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The message in the sand is a changing one

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From *Where I Stand*

This week, in a very real way, I watched the world both come together and fall apart. The interesting thing is that the insight came from where I least expected it. In the middle of Atlanta, Ga., sits Drepung Loseling Monastery, a quiet little Buddhist community intent on reminding us that we may be ignoring one of the basics of life. Here? Us? How could that be? .

Psychologists tell us that it's often exactly what we take for granted in ourselves that we find so surprising when we see it somewhere else. For instance, missionary work has been a staple of Christianity for centuries. We took it for granted that it was of our essence to go around the world, not to become something different ourselves, but to begin something different, to promote other values and insights somewhere else. And it worked.

As a result, whole continents became Christian, thanks to the life work of missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant.

What the rest of the world saw in missionaries from the West, they often became themselves -- literate, educated, professional, western. But now the process seems to be working in reverse, as well.

Buddhist monks from Drepung Loseling Monastery in Atlanta, the descendants of a revered 12th century foundation in Lhasa, Tibet, have come to the United States ?to contribute to North American culture by providing theoretical knowledge and practical training in Tibetan Buddhist traditions for Western students, scholars and the general public? and ?to preserve the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of wisdom and compassion? that thrived there until the Communists closed 6,500 Buddhist monasteries in Tibet in 1959.

Their message, a sobering one for us all, is not given in words. In fact, they never utter a syllable as they work. Instead, the monks bring the message in a medium seldom thought of as beautiful. Which, of course, makes it even more striking, and more meaningful.

The monks, you see, spend their lives going from place to place, from occasion to occasion, making sand mandalas, sacred cosmograms, that originated in Buddhist India over 2,500 years ago.

The creation of a cosmogram, the representation of the world in divine form, perfectly balanced, precisely designed, is meant to reconsecrate the earth and heal its inhabitants. But it is more than a picture. Sand painting is an intricate process. It requires millions of pieces of sand to make a mandala five by five feet square. It requires a team of monks working anywhere from days to weeks, depending on the size of the mandala, to create this floor plan of the sacred mansion that is life. It requires the interplay of vivid colors and ancient symbols.

The monks bend over the piece for hours on end, dropping one grain of sand after another into intricate symbolic patterns. The purpose is to call the community to meditation and awareness of something larger than their own small world. As they work, they spell one another off at intervals for the sake of physical relief from the backbreaking work but they look at no one of the faithful who have come to pray them through it, talk to none of the curious who stand by chattering about the process, acknowledge none of the fellow artists who come to admire as the work progresses. In perfect silence, they simply work while the world watches. They are not about conversation; they are about the transformation of the world, and each of us in it, into something closer to enlightenment and balance that we and it are now.

But the process itself, as laborious, as precise, as artistic, as stunningly powerful as it is, is not really the message.

When the mandala is finally finished, however long it takes for the monks to deal in this divine geometry of the heavens, they pray over it -- and then they destroy it. They sweep it up, every last grain of sand, and give handfuls of it away to those who participate in the closing ceremony as a final memory of sublime possibility. Then they throw the rest of the sand into the nearest living stream to be swept into the ocean to bless the whole world. And that's it. It's gone. In an instant, after all that artistry, all that work, it's over.

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They destroy it. Why? Because the underlying message of the mandala ceremony is that nothing is permanent. Nothing. All things are in flux, it says, beautiful but ephemeral, moving but temporary, a plateau but not a summit. All things are called to balance and enlightenment and the fulfillment of the Divine image in them, yes, but in flux. Always in flux.

There is nothing in the meaning of the mandala that denies or undermines the Christian story or its message, of course. But there is something shockingly profound to hear it coming from a wisdom written on the other side of the world. It gives a new note to an ancient truth. It strengthens the ties of humanity a world away.

Most of all, perhaps, it makes us all think again about what we think we're going to make permanent. Like our own domination of the world. Our privileged place in the community of nations. Our sense of status. Our surety of specialness among all the peoples of the world. Our place of comfort and security in

the face of all the poor on the planet.

This Buddhist missionary message is clear.

Nothing is permanent, neither their state in life -- nor ours. Maybe we can begin to see the truth of that better now as we begin to deal with the powerlessness of nuclear power that we were sure would give us eternal security. Maybe we will begin to understand better now the meaning of global hunger as we live with escalating prices for food in a country known for its wealth. Maybe we will come to realize the necessity of world community, equality and global democracy as we live in the wake of a culture in which the traditional dominance of whiteness is shifting in a largely brown, black and yellow world. Maybe we will some day get it: the Persian Empire came and went. The Roman Empire came and went. The Ottoman Empire came and went. The British Empire came and went. And the American Empire -- the engine of world politics and wealth now centered in the United States of America -- is hardly here and already close to over.

The fact is that the politics of permanence is a sham. It has never lasted, and it never will. We may be seeing the dawn of that reality right now in the stock market, in oil prices, in jobs, in cost of living, in national infrastructure.

From where I stand, it looks to me as if these monastics from another world may have as much a message for us as we ever did for everyone else. Hopefully we'll be as able to hear their message now as the rest of the world did ours and learn from others as they clearly have from us. Heaven knows, by anyone's geometry and symbols, we have mighty need for the wisdom and compassion they're trying to preserve.

For more information about mandalas, see: *Healing the Earth: A Sacred Art* by the Tibetan Lamas of Drepung Loseling Monastery

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