

# Encircling art with spirituality

By Louise Kennedy

GLOBE STAFF

WELLESLEY — In a contemporary art gallery at Wellesley College on Wednesday afternoon, about 100 people were sitting on canvas camp stools, gazing at an empty wooden platform painted the color of bricks.

"This blank space is actually quite an extraordinary moment, because it won't be blank for long," Victor Kazanjian told the crowd at the Davis Museum and Cultural Center. Kazanjian, Wellesley's dean of religious and spiritual life, was introducing the artists who would soon be transforming that blank space into a work of art: eight Tibetan Buddhist nuns from Keydong Thuk-Che-Cho-Ling, a nunnery in Kathmandu.

The nuns are the first women ever trained in the art of making a sand mandala, a symbolic circle that is central to Tibetan Buddhist spirituality and art but that has traditionally been made only by monks. They were scheduled to begin making a

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/DAVID L. RYAN

Tibetan Buddhist nuns from Keydong Thuk-Che-Cho-Ling, a nunnery in Kathmandu, chant prayers before the making of a sand mandala at Wellesley College.



# Revitalizing Buddhist spirituality on campus

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mandala in the Davis Center's gallery on Wednesday, but ended up delaying for a day because they had determined that yesterday would be more spiritually auspicious for the start of the project.

The nuns will be working on the mandala, arranging colored sand (some brought here from Kathmandu and some from Cape Cod, in order to connect the mandala to the region) into intricate patterns, images, and Sanskrit letters, until March 1. Then, in a gesture symbolic of life's impermanence, they'll dismantle the mandala and disperse its sands into nearby Lake Waban.

Wednesday's ceremony marked the opening of the project with chanted prayers, speeches of welcome, and the exchange of gifts between the nuns and their Wellesley hosts.

The proceedings continued yesterday with more chanting, this time accompanied by bells. The nuns, who had wrapped saffron robes over the maroon ones they wore on Wednesday, walked slowly around the edge of the platform, placing metal stakes at intervals to guide their work. About a dozen people sat and watched. A cellphone rang, but the nuns did not pause in their chants.

The visit marked the culmination of about a year's worth of planning, said organizer Ji Hyang Sunim, Wellesley's Buddhist community adviser. She first heard of the nuns and their work several years ago, when she was "staying at a hermitage a monk friend of



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/DAVID L. RYAN

**Tibetan nuns take measurements for their sacred mandala, a symbolic circle central to their Buddhist spirituality and art.**

mine was building" in California. She found a book about the nuns of Keydong and their mandalas.

When she came to Wellesley a year ago, she said, she thought of creating a mandala as a way of revitalizing the Buddhist community on campus.

"And then I thought, 'Where are those nuns who do it?'" Sunim said. "That very week, I got an envelope from Trinity College about the Keydong nunnery. It seemed auspicious."

So she started working with Trinity, in Hartford, to bring the nuns to both campuses. The nuns just completed their Trinity mandala and will return to Hartford after they finish here, in order to do some teaching.

Meanwhile, Sunim hopes their work will bring some teachings to Wellesley. "The mandala really epitomizes wellness," she said. "It shows all these different energies

brought into balance. ... One of the things about the mandala is that we all have this source of wholeness within us that's self-regulating, a source of strength and power we have within us."

The particular mandala that the Keydong nuns are creating in the Davis Center represents Avalokitesvara, the archetypal energy of compassion. That applies to both inner and outer relationships, Sunim said — which is why the project is titled "Circles of Healing, Circles of Peace," aiming for both personal and global harmony.

"If one achieves this kind of harmony and reconciliation within oneself," she said, "then it's much easier to come into harmony with the people and situations we encounter in the world."

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## Moving through 'Circles'

The Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College, 106 Central St., Wellesley, has scheduled a number of events as part of "Circles of Healing, Circles of Peace." All are free and open to the public. For details, visit [www.davis-museum.wellesley.edu](http://www.davis-museum.wellesley.edu).

**Through March 1:** Eight Tibetan nuns from Keydong nunnery create a Mandala, or sacred painting, in sand in the Davis Museum. Museum hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, until 8 p.m. Wednesdays, noon to 4 p.m. Sundays. Closed Mondays. Hours may vary to honor sacred intervals in the Mandala-making process.

**Sunday, Feb. 20:** The Keydong nuns perform a puja, or blessing, at 1:30 p.m. in Houghton Chapel. It includes visualizations, verse recitations, overtone chanting, and prayer. A reception with Wellesley president Diana Chapman Walsh follows.

**Thursday, Feb. 24:** "Windhorse," a film about the Chinese occupation of Tibet in which the nuns appeared, is screened at 7 p.m. at the Slater Center, with a discussion afterward.

**Tuesday, March 1:** Starting at 4 p.m. at the Davis Museum, the nuns will ceremoniously begin to dismantle the Mandala, ending by sweeping the sands into nearby Lake Waban. At 5 p.m. in the Slater Center, Wellesley Theater and Wellesley Summer Theater will celebrate the occasion with a "theatrical Mandala."