

Taima Mandala

The word “mandala,” which literally refers to the demarcation (Sanskrit: *la*) of a circle or disk (Sanskrit: *manda*), is a graphical representation of a divine or sacred territory in microcosm. Put more simply, it is a scale image of a sacred space that can be made in a variety of media, including sand, paint, and thread. The Taima Mandala can also be considered a *hensōzu*, or depiction of the Pure Land. The mandala functions as an explanation of the Contemplation Sutra (*Kanmuryōjukyō*), which contains the steps necessary for achieving rebirth in Amida’s Pure Land and is one of the three fundamental sutras of Pure Land Buddhism.

The mandala’s centermost section, or court, contains a depiction of the Pure Land, Amida Buddha’s western paradise where anyone can easily achieve enlightenment. The centermost image of the mandala depicts Amida Buddha sitting on a lotus and flanked on either side by two bodhisattvas, Seishi (left) and Kannon (right). In front of them is a pool where several lotuses float. The tiny figure inside each lotus bud represents someone who has been reborn in the Pure Land and can now devote their time to listening to Amida preach. Depending upon a person’s deeds in their previous life, their lotus bud may be partially or completely closed, obscuring Amida’s sermon and lengthening the time it will take for them to achieve enlightenment. The nine different levels of rebirth in the Pure Land are depicted in the bottom court.

The court on the right of the mandala contains depictions of the Thirteen Contemplations, visualizations that are described in the Contemplation Sutra as being crucial to achieving rebirth in the Pure Land. Other aspects of the mandala represent additional portions of the Contemplation Sutra, as well as references to a commentary on the sutra by Shandao (613–681), a Chinese monk who was the first to suggest the ritual invocation of Amida’s name (the *nenbutsu*) as the primary method to salvation.

The Taima Mandala displayed at Eikandō is a copy of the original, which is stored at Taimadera Temple in Nara. Many copies of the Taima Mandala were produced through the efforts of Shōkū (1177–1247), the founder of the Seizan branches of Pure Land Buddhism and the thirteenth abbot of Eikandō. Shokū first visited Taimadera Temple in 1229. For several years prior, he had been studying Shandao’s commentary on the Contemplation Sutra. Before Shokū’s visit, the content of the mandala was not well understood, but when Shōkū saw the Taima Mandala for the first time, he immediately recognized that it portrayed the Contemplation Sutra.

Shokū also understood the mandala’s worth as a way to spread the teachings of the Contemplation Sutra. Shōkū commissioned many copies, which were disseminated to various temples, and during the Kamakura period (1185–1333), the mandalas were

circulated widely by monks who used them to educate the common people about the Contemplation Sutra and Amida's Pure Land. The original Taima Mandala is huge—4 meters long on each side—and many of the copies that were produced for use in preaching are smaller in scale. The version enshrined in the Amida-dō Hall is a one-quarter-sized reduction, but Eikandō also possesses a version in the original dimensions that is too large to display.

Eikandō also possesses a set of records that detail the process by which the original mandala came to be stored at Taimadera Temple. It was supposedly made from lotus thread by a princess of the Fujiwara family named Chūjō (747–781) who was aided by Amida Buddha and Kannon Bodhisattva. After being exposed to the Amida Sutra at the age of four, Chūjō believed strongly in the saving grace of Amida Buddha, and it is said that even as a child she was able to recite the entire sutra from memory. When Chūjō was five, her mother died, and her father took another wife.

After being cast out of her family, Chūjō became a Buddhist nun and is believed to have eventually achieved rebirth in the Pure Land. Her creation of the mandala is nothing short of miraculous; it is estimated that it would have taken a team of expert weavers as long as 10 years to produce the original Taima Mandala.