A Blessing in Tibet
The Kalachakra Initiation

The Kalachakra initiation is the largest and most important Buddhist ritual conferred by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It is traditionally given to groups of people assembled from around the world and is therefore associated with the promotion of world peace.

The Kalachakra initiation is considered a special blessing for all who participate and for the environment in which it is given. It is a rite of initiation and a time for rejuvenation.

In August of 2000, I went with eighteen other Americans to a remote region of the Indian Himalayas, bordering Tibet, to participate in the sacred Kalachakra Initiation at the fourteenth-century Ki monastery. This ceremony was deemed especially significant as it was the closest the Dalai Lama had been to Tibet since his exile.

*Kalachakra* means “wheel of time.” The Kalachakra Initiation forms a part of a system of teachings and practices conferred by the Buddha to his disciples. Traditionally, the Kalachakra teachings have been a closely guarded secret. The viewing of a sand mandala is the culmination of the twelve-day initiation ritual. However, the Dalai Lama, recognizing the many misconceptions surrounding Tibetan Buddhist practice, began presenting the Kalachakra sand mandala to the general public as a cultural offering.
Each morning we arrived at Ki monastery at 6:00 a.m. to lay claim to coveted spots as close to His Holiness as possible. It was truly amazing to sit with him in such an intimately Buddhist setting, literally on a mountain top, prayer flags fluttering, scorching sun beating upon us. We did not even mind that the program usually didn’t begin until about 1:00 p.m. As people quickly filled the courtyard space, we would be surrounded on all sides and several thousand bodies deep by Buddhist pilgrims from every part of India and Nepal. The Dalai Lama spoke in the Tibetan language (translations were available via transistor radio in English, French, German, Italian, and Hindi).

From time to time monks would come through the crowd of about 10,000 to distribute tea and various props to the rituals such as protection string, a red band of cloth to signify blinders, a lotus flower, and two stalks of Kusha grass to enhance dreaming. There were times when the crowd’s Tibetan chants would be interspersed with the playing of Tibetan horns and drums and the Dalai Lama’s chuckles.

For a Buddhist practitioner, taking the initiation confers permission to begin study and practice of the Kalachakra Tantra with the motivation to free all beings from suffering and actualize realizations of the path to enlightenment. For the non-Buddhist who does not wish to take the empowerment, the initiation can be taken as a blessing.

The Kalachakra serves as a universal prayer for peace and harmony in the world. For each individual who participates, it is also a renewal of commitment to one’s inner spiritual path.