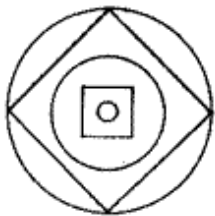


Psychology of the Mandala



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Mandalas are circular designs that reflect the wholeness of the person creating them. According to Carl Jung (pronounced Yoong), "a mandala is the psychological expression of the totality of the self" (1973: 20). Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist, discovered the significance of mandalas through his own inner work.



"I sketched every morning in a notebook a small circular drawing, a mandala, which seemed to correspond to my inner situation at the time. With the help of these drawings I could observe my psychic transformations from day to day...My mandalas were cryptograms...in which I saw the self—that is, my whole being—actively at work." (1965: 195-196).

How can it be that circular drawings symbolize the wholeness of a person? Is there some unique quality about circles that makes them important in the psychology of human beings? We know that circles have signified the idea of wholeness among many traditional peoples (Arien, 1992). Why should modern people feel compelled to draw circles and create mandalas? A review of research in psychology and child development suggests that circles are part of the fundamental structuring of personal identity.

Circles and Self

Research with infants has shown that we are born with a desire to look at circles. Infants less than a week old prefer to look at curved lines when given a choice between straight and curved ones (Fantz and Miranda, 1975). Babies three to five weeks old fix their eyes on the oval hairline framing a face (Haith, Bergman, and Moore, 1977). Babies at three months or even younger choose to look at simple, complete forms, such as circles, rather than complicated shapes with jumbled parts and pieces (Slater, 1997). And it has been found that two-month-old

infants can tell the difference between circles with patterns suggesting a face and circles with scrambled patterns (Goren, Sarty, and Wu, 1975). It is thought that these abilities to seek out circular face-like stimuli help babies bond with their care givers.

The ability to recognize circles is built into our visual apparatus. Researchers have found that our eyes organize visual input into patterns even before transmitting perceptions to the brain (Horowitz, 1983). According to Gestalt psychology, simple, closed forms, such as circles, are more quickly perceived and recognized as meaningful (Kohler, 1992). Because of this circles come forward out of a confusing mass of random visual input and are recognized as something known and familiar.

Circles are registered by the eye and passed directly to the visual cortex without intermediate processing (Horowitz, 1983). Because circles look the same whether right side up or turned upside down, the brain does not have to do intermediate processing to recognize a circle as it does when identifying a square or some other form that has been rotated. This ease of identification gives circles an advantage over other forms competing for our full attention.

The spherical form of the eye itself means that our visual information is literally taken in through a circle. The shape of the eyeball determines that the arrangement of rods and cones, the cells in the eye that receive and register light, is circular. What we are seeing at any given moment consists of a center area in sharp focus (with the exception of the blind spot where nerve pathways leave the eyeball) and a peripheral area that fades to the limits of vision. Because the eyeball is spherical, the total area of sight, the visual field, is circular.

James Gibson (1986) suggests that the circular field of vision plays an important part in the development of a sense of self beginning quite early in infancy. With what a baby can see in his visual field, he can develop the simple awareness of himself as that which is always present. The baby's nose is a constant, unchanging object in his visual field. His arms, legs, and trunk change in appearance as he moves. However, with experience, he can identify them, too, as things that are always there.

By coordinating what he sees within the circular field of vision with kinesthetic messages from his body, he forms a sense of himself as a physical being. This rudimentary sense of self as an object is refined through experience and maturation. Nevertheless, it seems to endure into adulthood. The feeling we have that "I" reside in my head is probably a result of this same visual information, framed in the circular field of vision. It would seem logical that this basic sense of self is our core self-image, one to which we refer often without being aware that we do so. Because the field of vision is circular, circles have become associated with this basic visual experience of our physical self.

Children's Art



Child's mandala

Circles appear early on in children's art. Children's art expression begins as random scribbling. Kellogg (1967) has documented children's progress from scribbling to drawing circles as early as age two. By age three children learn to draw circles without scribbling and begin to assign meaning to their circular forms. By the age of three or four, children's drawings evolve into more elaborate forms. Without any teaching by adults they spontaneously create radiant suns, flowers, mandalas, and people with arms and legs sprouting from large circular heads.

The people drawings young children make appear to have little resemblance to the human body, given our own adult perspective. They make sense, however, as a rendering of the visually based sense of self described by Gibson. Take a moment to test this yourself. Look down at your body and consider how you would draw what you see. Are not children's drawings a surprisingly accurate image of this view? The circle is not a head, but an attempt to draw what the whole body looks like when viewed from above, framed by the circular boundary of the field of vision.

While a child's drawing skills are developing, she is also developing a sense of herself as an agent of activity rather than as the passive recipient of others' actions. Self-awareness that unites feeling, willing, and thinking occurs by the age of three when children stop speaking of themselves in the third person as "baby," and begin using first person words "me" and "I" to refer to themselves (Kagan, 1981). I saw this process of development unfolding when a little girl in a family art therapy group drew a circle. Apparently delighted with what she had drawn, she pointed to the circle and exclaimed, "Baby!" the name she called herself. This reflected the importance of the circle in her discovery of herself as a person, as an individual.

The suns, flowers, mandalas, and people children draw are elaborations of circles and reveal the natural occurrence of the circle as an organizing principle while children are learning about themselves and their world. Children in cultures all over the world progress from creating scribbles to drawing circles, mandalas, and people

(Kellogg, 1967). This suggests that drawing circles is an integral part of the process of maturation. Drawing mandalas may even be necessary for the development of a psychological sense of self.



From the moment of birth the circle is associated with healthy physical and psychological development. Drawing mandalas taps into our natural affinity for circles and recalls some of our earliest experiences. We respond to a circle as once we responded to our parent's face. Circles remind us of the fundamental fact that we exist, and make us aware of our primary identity as a physical being that occupies space. Circles recall the pleasure of learning to draw, when directing our crayon the way we wanted became a celebration of ourselves, our own beingness.

When we adults draw circles, we revisit these childhood discoveries. As we grow and develop ever more complex ideas about who we are, creating circular mandalas is a way back to our primary sense of self. Mandalas provide a bridge between earlier self-images and our present experience of our self. The mandalas we create function as a sort of home base, a container where we create and re-create our sense of who we are.

Drawing mandalas helps us center psychologically. A circle is a soothing touchstone in the lifelong process of growth and change. Creating or coloring a mandala helps us orient ourselves, integrate new information about ourselves, and re-formulate our identity. This is a continuation of the process that begins when we are children drawing circles and creating mandalas.

The psychological order created by drawing a circular mandala extends outward to help us orient ourselves within our present life situation (Wertheimer, 1959). The orderly pattern of thought stimulated by creating and coloring mandalas helps us know our place within the web of relationships in our family circle, our circle of friends, and our work circle. That sense of order expands beyond our face to face relationships to help us relate to our physical surroundings as well: to know ourselves in relation to our neighborhood, our country, and our world. Mandalas give us a sense of belonging and help us find ourselves in relation to the powerful rhythms of the universe. In this, our mandalas are like those of Eastern peoples.

Mandalas in the East



Tibetan sand mandala

In the East, mandalas help people grasp the way things come to be and their rightful place in the order of things. Mandalas communicate complex philosophical ideas and convey the insights of mystics. Mandalas are used in special meditation practices for attaining and integrating non-ordinary states of consciousness. To learn more about Eastern mandalas, let us look at the practices of Tibetan Buddhism.

The Buddhist devotee wishing initiation to the way of the mandala must be well along on his inner work in order to be accepted for training. Work with the mandala is undertaken with the tutelage of a guru who judges the readiness of the devotee and instructs him in the techniques at a propitious time and place. The mandala tradition to which the aspirant is initiated depends upon the knowledge of the guru, his judgment of the needs of his pupil, and the signs or auguries of the occasion.

A space on the ground is cleared in a secluded place. A proper attitude is induced in the pupil through ritual cleansing, meditation, fasting, and chanting. The pupil is given colored threads and instructed in the procedures for laying out a circle divided in four equal sections. The mandala is created using paints, inks, or colored sand. Traditional designs and colors are used, yet there is opportunity for some individual variation within the standards. Materials, such as lapis lazuli ground for blue pigment, contribute their own symbolic meaning in the ritual.

Once the colorful stylized form of the Tibetan mandala is completed, the devotee is guided through steps of meditation. These are designed to move him through encounters with aspects of himself that hamper his full realization of pure consciousness. Part of the technique requires deepening his understanding of the traditional symbols in the mandala through personal experience. This inner work is facilitated by visualization based on the mandala. The devotee calls up a mental image of figures in the mandala. In his mind's eye he concentrates on these images, moving them through prescribed changes in relationship to himself.

Through training and repeated practice the devotee learns to call to mind a vivid image of the mandala. The devotee uses this mental image as a means of bringing about his return from the world of separateness to the realm of unity where he is in communion with pure consciousness. Thus, the mandala serves Tibetan devotees as a pathway to and from desirable states of consciousness. The act of creating the mandala works upon the

psychology of the devotee in ways that are beneficial. In the West the benefits of creating mandalas were first identified by Carl Jung.

Jung on the mandala

Carl Jung explored the psychological meaning of mandalas. He saw mandalas as symbolic of the inner process by which individuals grow toward fulfilling their potential for wholeness. In the mandalas created by his patients, Jung saw a natural process of generating and resolving inner conflicts that brings about greater complexity, harmony, and stability in the personality. Mandalas are important indicators of the process of personal growth that moves you toward fulfilling your particular identity and purpose in life. The mandalas we create indicate our:

“premonition of a centre of personality, a kind of central point within the psyche, to which everything is related, by which everything is arranged, and which is itself a source of energy. The energy of the central point is manifested in the almost irresistible compulsion and urge to become what one is, just as every organism is driven to assume the form that is characteristic of its nature, no matter what the circumstances” (1973: 73).

According to Jung, the powerful, generative center of our inner reality is the Self. This point of focus within us cannot be directly known. It remains outside of awareness, in the unconscious, and yet its pattern guides our psychological development throughout life. The Self is the true center of personality, but we are much more familiar with the ego, that which we know as “I.” The ego seems to us to be of central importance because we can know it directly with our conscious mind.

Whether or not you are aware of the Self, it exerts a powerful influence on your life. The quality of your conscious existence—your level of energy, your sense of harmony or confusion, and whether or not your life feels meaningful—all are largely determined by the connection between ego and Self. When ego and Self are in harmony, much energy is freed for thinking, caring, and creating. When ego and Self are not closely connected, life can seem flat and boring. There is little energy available for accomplishing things in the outer world.

The Self exists from the beginning of life and guides the development of your ego. Your ego develops within the matrix of the Self and even after it separates from the Self—when, as a child, you begin to speak of yourself as “I”—your ego remains connected to the Self (Edinger, 1987). Throughout life the Self acts as a guarantor for your ego. When stress, inner conflicts, or expanding consciousness challenge your ego, the natural order of the Self comes forward and restores harmony.

Sometimes the Self instigates change when your ego is stuck in a pattern that is not in keeping with your true character. This can feel like a disaster to the ego that resists change. The intervention of the Self in your life can seem like the visitation of a higher power. Indeed, Jung considered the Self to be like the image of God within each of us. Just as Job struggled to submit to the harsh love of his God, so we may flounder when the divine works its ways through us in the directives of the Self.

During such times we feel compelled to create mandalas. Jung found that, “mandalas usually appear in situations of psychic confusion and perplexity” (Jung, 1973:vi). People who have little training in art suddenly find themselves drawing and painting mandalas because it just feels right to do so. Instinctively they turn to mandalas to contain their experience, to open themselves to the guidance of the Self, and to listen to the voice of God within.

Creating Mandalas

The mandalas you create may take strange and wonderful forms. They may be circular gardens, arrangements of stones, colorful designs of flowers from the garden, lines traced in sand at the beach, elk hide stretched to make a drum, or mandalas created by your circular motions as you stir rich soup on a winter afternoon. You may dream mandalas, as well, in the form of abstract designs, or in dream activities such as sitting around a table with a group of people, or circling a mountain on a dream pilgrimage.

There is no need to wait until moments of stress to enjoy and benefit from creating mandalas. You can nurture the dialogue between your ego and the Self by making time to create and color mandalas. Mandalas carry information between conscious and unconscious, between ego and Self. The language is symbolic. It takes some patience to learn this language, but once you know it, you can align your conscious choices with the natural wisdom of the Self.

Conclusion

The mandala is a symbol and an instrument of natural energy within you that both gives you stability and pulls you beyond yourself to become more whole, more completely who you really are. The mandalas you create symbolize you: your body, your psychological state, and your place in the world. Mandalas also contain within their circular form the essence of the universe, the seasons, and cycles of nature. Mandalas translate the vast mysteries of human life to a scale that can be apprehended. May you come to experience mandalas as a source of healing and wholeness in your life.

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