

THE centre OF EVERYTHING

Mandalas offer not just tantalising works of art but a spiritual tool that has been used by various traditions as a first step on the journey towards self. By Gabi Mocatta

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

— William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

Imagine a symbol that represents Everything. Picture a structure imbued with such symbolism, it speaks of the deepest core of what it means to be human and of the vast concept that is the universe. This is something so understood, it is created in similar forms by disparate cultural and religious traditions the world over. These symbols are something so deep in us, psychoanalyst Carl Jung called them "the representation of the unconscious self". We translate the word for this symbol as "circle" or "completion", but the best description is the Sanskrit word, *mandala*.

Mandalas are probably as old as humankind. In their simplest form — a circle — they are seen in some of the oldest art made by human beings and in the first scribbles of a young child. They are a magic symbol with no beginning and no end: a universal representation of wholeness, unity, completion and eternity. They are the still centre of a turning world, a containment that defines and protects a stillness and emptiness within — and a symbol often linked with meditation, healing and prayer.

Think of mandalas and perhaps what first comes to mind is the Buddhist tradition in which the mandala is a form of devotional art and its creation an aspect of meditation practice. But mandalas appear everywhere, and not just in the context of worship. Mandalas can be as simple as the black-and-white contrast of the yin-yang symbol, as complicated and colourfully geometric as the images in a kaleidoscope, or as purposely symbolic as the confounding pathways arranged in a maze. Mandalas are also in nature: the arrangement of petals in a flower, the whorl of leaves around a succulent's centre, the perfect filigree of a snowflake — even the repeating rhythms of the seasons.

Mandala artist Barry Cunningham writes eloquently in his book *Journey to the Centre* about the significance of circles and mandalas: "Our lives are lived within cycles and circles. Cultures throughout history ... have witnessed the circular poetry of our solar system in motion day and night, birth and death, ebb and flow. As the archetypal model of the cosmos, the earth and life itself, the circle is the common denominator of human experience; a symbol for wholeness and centring. From the first image scratched in rock to the ancient stone circles, to expressions of spirituality and balance and architecture and art, we create circles, mandalas. Together, we dance in circles and hold hands in circles of prayer to symbolise the energy we bring to a common thought. Alone we go into our personal centres to experience connection with a higher power. Our human constructions reaffirm our innate reverence for, and belonging within, the circle — the symbol of one."

The religious use of circles and mandalas for meditation and worship is thought to have originated in ancient Hinduism. A Hindu temple's ground floor takes the pattern of a perfectly symmetrical mandala and temple decoration uses brightly coloured geometrically patterned discs, often centring on a star symbol or a burning sun at their core. Islam uses the crescent moon and a star, also symbols at their deepest level of symmetry around a central, perfect core. Native Americans' sand paintings and medicine wheels, too, have this characteristic.

Buddhism's mandalas vary according to the tradition. The circular framework with symmetrical divisions appears in the Buddhist stupa, in the structure of some Buddhist writings and — best known — in the intricate Buddhist painted mandalas. In Vajrayana Buddhism, a *kyil khor* — the Tibetan word for mandala — is usually composed of an outer circle around an inner square. Often depicted within this are the contrasting emblems of the Buddha realm and the realm of unenlightment, representing the different stages of the process of realisation of the truth.

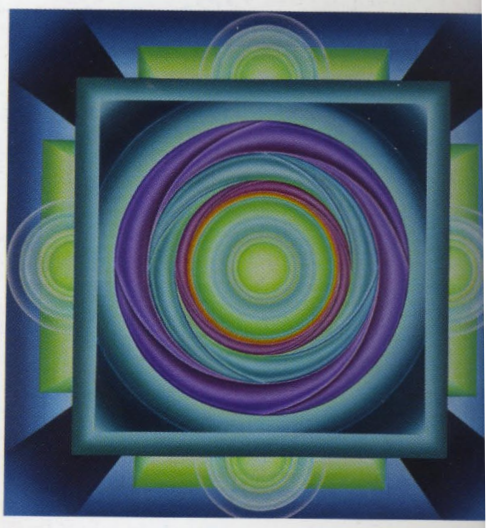
Sand mandalas — worked on meditatively by monks for days to create a rich and minutely detailed symbolism — also represent the Buddhist notion of impermanence. These gorgeously intricate artworks in sand are swept together when complete and the sand is distributed as a blessing for personal health and healing to those present.

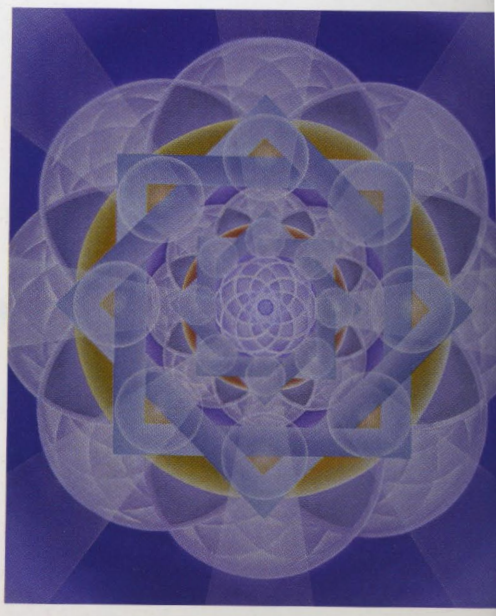
But it's not just in Eastern religious symbolism that mandalas appear. The Celtic cross is Christianity's most obvious mandala. The architecture of Christian churches and cathedrals also incorporates the theme of perfect geometric symmetry around a sacred centre. The polychromatic glass of a rose window, glorious in its mathematical perfection and sunlit brilliance, is intended to bring the worshipper closer to the divine.

It was Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung who brought the idea of the mandala as a symbolic entity to the West in 1928. Jung described mandalas as an archetype: a symbol so universal it was not defined by culture, but represented something set deep in the psyche of every human. Jung saw the mandala-like images his patients identified with in the course of their psychotherapy as "movement towards psychological growth".

For Jung, mandalas were "vessels" into which we project our psyches. Reflecting on his study of mandalas, Jung wrote in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections:* "I saw that everything, all paths I had been following, all steps I had taken, was leading back to a single point — namely, to the mid-point. It became increasingly plain to me that the mandala is the centre. It is the exponent of all paths. It is the path to the centre."

It's this notion of the journey to the core that describes the use of mandalas as a spiritual tool — across varied traditions and times. In meditation, as a point of focus and a visual and symbolic stimulus, the sacred geometry of the mandala can have the role of drawing the observer in from a chaotic outside world to that inner realm of stillness and oneness at meditation's heart. As an expression of a deeper consciousness that is common to us all, contemplating a mandala can help the meditator access deeper levels inside. Mandalas have a symmetry that is close to perfection and such perfection can be a pathway beyond the self, even to the divine.

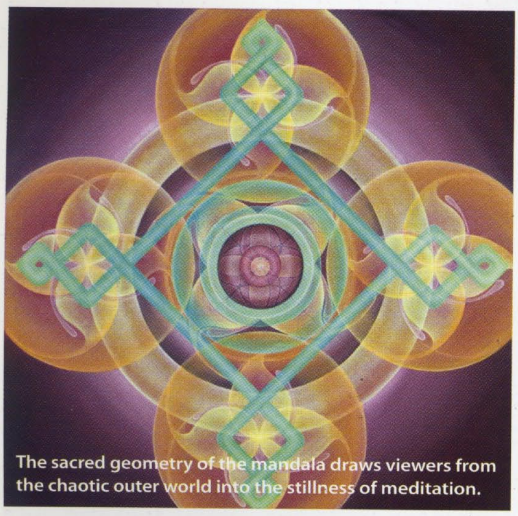






Mandalas represent a deep part of the human psyche.

All mandala images created by Sally Hanna



The sacred geometry of the mandala draws viewers from the chaotic outer world into the stillness of meditation.

Meditation usually uses the breath, a mantra, or the visual stimulation of a mandala as a focus for concentration. This is used as a nucleus around which to gather the awareness, a central still point to settle a busy cacophony of thoughts. A meditator lets his or her eyes focus softly and attentively on the image and allows the mandala to act as a road map which, with proper experience and understanding, can guide the meditator towards deeper levels of consciousness.

Meditators with mandalas report openness to the mandala as a key to the experience. Meditation is a process that encourages a peeling away of layers of logic and conditioning so the deepest essence of who we are — our truth (and perhaps a universal truth) — can reveal itself. Part of the role of the mandala in this process is to prevent the analytical mind getting in the way of this deepening and stilling. Embracing fully the visual sense, an experienced meditator with mandalas can report "becoming one with the mandala"; that is, incorporating the image into his or herself while at the same time going outside one's self and into the deepest recesses of the mind.

This, then, is the essence of the mandala: a reflection of the deepest inner self as well as a representation of the greater cosmos. Common to most philosophies and belief systems, and present in human symbol-making throughout the ages, mandalas are representations of the mysterious innate in human nature — perhaps a depiction of the simplest reality, which is so clouded by the complications, expectations and obligations of daily life. A mandala is a link between the macro and micro, a way of seamlessly uniting the deepest self with the universal. Mandalas can offer a path to going beyond the self to unite with the greatest whole and, through that, to finding one's own meaning.

Writer, scholar, follower of Jung and mandala expert Joseph Campbell believed that every culture needs a sacred place in which to connect with one's inner self; a place to meditate and, as he put it, to "find one's bliss". In Campbell's view, the sacred circle of the mandala can be this place.

"What happens when you follow your bliss?" Campbell was once asked in an interview. His response was as succinct and aphoristic as a mandala itself: "When you follow your bliss ... you come to bliss." And that is the power of the mandala.

Mandalas as art

For artist Sally Horne the mandala is a space where the personal and the greater merge, where the intangible is given shape and the paradoxical expressed. "The circle of a mandala is a place where everything meets and anything can happen," she says.

Slight, softly spoken and possessed of deep, dark eyes, Sally is a mandala painter and Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioner who explains her dual practices as her "peace offerings to the world". Sally creates intricately detailed and coloured mandalas — some ethereally feminine and watery, others bold and confronting — that are almost eerie in their intensity. All are the product of months of work and years of deepening her ability to go within.

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Sally has always been intrigued by the energy of patterns and mandalas, but remembers clearly the first time she came to understand their power. "It was in a Tibetan monastery," she says. "I felt deeply moved by the energy of the meditation hall with its deep, ancient silence, towering sculpted deities and the smell of the butter lamps. I stood in front of a small and intensely intricate mandala for quite some time, enthralled by it. I was looking at it intently when it began to shimmer and vibrate, then the image itself dissolved and all I could see was the pulsating energy that was encapsulated in it.

"A mandala demands that the observer become the voyager, engaging with and becoming the journey that is inherent in the mandala. It's like a guided meditation whereby the mandala mediates a connection between self and the energy of the macrocosm, offering a melting of one into the other. A harmonising of self with the greater cosmic order and flow is the medicine of mandala. It is powerful."

For Sally, as an artist as well as a spiritual voyager, the magic of the mandala is in the process. As with the Tibetan Buddhists, Sally's journey begins always with an empty circle and a ritualistic period of preparation. Through meditation and walks in nature she allows for a gentle quietening of the mind, an emptying of the self, to create a spaciousness for inspiration to arise. "Generally, the initial inspiration comes in the form of an impulsive image that springs to mind," she says. This image forms the centre of the mandala and Sally describes it as the key that unlocks the process.

"If I am perceptive enough, I see the energy encoded in the mandala manifesting itself in my daily living before, during and after painting it," says Sally. "The perimeter of the mandala extends to encompass my life until its revelations slowly soak my consciousness." Likewise, the painting process is a slow soaking of layers and layers of oil into canvas. The process is a prolonged meditation of one to several months: a test of patience, a slow transformation and emergence onto canvas.

While Sally's mandala paintings may appear to be carefully designed and constructed, the mandala evolves and unravels, more than it is planned. "As a painter, my role is to give in to the process, to let go of any preconceived ideas," she says. "I follow the rhythm and mood of the mandala with the least resistance and interference possible." Each mandala takes her through a specific inner journey, an alchemical process from which the artist returns each time changed in an indefinable way.

Like many subjects of art, mandalas represent attempts to express the inexpressible. Sally believes the real power of a mandala is in its enigma, its enchanting, subliminal communication. "I feel that words are sometimes superfluous and can take one further away from the real experience of a mandala," the painter explains. "It's about the viewer stepping into the mandala, tuning in and giving in to its energy, its rhythm, its beat."

See Sally Horne's paintings and read more about mandalas at www.moonstonemandala.com. Gabi Mocatta is a freelance writer whose subjects include art, architecture, travel and the outdoors. She is also a guidebook author for Lonely Planet and Insight Guides.