

“The Magical Mandala”

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Introduction to the Mandala

The word mandala stems from the classical Indian language of Sanskrit. It is derived from the root “manda”, which means *essence*, to which the suffix “la”, meaning *container*, has been added. Thus, one obvious connotation of mandala, is that it is a *container of essence*. It has also been loosely translated to mean “sacred circle”. More than a simple shape, the circle is a primal pattern that has existed in nature since the beginning of time. It is present in all aspects of life, from the microcosm to the macrocosm. Just as the particles of an atom revolve around a center nucleus, the planets of our solar system revolve around the sun. Astrophysicists have discovered that the universe is expanding and a dynamic force is at work - new stars are being created, revolving and rotating planets, solar systems, galaxies, and super clusters- and the timeless model is the pattern of the mandala.

The essential form of the mandala has made a deep impression on the collective human psyche, manifesting across all cultures, traditions and religions. Images of circles and spiral motifs appeared simultaneously in every prehistoric culture. They have been found on the walls of caves, boulders and cliff faces dating back as far as 40,000 years. Mandalas have been found on every continent and have been used as tools to interpret and record information, used as time keeping devices, created as ritual art, for the sake of healing physically, for the purpose of expanding in consciousness and have been used in modern psychotherapy.

The mandala is seen repeatedly in many religions and spiritual traditions. Although most commonly associated with the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, it is also seen in Christianity with rose window, labyrinths and nimbuses, and in Judaism with the Star of David. The concept of

yin and yang, and its black and white symbol, dates back to the theory of opposites outlined in the I Ching over 3000 years ago. Muslim artisans also used geometric designs to represent cosmic perfection. The center of the mandalic star was seen as a circle representing the One God, from which the teachings of Islam radiate outward.

Nature and the Mandala

Nature appears to favor the mandalic pattern, with the circle being the most prevalent form in our physical world. All living things - plants, animals and human beings, are composed of microscopic cells. This fractal symmetry is further realized in many organisms throughout the biological kingdom. Literally millions of species on land and in the sea are living examples of the mandala model: jelly fish, starfish, the sand dollar, the octopus, the tortoise, spiders as well as their webs. Flowers are beautiful examples of the mandalic pattern, as are ladybugs, pine cones, the rings of a tree, eggs, oranges, a cross section of an apple, the planet earth, the moon, and other celestial bodies. The spiral-like energy of the mandala is also witnessed in metrological forms such as with tornados or hurricanes. Volcanoes are another example of the mandala in nature; they are bowl like craters that can be dome or cone shaped. As lava is violently blown into the air, it breaks into small fragments that solidify and fall as cinders around the vent to form a circular or oval cone.

The implications are profound when we consider that the atom, the building blocks of all things, reveals once again, the primal pattern of the circle. The word “atom” is derived from the Greek work “atomos”, meaning *indivisible*. The ancient Greek philosophers described atoms as indestructible, the smallest building blocks of matter. The center of the atom is a positively charged nucleus, comprised of elementary particles: positive protons and neutral neutrons.

Revolving around the nucleic core is a cloud or shell of negatively charged electron particles.

Together unified, the nucleus, the space around the nucleus, and the shell comprise the whole of a mandala.

Snowflakes are another extraordinary example of the mandala in nature. They have been falling to the earth for more than a few million years, and each snowflake, as we have been told, has a very unique shape and structure.

With the recent work of Dr. Masaru Emoto, we are now able to witness the effects of thoughts and emotions in the crystal-like patterns of water. Dr. Emoto's work consists of water being exposed to a thought or word, then frozen, slowly thawed, and photographed while still in the crystalline state, just before melting. The result is that the water mirrors the energies that it has been exposed to. Photographs capture and reveal the incredible reflections of water, as alive and highly responsive to energy. When water is exposed to positive thoughts, such as love and appreciation, it is transformed into beautiful symmetrical mandala-like patterns. Conversely, when the water is exposed to thoughts such as "I hate you" or "You're ugly", the formations are blown out, distorted, random, or asymmetric. Considering that our bodies are comprised of 70% water, the ramifications are astonishing. It appears that by turning our attention towards gratitude, kindness and love, we are able to create a system and experience of balance, order and beauty. Our bodies, and our lives, can quite possibly reflect the power and beauty of the mandala.

The Human Body and the Mandala

Although the physical human form might not at first appear to follow the mandala model, when we examine aspects of our bodies, from the smallest molecule to the stages of development

to our outward shape, a clearer picture emerges. We all start out as a mandala - a single cell. After fertilization occurs, cells begin to grow and replicate, radiating an outward growth of the embryo. Deoxyribonucleic acid, or DNA, consists of two long strands that wrap around each other in a helical spiral. DNA contains the instructions used in the and functioning of all known organisms. They are chromosomal molecules that carry our hereditary information. Mandala-like red and white blood cells travel through veins, arteries and capillaries, each of which, when cross sectioned, is a mandala. Our eyes are “multi-mandalic”, with the eyeball, iris and pupil all being round. There are also swirling designs on our fingers and toes - a center from which a pattern radiates outwards. Our body itself also mirrors the star-shaped mandala patterns as demonstrated by Leonardo da Vinci’s drawing of the Vitruvian Man. da Vinci discovered that the navel is the exact center of the body and if the center of a circle is placed on his navel, his figure and toes will touch the circumference.

Buddhism and the Mandala

For Tantric Buddhists, mandalas are rich with symbolism and sacred meaning. They are thought to originate in the natural mind and were introduced to the human realm by enlightened beings. They have been passed down through the generations with meticulous care. When completed, a mandala becomes a sacred area that serves as a receptacle for deities and a collection point of universal forces. By mentally entering a mandala and proceeding to its center, a person is symbolically guided through the cosmos to the essence of reality. By constructing a mandala, a monk ritually participates in the Buddha's teachings. The process of constructing a mandala is a sacred ritual. It is a meditative, painstaking process that can take days or even weeks to complete.

Before a monk may participate in the construction of a mandala, he must undergo an extended period of artistic and philosophical study. In the Namgyal monastery, the personal monastery of Dalai Lama, this period lasts for three years. There is good reason for the extreme degree of care and attention that the monks put into their work: they are actually imparting the Buddha's teachings. Since the mandala contains instructions by the Buddha for attaining enlightenment, the purity of their motivation and the perfection of their work assists viewers in obtaining maximum benefit.

The preparation of a mandala is an artistic endeavor, but at the same time, it is also an act of worship. In this form of worship, concepts and form are created in which the deepest intuitions are crystallized and expressed as spiritual art. The design, which is usually meditated upon, is a continuum of spatial experiences, the essence of which precedes its existence.

Traditionally, four monks work together on a single mandala. The mandala is divided into quadrants with one monk assigned to each. Midway through the process, each monk receives an assistant who helps fill in the colors while the primary monk continues to work on detailed outlines.

Mandalas are constructed from the center outward, beginning with a dot. With the placement of the center dot, the mandala is consecrated to a particular deity. This deity will usually be depicted in an image over the center dot, although some mandalas are purely geometric in design.

Lines are then drawn through the center dot to the four corners, creating triangular geometric patterns. These lines are then used to construct a square "palace" with four gates. The monks usually keep to their own quadrant at this point.

From the inner square, the monks move outward to a series of concentric circles. Here the monks work in tandem, moving all around the mandala. They wait until each section is entirely completed before moving outward together. This ensures that balance is always maintained.

Although some mandalas are painted and serve as an enduring object of contemplation, the traditional Tibetan sand mandala, when completed, is deliberately destroyed. The sand is poured into a nearby stream or river to distribute the positive energies it contains. This ritual reminds those who painstakingly constructed the mandala of the central Buddhist teaching; the impermanence of all things.

The visualization and concretization of the mandala concept is one of the most significant contributions of Buddhism to religious psychology. Mandalas are seen as sacred places which, by their very presence in the world, remind a viewer of the immanence of sanctity in the universe and its potential in himself. In the context of the Buddhist path, the purpose of a mandala is to put an end to human suffering, to attain a correct view of Reality and achieve enlightenment. It is a means to discover divinity, by realizing that it resides within one's own self.

Yantras

Yantras are a particular field of mandala imagery. Yantra is translated to mean *support* or *instrument*. They are geometric designs and visual representations of the harmonic tones of mantras. They are thought to be highly efficient tools for contemplation, concentration and

meditation. Yantras carry spiritual significance and point the user to higher levels of consciousness.

The Yantra provides a focal point that is a window into the absolute. When the mind is concentrated on a single, simple object (in this case a Yantra), mental chatter ceases. Eventually, the object is dropped when the mind can remain empty and silent without help. In the most advanced phases, it is possible to attain union with God by the geometric visualization of a Yantra.

The most celebrated Yantra in India is the Sri Yantra, it is sometimes referred to as the Yantra of Creation. The Sri Yantra is believed to be the image of the 'Om' mantra. In the Hindu tradition, the sound 'Om' is understood to be the sound of creation. If the sound 'Om' is transformed into a visual representation displayed on a screen (through the use of a tonoscope) it produces a circle. As the tone is completed the circle is filled with squares and triangles. It is a symbol of the entire cosmos that serves to remind the practitioner of the non-difference between subject and object; the outer and the inner.

Yantras are thought to be secret keys for establishing alignment and resonance with the benefic energies of the macrocosm. When one focuses on a Yantra, the mind is automatically "tuned in" and the Yantra acts as a mechanism or a doorway. Very often, Yantras can put us in contact with extremely elevated energies and entities and can be of invaluable support on the spiritual path.

Christianity and the Mandala

The mandala reveals itself in several forms in Christianity: rose windows, the cross, the nimbus, and labyrinths, to name a few. The term "rose window" is often used as a generic term

applied to a circular window, but is especially used for those found in churches of the architectural style. These windows were found in many cathedrals throughout Europe. The west rose window of Notre Dame in Paris, features the Virgin Mary with her child in the center, surrounded by 24 fields. In addition to symbols for virtues, vices, and prophets, all twelve signs of the zodiac are included in the window. The Chartres Cathedral, in the French city of Chartres, was built between 1194 and 1220. There are three major rose windows there, using mathematic ideals to establish perfect placement and form. The windows are mandalas of colored glass that express a transcendent message of truth and beauty.

The Celtic cross--a pagan symbol which represented the four seasons, four positions of the sun, the four directions and four elements--was adapted as a symbol for Christianity, and many Christian temples were built on former places of worship for the Druids. In the Book of Kells, a richly illustrated transcription of the Christian Gospels, Mark, Luke and John were represented by an lion, ox, and eagle, respectively. In some rose windows, the placement of these saints corresponds to the positions of Leo, Taurus and Scorpio in a zodiac wheel.

One of the earliest creators of Christian mandalas was Hildegard of Bingen, an 11th century nun, who was later recognized as a saint. Born in 1098, Hildegard became a Benedictine nun at the age of 18. In 1140, four years after assuming leadership of the female monastic community, she had an awakening experience, a series of "illuminations" which she shared with others through written word, songs and art. Hildegard created many beautiful symbolic circles, each a representation of a vision.

Another sacred circle in Christianity is the halo or "nimbus", the circular light that artists painted around the heads of those who were considered holy. This symbol first showed up in

Christian art during the 5th century, although it had already been used by Buddhists and Greeks to represent a person of spirituality as early as the 3rd century. Some painters, both Christian and Buddhist, made use of a "mandorla," an almond shaped light that encircled the whole body of a holy person (usually an image of Christ). Some Christian "halos" featured a cross figure within the circle behind the head of the Christ.

The labyrinth is another mandalic symbol that was adapted by Christianity and represents wholeness. Walking its course is a metaphoric path to unity with the center representing the divine. Unlike a maze, a labyrinth does not seek to confuse or deceive, and winds its way to the center, thus symbolizing man's search for God. In the course of the labyrinth, sometimes one is close to God, and sometimes far away. With persistence, the center of the labyrinth is eventually reached, and there one finds a six-petaled white rose - the Christian symbol for love. People today still walk the labyrinth as a form of meditation. One of the more famous labyrinths is located in the Cathedral of Chartres, it has eleven circuits, (rings), and four quadrants that represents the cross. Sometimes called the "Road to Jerusalem," it was often used as a substitute for an actual pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

American Indians and the Mandala

Mandala-like symbols and structures are found throughout North America, and are seen repeatedly throughout American Indian culture. Circular patterns have been found in the form of sand paintings, shields, medicine wheels and calendars.

The American Navajo people have a tradition of creating impermanent sand paintings which are used in spiritual rituals - in much the same way as they are used by Tibetans. A Navajo

sand painting ritual may last from five to nine days, and range in size from three to fifteen feet or more. Navajo Medicine Men create these sand paintings without the assistance of models, patterns, or tools. They are made by taking colored powder in the palm of the hand and allowing it to filter through the thumb and index finger. There are “day pictures” that must be completed before sunset and “night picture” that are produced inside of the home. The word “Ikeah” translates to mean *that which comes from the mind*, describes all of these works. It is also believed that simply looking at a Mandala can have a calming effect on the observer. As Joe Ben Jr., a contemporary Navajo artist explains: “The eye is the instrument through which healing will take place”. Beauty has a powerful and healing purpose.

Some tribes created circular patterns on the ground made out of grains, rocks, sticks, feathers, and other articles from nature. They believed that the center of the circle was a healing vortex. They would place an “unwell” person or patient in the center of the circle, in order to cure them from disease, ailments or sickness.

North America's Plains Indian warriors, including the Sioux, Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Crow, created and then carried, circular, decorated, buffalo hide shields into combat. A warrior's shield was thought to be a “mystical circle of power” and provided both physical and supernatural protection. It was what the Indian calls “medicine”, a symbol of the blessings that came from prayers directed to the Creator of the Universe. The quest for medicine was an established part of life in the American Indian culture. With a shield's medicine, a warrior went into battle fully armed; without it, he was vulnerable and without protection.

In addition to shields, North American Indians also created Medicine Wheels, circular structures built out of stone. Medicine Wheels have been found in South Dakota, Wyoming,

Montana, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. More than 70 Medicine Wheels have been found to date. The most famous one is in the Bighorn National Forest in Big Horn County, Wyoming at an elevation of 9,642 feet. The Bighorn Medicine Wheel has 28 spokes that extend out from a central cairn. It is 75 feet in diameter and has smaller cairns on the circumference. Some Medicine Wheels have been estimated to be more than 4,500 years old. Although little is known of the ancient practice of creating Medicine Wheels, these sites seem to have been designed with spiritual, ceremonial, and astronomical significance.

Mesoamerican calendars are another circular structure from the people of Pre-Columbian Mexico. The original Aztec Calendar weighs almost 25 tons, has a diameter of 12 feet, and a thickness of 3 feet. It was carved in the middle of the 15th century. Historically, the Aztecs name for the huge basaltic monolith is Cuauhxicalli or *Eagle Bowl*, but it is universally known as the Aztec Calendar or Sun Stone. It was during the reign of the 6th Aztec monarch in 1479 that this stone was carved and dedicated to the principal Aztec deity: the sun. The stone has both mythological and astronomical significance. Many renditions of this mandala-like calendar have existed through the years and throughout Mexico.

Carl Jung and the Mandala

Carl Gustav Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist, influential thinker, and founder of analytical psychology. Although he was a theoretical psychologist and clinician, much of his life's work was spent exploring other realms such as philosophy, alchemy, astrology, sociology, dreams, literature and art. Jung had a unique approach and emphasized the importance of balance and harmony. He believed that modern humans relied too heavily on science and logic and could benefit greatly from integrating spirituality and the appreciation of the unconscious realm.

In 1913, Jung was 38 years old and had a wife and five children. His career was at its peak; he was the head doctor at the Zurich Psychiatric Clinic, a professor at the University, and treating numerous patients in his private practice. During this time he began an internal journey that could have ended in serious psychosis. His behavior became strange and he distanced himself from his family and friends. He also left his teaching responsibilities and started constructing miniature villages. This “strangeness” lasted for three years. This is when he started drawing mandalas. He did not fully understand why he was compelled to create these circular designs and was quoted as saying: “I painted the first mandala in 1916 after writing the Seven Sermons of the Dead. Naturally I did not understand it.”

With the mandala, Jung began to find the means to reconstruct himself. They became a tool for introspection. Jung states: “In 1918 and 1919, I was at Chateau-d Oex as commander of the English region of War Internees. There, every morning, I sketched in a note book a little drawing in the form of a circle, a mandala that seemed to correspond to my interior situation. Enlightened by these images, I could see day by day, the psychic transformation that was operating in me...it was only gradually that I discovered what a mandala really means; formation, transformation, eternal mind and eternal creation. And that is the self, the wholeness of the personality, which if all goes well is harmonious, but which cannot tolerate self-deception”.

For 10 years Jung continued to create drawings and paintings of circles, squares and labyrinths, with dark and shining centers. He was in the process of constructing a theory based on his experience. He came to understand that the goal of psychic development is the self. There is no linear evolution; there is only a circumambulation, the process is one of circling, rotating,

orbiting around the center. Jung stated: “We must square the circle, we must create our own mandalas and go where they lead us. As much as we might wish for a clearly delineated way, there is no straight line to follow.” His theory, or hypothesis, would be that the mandala represented the totality of the soul, both conscious and unconscious. Its center reveals the existence of an authority much larger than the ego, the source of psychic life and instigator of its development as well as its total fulfillment. He came to refer to the mandala as the “archetype of wholeness”.

As Jung began to understand the power and purpose of the mandala, he used them extensively in his practice. He found that the act of drawing the mandalas had a calming effect on his patients, while at the same time supported them in facilitating psychic integration. He noticed certain themes and similarities in many of his patient’s creations. Jung believed that the symbols and images came from the collective unconscious, and were therefore, archetypal or primordial images which reside in all of us.

In regard to the creation of personal mandalas, Jung was quoted as saying: “Most mandalas have an intuitive, irrational character and, through their symbolical content, exert a retroactive influence on the unconscious. They therefore possess a ‘magical’ significance, like icons, whose possible efficacy was never consciously felt by the patient”.

Indeed, Jung's discovery of the mandala provided the key to his entire system. "I had to abandon the idea of the subordinate position of the ego... I saw that everything, all paths I had been following, all steps I had taken, were leading back to a single point - namely, to the mid-point. It became increasingly plain to me that the mandala is the center. It is the exponent of all

paths. It is the path to the center, to individuation... I knew that in finding the mandala as an expression of the self, I had attained what was for me, the ultimate."

Mandala Studies

Contemporary art therapists frequently use the mandala as a basic tool for self-awareness, self-expression, conflict resolution and healing. The mandala has been found to be an effective therapeutic tool within numerous populations and settings including: schizophrenia and psychotic disorders, dissociative disorders (Cox & Cohen, 2000), Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Smitherman-Brown & Church, 1996) and dementia patients. Efforts have also been made to use mandalas as a diagnostic tool so that the process is more objective. (Kellogg, Mac Rae, Bonny, & di Leo 1977; Kellogg, 1978)

Pure empirical research on the use of mandalas as a therapeutic tool is relatively sparse. There is, however, some research that has been undertaken to formalize the use of mandalas as a diagnostic tool in therapy (Kellogg, 1978). Although most research into the healing aspects of mandala drawing has been limited to case studies and clinical observations, they do provide promising results. (Couch, 1997; Kellogg et al., 1977; Smitherman-Brown & Church, 1996)

One such study was conducted by Cox and Cohen. Patterns in mandala artwork produced by individuals diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder were examined. Most of these individuals have been shamed into secrecy by childhood abusers and find they are unable to discuss sensitive information regarding abuse. Symbolic coding of traumatic events in drawing allows clients the ability to maintain secrecy (from their therapist and themselves) while

at the same time symbolically communicating and resolving traumatic material (Cohen & Cox, 1989, 1995, 2000).

Further research has indicated that creating mandalas provides relief and improvement for those suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Creating mandalas can be used as a way of sublimating or substituting verbal process treatments for trauma victims, particularly those who, due to personality features or cognitive factors, are unable or unwilling to process traumatic experiences through verbal means (Sloan & Marx, 2004).

Mandalas, for many, have proven themselves to be an artistic endeavor that lends itself well to the symbolic expression and disclosure of traumatic events. The mandala is a tool that can provide peace, order, healing and relief to the artist. They serve as a symbolic representation of emotionally laden and conflicting material, yet at the same time provides a sense of order, organization and integration to the material.

My Experience with the Mandala

I was first introduced to the mandala in June of 2002, while participating in a Masters program entitled “Consciousness, Health and Healing” at the University of Santa Monica. We watched a DVD entitled “*Mandala, Luminous Symbols for Healing*”. It featured an interview with Dr. Judith Cornell, one of today’s most foremost authorities on the mandala.

I was intrigued as Dr. Cornell spoke of her experience with cancer and how the mandala assisted her in healing. She talked about the sacred symbol of the mandala and how the process of creating mandalas, helped her to integrate the reductionism of the scientific worldview with her own intuitive experiences of wholeness and luminous states of consciousness. Dr. Cornell stated: “The sacred symbol of the mandala enabled me not only to find the healing power within

myself but also to recover from a sense of psychological fragmentation”. She has since facilitated hundreds of people in physical and psychological healing as well as spiritual transformation. In regard to creating personal mandalas, Dr. Cornell has said: “The ultimate aim of these practices is Self-realization – the recovery of one’s authentic Self, *not* the ego-personality bound by one’s individual circumstances. This greater Self is an aspect of the transcendental Reality. The recovery of this Self, synonymous with enlightenment, is the mystical experiential knowing and remembering in mind, body, and soul that we are one with God”

“Mandala, Luminous Symbols for Healing” also featured powerful visual effects, including tonal wave formations in sand and vibrating water patterns. In the first demonstration, a violin bow was drawn along the side of a stainless steel plate that had a handful of sand on it. Immediately the sand came alive and transformed into a symmetrical, mandala like pattern. When the bow was relocated to another side of the steel plate, the sand responded by creating four separate, yet identical mandalas. Another example included a sample of water that was exposed to specific vibrational frequencies. The result was a beautiful, intricate harmonic pattern. I found these visual displays of sound, vibration and imagery astonishing.

After watching the DVD, one of the instructors lead the class in a guided meditation. We were supported in accessing a personal healing symbol, and then began the creative process. Making my first mandala was an amazing experience - I felt divinely guided, present, calm, peaceful and joyful. I had suffered for several years with anxiety and depression and tried a multitude of pharmaceuticals in search of relief. I found that the mandala process was far more effective than any medication, in providing me with the experience of freedom, clarity, and peace.

After the class was over, I continued creating mandalas on my own, sometimes working up to eight and ten hours at a time. I used watercolors, colored pencils and eventually acrylics, and mixed medium on canvas. The images of my mandalas evolved and my canvases grew....eventually up to four feet by four feet! People expressed interest in my work. I did an art show and was commissioned to create several paintings. I loved the process of creating mandalas, but felt a desire to acquire more knowledge and understanding about the power of sacred art and the mandala.

After doing some research, I found that Dr. Cornell was teaching a “Mandala Facilitation Class” in Northern California. I immediately enrolled. It was a week long course that supported and equipped students in facilitating personal mandala sessions and classes. I loved the program and chose to do an internship with Dr. Cornell. I have been studying with her for three years and am now a “Certified Mandala Facilitator”. I sponsored Dr. Cornell to come to Boise, Idaho to do a mandala workshop, which was highly successful. The community expressed an interest in the mandala, so I have continued to facilitate monthly classes. Dr. Cornell will be returning to Idaho in the spring, where I will be assisting her in a weekend retreat. I am also volunteering at her up next facilitation training, where I will be teaching a segment on “Divine Prosperity” and the “Power of Gratitude”.

Although I have been learning about the mandala, creating mandalas, and facilitating classes for several years, I find that at times, I still feel like a novice. As one of my students has eloquently stated; “You can’t explain or understand the mandala for it is beyond logic or words. You simply have to experience it.” For me, the mandala has been a meditation practice, a mystery and a powerful gift. It has brought me the experience of deep peace, presence, intuition, alignment, divine inspiration, connection, and revelation. I have also been humbled and honored

as I have held space for others to step into this practice of sacred art. I have witnessed and experienced joy and excitement as students tap into their personal power, creativity and connection to the divine. I feel certain that I will be life-long student, creator and facilitator of the mandala, and as Carl Jung has said, I believe I have attained what is for me, “the ultimate”.

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