

# THE MANDALA, A MEANS FOR INNER DIALOGUE, A TOOL FOR SYNTHESIS AND SELF-AWARENESS.

*Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves. Our teepees were round like the nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children.*

Black Elk

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*Translated by Luisa Bertolatti/ Gordon Leonard Symons*

## A Story as old as Mankind

In Sanskrit, Māṇḍala (मण्डल) [meaning: «essence» (maṇḍa) + «possess» or «contain» (la), also translated as “circle-circumference” or “cycle” ]<sup>(1)</sup> is the symbolic diagram of the cosmos, of the inner and outer universe, that contains and harmonises shapes. The Mandala is a psychocosmogram.

The laws of the universe, of nature, and indeed of Mankind, seem to follow this circular movement. We are conceived within a Mandala, the uterus, and initially develop as a Mandala of cells, a morula. We live on a Mandala, the Earth, and when we need comfort we yearn for an embrace, a Mandala, to hold us.

“The Mandala is the model of the origin of creation, or the journey from the micro- to the macro-cosmos. The fact that the Mandala is the main model or symbol of our world is easy to comprehend, even for materialists; everything that exists in the material world is made of a Mandala, in that each thing is made of atoms. Atoms are Mandalas. They both quietly adopt the moves of a concentric dance of (clouds of) electrons around the atomic nucleus»<sup>(2)</sup>.

The circle is such a representative structure of the world around us that Mankind has used it since ancient times as a symbolic image to represent Mankind itself, the material world, and the spiritual world. Mandala shapes can be found in cave art in Africa, Europe and America.

Mandala shapes represent Man's ancestral need to feel part of the Whole, to be within a Cosmic Union. This need for universal belonging is represented through creativity, through the expression of personal skill in generating new shapes.

Therefore, the drawing of a circumference, or more elaborate patterns such as a spiral or rays that radiate from the centre outwards, represent the eternal desire to be in touch with the divine, which we perceive to be outside of ourselves: the sun and moon are gods, and the only way to reach them appears to be through their representation. The symbolic representation drawn through the shape of a Mandala is the connection between the inside and the outside, and the outside within. The design becomes a symbol, and the act of depicting it, a ritual. The created image is not intended as a means to receive immediate answers, but is rather a form of inner comfort, a quest for the Sacred.

The Mandala, being an archetypal shape, in other words a model, an image with primordial and universal content embedded in collective consciousness, is expressed not just over millennia, but also across different cultures.

For example, Mandala designs such as the Triskel, a symbol made up of three spirals, can be found in Celtic tradition, but can also be found in other cultures, but it is evident that this symbol was highly important for Celtic populations, in that it could represent the movement of the sun, therefore a kind of “sun-wheel” which is reminiscent of the Irish god Dagda.

For Native Americans, dreamcatchers were symbols that were hung outside the curtains of their homes, and indicated the profession of esteemed men such as medicine men.

Dreamcatchers were made using different ornaments and colours according to the profession that was to be

represented. The Navajo people drew Mandala sand paintings to restore health and bring the sick back to the harmonious existence they had lost. When Western Man arrived, the original meaning was lost, re-interpreted, and now bears the significance of a tool that casts away evil spirits and protects restful sleep, banishing nightmares. This could be seen to be reductive compared to the intention of the symbol, which was destined to bring healing.

Mandala shapes are also very common in the Christian faith, for example, in church rose windows. In cathedrals, important emblematic shapes such as the labyrinth, which perhaps represents Mankind’s difficulty in finding the righteous path without the aid of God, can also be found.

Certainly, the most renowned Mandalas originated in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist faiths, where they became a tool for one’s own personal and spiritual evolution.



*Tibetan sand Mandala*

Carl Gustav Jung was not just a psychiatrist and psychologist, but was also an anthropologist. During his journeys through Northern Africa, Arizona, New Mexico and Kenya, he discovered the existence of stark similarities between images of primitive mythology and “civilised” consciousness. He became the first Westerner to unify and organise<sup>(3)</sup> Man’s intuitive knowledge across time, religions and cultures described thus far. Jung believed that individual subconsciousness is just a fraction of the psychic structure of Man. His anthropology and mythology studies led him to theorise a collective consciousness that encompasses common and transversal behavioural models across time, cultures and populations, which he calls “archetypes”. Archetypes are innate potentials within Mankind, inherited from the features of collective psyche and behaviour. Mankind reconnects and reactivates the behaviours and features of these, and they are so powerful within the collective consciousness that their symbolic representations are very similar throughout different cultures and across different eras and traditions. One of these archetypical symbols is the circle, the Mandala.

*«“The Mandala is a very important archetype. It is the archetype of inner order and expresses the fact that there is a centre and a periphery, seeking to embrace the whole. It is the symbol of totality. Therefore, during therapy, when there is great disorder and chaos in the patient’s psyche, this symbol may appear in the form of a Mandala in dreams or in free fantasies or drawings. The Mandala appears spontaneously as a compensatory archetype, bringing order and showing the possibility of order»»<sup>(4)</sup>*

Jung was the first to use the Sanskrit word Mandala for the images created within a circumference that he and his patients both drew intuitively. Jung believed the Mandala to be a representation of the Self. In the circular image, the central point is connected to the rest of the image and is the main regulator and harmoniser of psychic content. The Mandala as a symbol of the Self represents the unity of consciousness, the connection between individual and collective consciousness. It expresses the entirety of the individual and their relationship with the universe. According to Jung, the Mandala is a therapeutic tool to

reharmonise fragmented parts of the personality in order to reconnect with the centre, the vital nucleus of force and energy, and reactivate inner resources.

### **The Mandala as a symbol and tool for synthesis**

The Mandala is the representation of Rhythm, Harmony, and the Laws of the Universe. Man becomes ill when there is a disconnection from this Natural ‘Order.’ From a biological perspective, if we are in harmony with these laws, we adhere to a principle of conservation, harmonization, and therefore, greater efficiency in terms of energy and “health”.

The Mandala is a psychocosmogram that represents an isomorphism between external Nature and the inner world, that is the psyche. Nature is preserved and renewed, it overcomes obstacles and finds new forms, it harmonises around a stable centre that coordinates and supplements the various elements to find ever new configurations that are most suitable to maintaining this balance. Thus, Nature pulsates, is generative. Balance is not static but rather dynamic, otherwise the risk would be the crystallisation of life, leading it to perish. From a psychological perspective, in Psychosynthesis, this movement of element integration around a central point and the consequent harmonisation and creation of a new shape is called the process of Synthesis. Synthesis is a Greek word, *syn-thesis*<sup>(5)</sup>, that means *composition*: “The expression of a universal principle, a manifestation of the general law of syntropy, synthesis is different from a mixture, a simple sum of the properties of individual elements, because it consolidates two elements into a higher unity with qualities that are distinct from each of them, in a superior reality that encompasses and transcends them. To enact it, the powerful action of a higher regulating principle is required.”<sup>(6)</sup>

Assagioli leads from the assumption that Unity exists before the separation of each part, which may appear opposite but, being complementary, tend towards Unity.

Our psyche is formed by a multitude of content and counteracting forces; these elements can create

## THE MANDALA AS A SYMBOL OF HARMONY AND SYNTHESIS AROUND A UNIFYING CENTRE

alliances, can interact, and are even capable of grouping and uniting in somewhat organised structures (called Subpersonalities in Psychosynthesis), because our psyche also tends towards unity.

It appears that nothing is truly coincidental, that there is a Superior Intelligence that coordinates the various forces of nature through its own Laws, and that the respecting of these Laws allows life to regenerate, to be renewed, and to proceed towards an evolutionary movement: the interrelation of its elements means that life itself creates life in a harmonic macro-cosmos. This Superior Intelligence is within us, and our inner world is Its expression. Mankind is an integral part of this process. Man represents the “micro” that is a reflection of the “macro”. Man is a multidimensional being, these dimensions are interrelated, the physical dimension cannot be disconnected from the emotional dimension, nor the mental dimension. The effects of emotions and thoughts on our “physical” well-being are now common knowledge. Psychosomatic medicine and PNEI, Psycho-Neuro-Endocrine-Immunology, study and deal with these effects from a scientific standpoint. From a psychological perspective, Psychosynthesis explains their function and correlation through the laws of psychodynamics<sup>(7)</sup>. Assagioli was a great precursor of this. According to Psychosynthesis, the inner dimensions of man – physical, emotional and mental – are harmonized by a superior regulating principle, by the transpersonal dimension.

If unobstructed, the movement of this integration, correlation and interdependency of each part, is fluid. If we can imagine this fluidity symbolically, in order to maintain its flow-like state it must not meet sharp corners, nor sudden changes in direction. These corners, which represent conflict, obstacles or crystallisations, break the shape. The cornerless figure is the circle itself, the Mandala. The centre of the Mandala depicts the Transpersonal Self, a source of creative energy that conveys stability, unity and a sense of the whole. The Mandala represents the harmony of the inner universe of Man. I believe it not to be a coincidence that the symbol of Psychosynthesis is an ovoid, an elongated circle that

contains humankind and their dimensions, commencing from a centre that radiates outwards into a bi-directional movement that also radiates from the outside within.

The condition of psychophysical well-being is not stable. We often feel fragmented inside, we feel confused, we don't know which direction to take. We have the feeling of having lost our centre. We feel inner conflict, as if there were forces in motion that move in different directions.

The Mandala as a symbol of harmony and synthesis around a unifying centre can help us in stimulating a process of inner clarification, understanding, and choice of direction. The simple act of colouring pre-designed Mandala shapes activates creativity, as well as giving the feeling of rediscovering and inputting colour into our lives, therefore guiding us towards the feeling of possibility of choice, and being capable of conducting the situation, and ourselves. By using the Mandala in this way, we can exercise and develop areas of our brain within the cerebral cortex that regulate intuition and creativity (right hemisphere) or logic and reason (left hemisphere). We activate both hemispheres through colouring.<sup>(8)</sup>

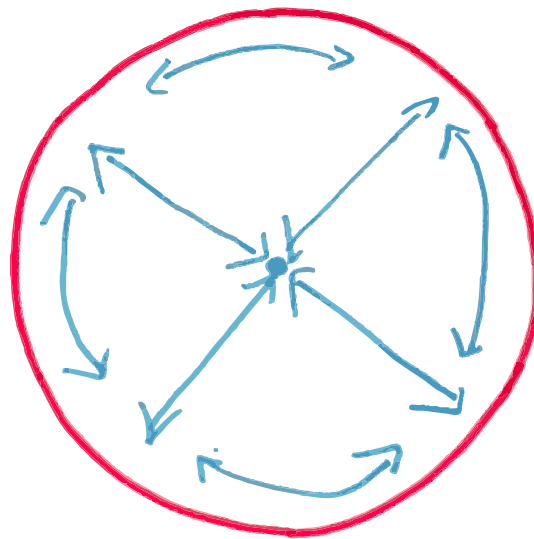
The simple act of colouring allows us to find our harmonic rhythm, creating a state of well-being. Rudiger Dahlke speaks of this technique, stating that *“By colouring pre-existing structures we practise fitting into a model that is prior to us, and which we cannot radically change”*<sup>(9)</sup>. Dahlke's observations also refer back to the need for a Superior Order, which is stronger than a “personal human system”, to rediscover the respect for universal law that modern Man struggles to recognise. Perhaps we have lost that basic humility that we should feel towards Life as a Creative Mother, and it is only by getting closer to her, to her model, her example, that we can become co-creators of ourselves. When designing a Mandala, we can choose two methods. We can create a geometric design within a circumference with symmetrical parts that radiate from the centre towards the outer edge. Through the movements of the hand, colours and shapes, we can find a sort of inner harmony. Drawing symmetrical

Mandalas also brings a state of inner peace. The second method is creating a design within a circumference, with a central point indicated in the middle, that is freehand and spontaneous, that can avoid symmetry, and can represent different shapes. This releases creative and creator forces, and in symbolical terms gives shape to the parts of the self that need to emerge at that moment in time.

The person is free to move within the circumference. When creating a Mandala, there is also a feeling of reassuring containment through self-expression. It is as if we could listen to ourselves through shapes and colours and see ourselves reflected from another point of view, we disidentify from ourselves. The depicted images may bring out intuitions and solutions and become food for thought.

It is a process of revelation as well as recognition of oneself through an alternative perspective. For an adult, drawing can be unusual, like a transgression, compared to the image one has of oneself. Trying something new, however, can give the pleasure of novelty, a sort of small transgression from our stiffness, from a static image of ourselves. In fact, transgressing means going beyond, and when we try to go beyond, to break our routine and our crystallised sense of security, we feel more energised, it is the energy of the new that regenerates us, and we become more self-aware of our abilities. New perspectives can open up.

I have asked myself why a simple drawing on a sheet of paper doesn't reap the same benefits, and what the difference of drawing within a circle with a central point is. The answer I have given myself is that perhaps there is great power within these forms. In terms of psychic energy, it's as if the energies from the centre moved outwards, and from the exterior to the interior, rotating in each possible direction, both right and left, finding harmony and stability whilst creating movement and transformation. All this does not happen by simply drawing on a sheet of paper: when inside a circumference, everything is amplified, harmonised and synthesised.



Directions of energy within a Mandala

Dahlke states:

*“Even if we do not have a scientifically sustainable explanation for this aspect, everything seems to indicate how therapy using the Mandala also contributes to harmonising the energy flow. Through its complementary symmetric rotation pattern, as it could be defined in geometric terms, the Mandala radiates the highest form of harmony”<sup>(11)</sup>.*

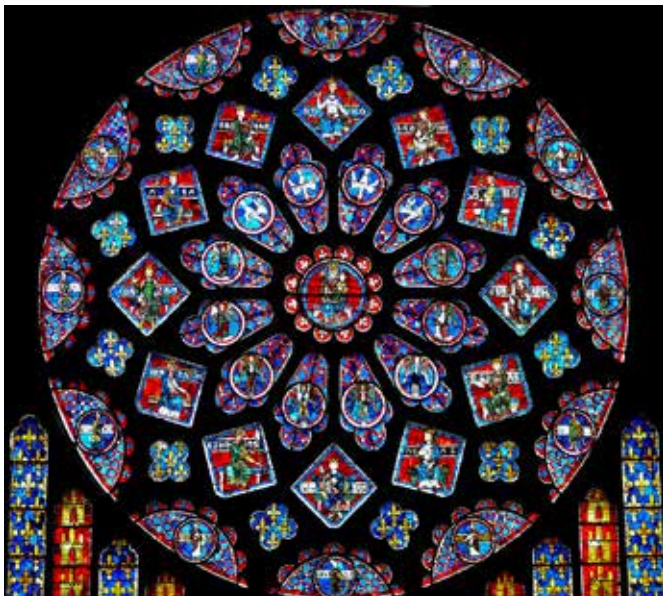
When the Mandala becomes an experience, it helps to be more in tune with oneself, with one's opposites. Through this internal dialogue we are simultaneously at a higher and deeper point, we learn to exist in both suffering and in joy, since both are forged from the same source, the source of the Self, where there is no division, and where there is Peace of the One.

*“True self-knowledge, that leads to self-awareness and to re-establishing lost balance, is experience; because action that does not adapt to knowledge is not a good, but an evil: knowledge that does not transform life and is not created within it is a cause for disharmony”<sup>(12)</sup>.*

## Notes

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8. Putzu M, Sanna L., *I Mandala, conoscerli, osservarli, utilizzarli*, Sovera Edizioni, Roma, 2016, p. 29
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*Conosci, possiedi, trasforma te stesso*, Casa Xenia Edizioni, Pavia, 2016, p. 173
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Chartes Cathedral



Milan Cathedral