

The Art and Practice of Mandala

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I was initially motivated to write this article due to a long-standing fascination with the aesthetic value of mandalas. One observes these ancient geometric structures being bandied about and exploited in many contexts, particularly in the contemporary Western world, without much regard to their meaning: a design on a party ticket, a wall-hanging in a murky, smoke-filled basement and so on. Upon delving slightly deeper into the background of these images, I came to the realization that there is much more to them than just ‘trippy’ designs.

Their aesthetic value is merely one of many facets. The doctrines of *mandala* embody some of the core principles upon which whole religions and civilisations flourished, ideas that contributed immensely to the formation of both the Eastern and Western mind (to the point where such influence is so widespread that one could not even think outside it): ideas such as embodiment and emancipation through unity with a deity (ideas that can be seen clearly in the Christian and Muslim traditions in prayer and rituals such as Holy Mass). These ideas are to this day instilled into each and every individual in both East and West. As a child almost everyone is brought up in one religious tradition or another, and no matter one’s reaction, the influence upon one’s thinking is always there – even if just in the shape of an idea to be rejected. I shall be looking briefly at the history and doctrine of mandalas in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

The word *mandala* is the Sanskrit word for disc (Harper, 2014) and these sacred designs crop up again and again across time and space in various different, and often unconnected, cultures and streams of thought, from the famous Christian mandalas of Hildegard von Bingen and the magnificent rose windows in Chartres Cathedral to the Islamic divisions of the circle. Carl Gustav Jung dealt thoroughly with this recurrence of the *mandala* (circle) across human culture and thought it to be one of the basic archetypes in the collective consciousness. Mandalas are however most prevalent in Indian thought, especially Hinduism, Buddhism and Tibetan Lamaism (Eliade, 1987, p. 155).

All mandalas share certain characteristics in their plastic representation, the most obvious of these being the radiation of even geometrical designs from a central point. Our first records of mandalas come from sacred Tantric texts in the Hindu culture. However, it must be mentioned that the complexity of the information espoused presupposes an older orally transmitted tradition. In India itself the mandala can be traced back to Vedic times (around 1000-1500 BCE). Rituals and sacrifices were carried out on altars that represented the cosmos. Around these altars a sacred space bounded by a circle would be created. The idea of mandala then migrated out of India and Tibet into Japan and the Near-East. Throughout this dissemination, the core ideas of the mandala remained largely unchanged while the peripheries of the doctrine were developed (especially by the Buddhist Tantrics) (Eliade, 1987, p. 155).

One can safely say that one of the main functions of the *mandala*, regardless of time or place, is spiritual liberation. The practitioner becomes one with a deity and thus purifies the soul. *Mandala* meditation generally consists of using these structures as focus points to renounce the gross and earthly self, either through their construction, or through contemplation and visualization of their form. This can be explained more accurately through a comparison with mantra meditation. In the latter, the practitioner allows a single sound to resound through the mind until that sound is all there is and eventually also fades away providing a window to the true self, a self that is separate from earthly perceptions and derives meaning from something deeper than material and inter-subjective halos.

In the practice of *mandala*, this mantra is substituted by geometrical forms. In other words, *mandala* meditation is a tool for the contemplation of the true self, the ‘substratum’ or substantiating principle of contingent beings. In Western philosophy this idea of a self before the world has been rediscovered in various philosophical traditions (phenomenology and existentialism for example). It has been called directedness, pure consciousness, the pre-objective etc... Sartre very crudely crystallized this idea with his assertion that existence precedes essence (Sartre, 1948).

Bühnemann, in her *Mañòdaldas* and *Yantras* in the Hindu Traditions, delineates four basic types of mandalas. The first and simplest she calls seat-mandalas (Bühnemann, 2004, p. 19) – two dimensional mandalas with no prescribed structure, their main purpose is to be a point of focus for a deity to come to rest on

(similar to the manner in which Christ is invoked into the bread and wine during holy Christian Mass). The second type she calls image-mandalas (ibid.), these are generally constructed out of coloured sands and serve as temporary symbols in particular rituals. Their deconstruction is also part and parcel of the process of worship and many specifications such as the directions for their internal corners or gates to point in have to be satisfied for the resulting structure to be adequate for worship or meditation. The third type she calls distributive diagrams (ibid.) and these consist of spaces divided into square grids, termed *pada*, within which the being is invoked to be presented with an offering or grant a boon (healing, protection, etc...). These mandalas are usually colourless and form the foundations of altars, temples and sometimes even whole cities. The fourth kind of *mandala* is of less importance and is usually associated with the representation of the elements, the sun, moon and the *chakra*.

Mandalas can also be seen as what Tucci (1969) calls cosmograms; microcosmic representations of the macrocosm of creation. The ultimate point of creating cosmograms is to incorporate the whole of the cosmos in the ritual. The concept of cosmogrammatic forms dates back thousands of years to the very first recorded ruminations on the cosmos itself; ancient ascetics would attempt to delimitate the whole universe in diagrams, sounds or shapes. One can observe this particularly clearly in cultures that developed under Indian influence. In Yogic thought for example the worshiper would 'make a mandala in his own body and in that sense' (Eliade, 1987, p. 155) identify a microcosm with the macrocosm.

In Buddhist thought, the mandala can also be seen as a journey whereby the initiate enters into the ritual with the aim of reaching the centre and becoming one with the deity invoked through the construction of the structure – a pilgrimage that can sometimes last several months. In order for the exercise to be successful various factors have to be taken into consideration and certain rules and forms have to be observed. The astrological time and location of the mandala are both of paramount importance as well as the materials used (the cords used to mark the ground and the coloured powder or sand must all be blessed in a certain way). At the end of the ritual the mandala is deconstructed and the coloured elements cast into a river.

The ritual deconstruction of the mandala after such rigorous construction represents the impermanence of life within the cycles of *samsara*. As to their form, Buddhist mandalas are generally also circular and bounded by four concentric circles each with its own meaning. The outermost ring, a ring of flames, serves as a protective barrier and represents knowledge. As the subject visualizes his entry into the sacred space ‘his impurities are symbolically burned’ (Bowker, 1997, p. 610). The second ring is of cemeteries which represent the world of the senses. This ring is usually further split into eight separate cemeteries that represent the ‘eight superficial modes of consciousness that bind man to the rebirth cycles of *samsara*’ (ibid.). These must die for the initiate to maintain his concentration and stillness within the present-moment on the journey towards emancipation. The third ring is the ring of *Varja* (diamonds), and this represents the stability and permanence of the eternal soul (consciousness) while the fourth and final ring is

of the lotus which, in Buddhist thought, represents the spiritual world and enlightenment (Lotus flower, 2014). At the centre of Buddhist mandalas one can generally observe a great-eight petalled lotus flower that is the divine seat of the Buddha and houses the deity being invoked through the *mandala*. Gods usually find their plastic representation as images. However, in a number of iconophobic traditions these images are replaced with magical or spiritual symbols associated with the deity. The offering up of the whole universe is also associated with Buddhist mandalas. Lumps of dough, rice or ghee inscribed with circular patterns are placed within the mandala and used to represent the offering.

When it comes to permanent mandalas that are not architectural in nature, a great many exist in practically all the traditions that make use of mandalas. These are however not given much importance after their initial construction and usually correspond to specific mandalas in particular texts.

Thus it becomes clear how the concept of mandala has descended through the ages practically unchanged into the contemporary mind. Where and when these mystical structures find their primary actualization in human consciousness, no-one can say with certainty, their conception is lost in an age before writing and before history. However one can assert with confidence that they are definitely part and parcel of the human mind and the universe as a whole, one only need direct one's attention to the fascinating structures prevalent all around us in both the minute and the massive – from certain cell structures, to whorls on shells and the intricate symmetries in flowers to the very form of the galaxy our solar

system finds itself in. One could argue that perhaps these structures form as a result of the natural propensity for things to always take the path of least resistance. However does that reduce their ontic value? Is the natural passage down the path of least resistance, entropy, not the natural passage out of the cycles of *samsara*, a natural form of emancipation?

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