to that of Tibetan Buddhism to be explained in the visions of Hildegard? No discussion of Hildegard's visions is complete in current times without the mention of Sacks' ¹⁵ suggestion that her visions may have been caused by

¹² Hildegard of Bingen: 'De Operatione Dei', op cit, 220.

¹³ Hildegard of Bingen: 'Liber Vitae Meritorum', *Hildegard of Bingen: The Book of the Rewards of Life (Liber Vitae Meritorum)*, translated by Bruce W Hozeski: New York, 1994, 25.

¹⁴ Ibid, 44.

¹⁵ O Sacks: *Migraine: Understanding a Common Disorder*, Berkeley, 1985.

migraine. From Hildegard's perspective, this need not prevent them from coming from God since, according to her beliefs, it would have been God who blessed her with the migraines which gave her the visions. Nonetheless, the possibility that the brain's apparent tendency to produce religious iconography during such hallucinations proposes one possible explanation for the congruence of concept within the disparate contexts of Hildegard's visions and Tibetan Buddhist mandalas.

Another closely linked theory which similarly answers the question of how there should arise such similarities is that of the collective unconscious. Jung's postulation that there is a resource of information which is available to every human being no matter when or where they are born provides a widely accepted explanation for such coincidences. In particular relation to the common healing associations of the circle, his theory forms the backbone for his description of the shape as an archetype – specifically the archetype of wholeness.¹⁶

As if in anticipation of Jung's theories, or perhaps as evidence of their truth, Hildegard provides an explanation for the similarities noted here within the text of her visions in medieval Catholic versions of the collective unconscious and the archetype of wholeness. A timeless availability of information to human beings is touched upon when the voice Hildegard hears from heaven asserts that 'Just as the heart of a human being rests hidden within the body, so also is the body surrounded by the powers of the soul since these powers extend over the entire globe.'¹⁷

In addition to this, and simultaneously providing further material supporting the similarity between Tibetan Buddhist beliefs and her visions, Hildegard explains that 'the soul has not only earthly powers but also heavenly powers when it knows God wisely'¹⁸. The extension of the soul's powers around the globe, together with its heavenly powers when it knows God wisely, offers an explanation for the coincidence of similar concepts and imagery between Tibetan Buddhism and Hildegard's visions. Hildegard makes clear in an early vision that she believes that it is the placement of the soul in the body

¹⁶ Carl G Jung: *Man and His Symbols*, London, 1978.

¹⁷ Hildegard of Bingen: 'De Operatione Dei,' op cit, 35-36.

¹⁸ Hildegard of Bingen: 'Scivias,' op cit, 1995, 50.

which brings the body to life. Everybody therefore, according to Hildegard's belief, has a soul, and everybody likewise possesses the soul's powers.

Speaking as much of the collective unconscious as of the circle as the archetype of wholeness (though without, of course, knowing of them directly) Hildegard describes the soul as a sphere as early as her fourth vision in the first part of *Scivias*. A burning ball which emanates from God, its appearance is explained as signifying that 'the soul, burning with the fire of understanding, comprehends various things in its understanding.'¹⁹ Reinforcing the medieval Catholic theory of the archetype of wholeness, Hildegard later sees a wheel which is 'the circle of divine mercy, which fights the arts of the Devil by the secret power of God, and builds a spiritual structure in human minds.'²⁰ In completion of this pre-emptive theory, Hildegard explains that 'The human species has within its soul the ability to arrange everything according to its own wish'²¹.

The soul being spherical and possessing the ability to arrange everything according to its own wish would be perfectly sufficient to explain the circle's common association with healing. The placement of a spiritual structure by the circle of divine mercy in human minds to fight the arts of the Devil provides another, and in combination offer a compelling equivalent of the archetype of wholeness. The strength of such beliefs, as is the case for Jung's theory, is that they are remarkably difficult to disprove. Who, for example, can come up with a scientific experiment which proves or disproves that the soul exists and is spherical? More practically, where could the funding for such a project be sought?

Based on the content of Hildegard's visions discussed briefly here, combined with the similarities observed between their texts, their images and those of Tibetan Buddhism, and enhanced by the explanation for such congruence embedded within Hildegard's visions, you may feel reassured that you have within you the capability to address such issues. After all, the message of Hildegard's illuminations when compared with Tibetan Buddhist wisdom seems to be that we are all Buddhas of suburbia.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ op cit, 484.

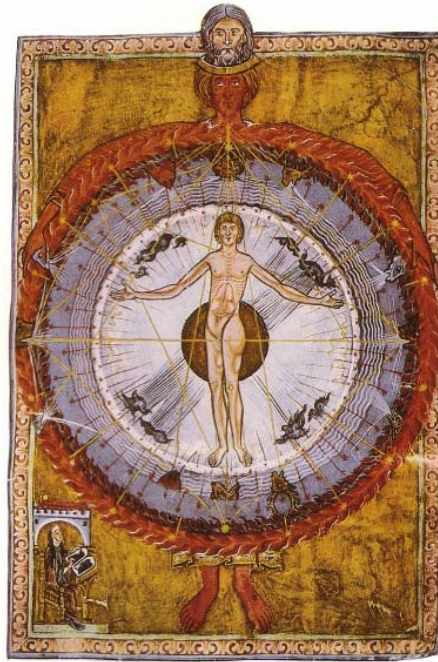
²¹ Hildegard of Bingen, 'De Operatione Dei,' op cit, 204.

APPENDIX 1



Kalachakra is from Martin Brauen: *The Mandala; Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism*, Boston, 1997, 94. The list of images attributes the photo of the sand mandala to one of Martin Brauen, Peter Nebel or Doro Röthlisberger, taken during a Kalacakra ritual in Rikon, Switzerland, July - August 1985. It is colour plate 45 and the subtitle beneath it reads Complete Sprinkled Kalacakra Mandala.

APPENDIX 2



Hildegard: 'Man as the centre of the universe' or 'On the Construction of the World', which is the second vision from *De Operatione Dei*. The image is from Matthew Fox: *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*, Santa Fe, 1985, 38. In this book the image is reproduced by permission of SCALA/Art Resources, New York City.