

MANDALA, A HEALING ART

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Mandala is a Sanskrit word meaning magic circle. The meaning includes both the circumference and the center. The mandala is placed in a threefold tradition of Orientation (Self to the Cosmos), of Spiritual practice (related to Meditation) and of Connection (by the psyche to cosmic rhythm—to achieve balance and harmony). Today I will be talking mostly about the use of the Mandala as healing art. The subject however, I found to be complex and vast, let us say, all-encompassing.

Man, since his beginnings, has recognized the design of the circle in nature. He attached meaning and significance to the parallels between the egg, the womb, the sun and the moon, the phases of the moon, the planets and their perceived orbits, the natural cycles of day and night, the changing seasons, of life and death and rebirth. We now recognize the form in cells, the iris of the eye, a snow crystal, the atom. These connections lead us eventually to an understanding of the circle as a symbol of the consciousness of totality.

There are places in nature held to be sacred, such as caves and mountains which have been copied in the forms of kivas and tipis by native Americans, the ziggurat in Babylonia, the Buddhist temples at Sanchi in India and Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Borodubur in Indonesia. At Stonehenge, a sacred observatory, thirty stones are placed in a circular design thirty meters, one hundred feet in diameter, patterning the circular disk of the night sky and marking the progress of the sun through the year. Igloos and yurts are still employed as dwelling by peoples of the cold north. The Place d'Etoile in Paris and Washington, D.C. are laid out as appropriate the symbolic design in more sophisticated manner, and are considered marvels in landscape architecture and city planning.

Creation myths abound in circle symbolism. My personal favorite is pictured in a tomb painting of the Egyptian goddess Nut, her body arching and forming the heavens above the semi-circular form of the earth god Geb. In the Upanishads, Brahma is born from an egg, which, when cracked, separate into a shell of gold above and silver below. Plato believed that the universe was a revolving sphere. In the Middle Ages, the Celestial wheel incorporated the twelve signs of the Zodiac. King Arthur's order is established around the Round Table. Black Elk describes this fundamental world view based on circles.

It is not surprising that early man took his bearings by aligning his body with the horizon, which I learned—despite my elementary school lessons—was known to be curved to form a circle, approximating spiral orientation with the four points of the compass. Arms outstretched in opposite directions toward the horizon, eyes forming a line of sight in another direction, the body could thus be oriented to the position of the pole star. In trying to picture this, I recalled Michelangelo's square within a circle containing the male figure as a pentagon formed by arms, legs, and head. This orientation angle, as you may

gather, is a little hard for me to understand, but the Etruscans and Native Americans had no trouble with it.

Rituals evolved around the concept of sacred circle. Creating a circle is a sacred action; the space within is made sacred. If you've ever played with magic, you know this to be so. I hate to say this, but it's the first step in voodoo and witchcraft. Shamans, who are coming back in style after centuries of being held in disfavor, employ the method to call down the powers of healing. The priest marked on the ground a sacred area, circumscribed it with a line of defense as protection from disintegrating forces. Neolithic carvings in Denmark show a circle bisected by a line, footprints apparently traced around the feet of a person believed to be a priest. These are juxtaposed with outlines of ships. It is supposed that these priests were stand-ins for a sun god at the blessing of a ship. In Hawaii, I saw petroglyphs of such big feet and boats; researchers of petroglyphs here are more obscure in their interpretation, but the parallel is fun to speculate upon.

At Mesa Verde, in southwestern Colorado, an ancient Anasazi city of still uncertain origin and demise is carved in cliff walls. In the rooms within are kivas, round holes in the floors, which were used ceremonially. As a girl of twelve, I was delighted and amazed to watch Indians there perform the art of sandpainting with sand of several colors poured into designs forming a circular pattern in a squared frame. When Shirley asked me to find out how to create a Mandala, I felt there had to be connection. I have found it and learned in the process that sand painting is integral to the Navaho art of Healing.

It is considered to be a sacred art to be performed only by the initiated, shieldmakers, who must apprentice and learn the patterns from their elders or a teacher. It is believed that the Navaho were taught by the Pueblo tribe, who received their instructions from the gods, or yeis. When efforts beginning about 1949 were begun to replicate the patterns in rugs or reproductive prints, permission had to be obtained and practitioners convinced that the dying art must be preserved. Since 1964, new media have been employed and permanent designs are now created on boards with glue. In any case, the designs are created with the intent to produce harmony and balance with nature and the gods and thereby cure specific illnesses with selected prescriptions.

Ritual circular dancing and incantations are performed before the painting is made. This provides Ceremonial Protection. Ceremonies, called Chants or Ways, often lasting as long as nine days, present legendary history; the patient is strengthened by identification with an appropriate hero, chosen from Monster Slayer, Pollen Boy, Corn Girl or animals such as Coyote, Bear, Frog, or Snake. To make the painting, the participants face the east. Five sacred colors—white, black, blue, yellow, and red, made from specially selected rocks and minerals—are employed. A border is created, examples are of a rainbow, garlands, arrows, usually with an opening to the east, deemed the least dangerous direction, guarded by Yeis, and the pattern is created. The patient is placed spread-eagled in the center for the cure, and, when the sun has set, he gets up, the whole is erased, swept onto a blanket and cast out—the sickness, hopefully, with it.

Perhaps the most famous of Mandalas are Tibetan. These are cited to be the originals by Carl Jung, the psychologist and Tucci, an authority on the practice of the mandala in Hindu and Buddhist Tantrism. These two also believe that the mandala not only represents the cosmos, but also gives expression to the subconscious. The designs are complex and formalized. They replicate on a flat surface the form of temples and stupas such as the holy Buddhist shrine at Sanchi, a dome encircled by four walls. We can make out in the elaborate pattern forms of a circle within a square; the deity may be placed in the center. A tightly balanced geometric painting depicting the cosmos and attendant deities.

In some Buddhist practices, a geometric form called the Yantra is used as an aid in meditation. It does not have a center figure. The Shri Yantra is composed of nine triangles, four pointing up and five down, with a border of lotus leaves. The pattern expresses unity transcending the polarity of opposites, providing empowerment in conflict.

In Buddhist ritual, monks in orange robes circumambulate the temple, entering and departing through prescribed gates in the walls. There is chanting and beating of gongs. In meditative practice, one circumambulates with the eyes according to a planned spiritual progression. Tucci states that the novice must have already undergone inner work to change his ego structure before undergoing the process of creating the mandala. This is followed by preparation, including ritual cleansing. Now, a circle is formed with thread, then divided into four parts. The parts are filled with a colorful stylized pattern. Colored sands are used along with pulverized semi-precious materials such as lapis. Next, the steps of meditation are taken. Visualization follows with committal to memory of the whole as a mantra for future meditation.

In Provincetown, in September, I witnessed the concluding ceremony, the inevitable dismantling of the mandala. It was explained that this represents the impermanence of all reality. With trowels and brushes, all was swept away and cast into the sea, its healing powers to be dispersed as widely as possible. The March Smithsonian shows monks from India at work at the Sackler following September 11, creating a healing icon to Buddha Akshobya, deity of steadfastness. Seven feet in diameter, completed January 27, dismantled and cast into the Tidal Basin.

There are two parts to the theory or concepts involved here, as far as I can understand. Visualize the center of the circle as the Now. Visualize the circumference as both Potential and Boundary. They are (1) Reality, the material world, the body holds our karma; in involves our death and rebirth; and (2) Nirvana, the Absolute lies beyond our ego-self; --to achieve the desired outcome, karma must be stopped. One may then achieve a glimpse of the Pure Absolute, seen as Light or Insight or Enlightenment. This requires understanding of Oriental philosophy.

Mandalas are not only Oriental, however. In Europe, the great rose windows (or rota, from wheel) of the Gothic cathedrals, express the form and symbolism; Christ may be found at the center. In the cathedrals, labyrinths were inlaid in the floor, representing

pilgrimage to the Holy City, Jerusalem; the mythic Jerusalem symbolizing union with God. A labyrinth may be viewed as an incomplete mandala, representing the Search for a center. At Chartres, the labyrinth is forty feet in diameter—an eighth of a mile to walk. Circumambulation is similarly practiced on the hadj by pilgrims circling the kaaba stone at Mecca. Hildegard of Bingen created mandalas in a process of self-healing and writes of them in letters and journals. Jacob Boehme found in them the symbol of Christian cosmology. Giordano Bruno found them to be the ideal form to imprint in memory for transformation. In the Divine Comedy, Dante creates a poetic series of mandalas, his cosmogram of the nine circles of the Inferno, the ledges of the mountain island of the Purgatorio and in the Paradiso, the celestial universe, planetary circles and in the midst of Heaven, a white rose, God, at the center.

Now we arrive at Carl Jung. Jung observed symbolism in his patients' dream imagery and he encouraged them to draw. He found that in mandalas there occurred a spontaneous untaught learning of the consciousness of self. Jung himself sketched daily in his journal and recorded his own responses to the mandalas he created. Often Jung employed the hexagram inscribed in a circle, representing the four elements earth, air, fire, and water. This eventually led him to his theory of the psyche as four elements of personality in a similar construct of thinking, feeling, intuition and sensation.

As he grew more certain that the mandala was an archetypal symbol, Jung pursued his vision of the Mandalic Universe, a belief in the oft mapped sun disk shaped world of islands girdled by water. The idea of circularity grew up in Greece and Mesopotamia and moved eastward to India into Jewish culture and through it to Christian archetypes. Major cities laid out around a sacred center began at Nippur, Babylon, and Delphi. The Middle Eastern mind embraced as well the world-mountain concept, a high point reaching upward, deemed at each location to be the navel of the world, each with its vertical axis reaching below to the underworld and up to the skies. This is referred to as the axis mundi or polar axis, and points to the pole star. Examples are Ziggurats in Babylon Meru in the Islamic world, Zion and the Temple Rock in Jerusalem. At last he was convinced by the Oriental manuscript titled, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, a Taoist alchemical treatise, sent to him by a friend and acquired the confidence to launch his theory.

He began as well to look at number symbolism, believing the the seven mystique was somehow involved, combining figures of three's and four's. He studied his drawings of circles and hexagons.

There are fascinating connections to be explored to symbol systems such as I Ching and Tarot. Adele is our I Ching expert and Cliff, I suspect, could open more doors on Tarot.

The Tarot cards, which have ancient obscure origins to teach lessons in a visual way and perhaps even some early religious principles to the illiterate, employ symbols of a cyclical world for divination and employ colors to express healing. The 56 cards of the Minor Arcana, using four suits, parallel Earth, Air, Fire and Water, as well as the directions of North, East, South, West. Ceremonies to celebrate the Winter Solstice were

presented in a workshop at the Mountain in December, involving active meditation and healing art, based on these connections.

Tarot has been followed by many using art as therapy. Joan Kellogg, an art therapist, engaged in research with Stanilas Grof at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in the 1970's, is a well-known example. We know that children instinctively create circles, crosses in circles, suns, and circles with faces in their early artwork. Jung believed that what goes on is a process of what he calls individuation or separation of the ego and self, which occurs and is followed by reunification, often at times of crisis. he found them, an archetypal symbol of psychic integration—a progression if taken in series to the spiritual center, paralleling the physical pilgrimages in their traditional origins. Kellogg states that by making a mandala, we create our own sacred space. When we express inner conflict in the symbolic form, we project them outside ourselves. A sense of unity may be achieved in the act of drawing within the circle.

The way of the mandala is an active meditation for personal growth and spiritual enrichment, based on the traditions from around the world and the insights of Jung and Kellogg.

Richard Zyne has brought in examples of his computer generated designs and could tell us about his own process. Just take a look.

Do you want to do it? For materials, you will need paper about twelve or eighteen inches, oil pastels, or color chalk and/or paints or markers. Maybe you want to work with clay, stones, pencils, flowers, sand, leather, wood, or cloth. A ten inch pie plate or compass or thread will help if you don't do circles freehand very well. You will also need a flat surface and a good light. Next, a notebook for your responses. You will need an uninterrupted hour. Prepare by silence or music. Mental preparation involves relaxation, breathing techniques to create a clear mind. Suspend judgment or critical approaches and let instinct be your guide. Now you are ready.

- Choose a color and draw the circle.
- Fill the circle with color and form.
- Stop when you feel finished.
- Identify the proper position for display. Mark T for top, and date it.
- Experience your work.
- In a journal, title the work.
- List colors and associations.
- List numbers and shapes.

- Look for a theme, pattern.

In interpreting our work, which I am not presumptuous enough to do, we come to a wealth of available material on the symbolism of colors, numbers and shapes. Let us save that until after we have experienced something of this process.

READINGS:

“Our first introduction to art and healing in general and mandalas in particular came at the darkest point of 1978. Winter Solstice marked the beginning of our two-week vacation from Tufts Medical School, where we both taught and did medical research. Miron was depressed and out of sorts, virtually incommunicado, leaving me to organize Christmas for our two young sons. Arriving home from a shopping expedition, I was surprised to find Miron revived from his depressed state, having converted our dining room table into what looked like an art studio. Since I had never seen him draw, paint, or express any interest in art at all, I was amazed. Several pieces of white poster board and an assortment of rulers, compasses, protractors, colored pencils, pens, and assorted cans of paint from the garage surrounded him. Flushed and animated, he explained that he had been seized by an inexplicable urge to create something.

And create he did—virtually day and night without stop for the entire two weeks of our vacation. He seemed to be in an altered state in which he needed very little food or rest. The finished product looked like a jewel with many facets, or a temple with many doors. It was filled with spiritual archetypes from both Eastern and Western traditions and had a rich, Byzantine quality to it, as if it had been created by a medieval monk used to illuminating manuscripts. I was awed by its magnificence and its creation, as it were, out of nothing. There were no forms or templates. It had come directly from Miron’s unconscious mind. As I gazed at it, the powerful image seemed to draw me down into my center. When I asked what the image was, Miron replied that he thought such things were called mandalas, and what it felt like to him was an outer representation of his inner Self.

In the process of creating the mandala, Miron’s depression disappeared. The healing power of the mandala extended not only to him, but to many of the people who took the time to absorb themselves in it. Intrigued, he went off to the bookstore in search of some outer corroboration for his inner process and was just about hit on the head by the proverbial book that falls off the shelf—a book that concerned Carl Jung’s personal experiences of mandala drawing and his use of mandala drawing as an agent of healing and transformation for clients who were depressed or in the throes of some other form of crisis. Now there’s a synchronicity for you! Having solved his personal “mystery of the healing mandala”, Miron went about his usual business of being a medical scientist and educator, and there was a sixteen-year hiatus before he drew another mandala, once again during the Winter Solstice at a time of both inner and outer darkness.”

- Joan Borgsenko in Preface to Mandala by Judith Cornwell