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MANDALA SYMBOLISM



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REFLECTIONS

Do you carry photos of family or friends in your wallet or purse? Do you have them displayed in your office or home? Have you ever wondered why? Busy as we are most of the time, focused on the coping patterns and survival routines of daily living, pictures help us remember who we love and how we feel in their presence. They connect us to inspiring places. They help us feel supported in times of uncertainty or distress. They inspire us to acts of generosity and good will, and help us keep our values clear. What about mirrors? How often do you pause in front of a mirror to see if your tie is straight, if your hair is how you want it, or if your makeup is well applied? You catch a peek as you get ready to confront the social world and, secure in the knowledge that you've done the best you can with what you've got, you charge off to face the day.

Photographs and mirrors give us see things we otherwise cannot see and offer us reflections of what ordinarily remains outside our awareness or field of view. Mandala art operates in similar

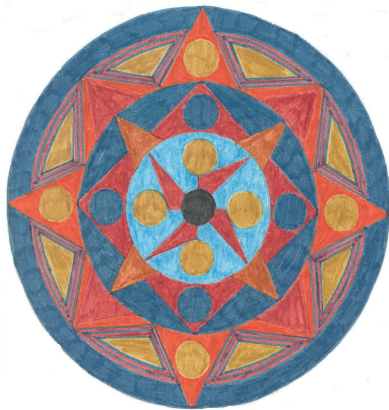
ways but, instead of giving us reflections of the external world, mandalas help us see what is going on *within* us, in our hearts and souls. They help us remain connected to ourselves in fundamental ways and can help us understand the meaning of important life experiences when we learn how to create and then interpret these symbolic drawings.

BACKGROUND

Mandala means “whole world” or “healing circle” in the Sanskrit language, and mandala art refers to symbols that are drawn, sketched or painted in a circular frame. Mandala art has been used throughout the world as a process of self-expression and in the service of personal growth and spiritual transformation. Tibetan Buddhism has used mandala art for thousands of years to capture images from the deep unconscious. Through mandalas, Buddhism depicts in symbolic form the countless demons and gods it believes both plague and uplift humanity (Brauen, 1997; Lauf, 1976, Tucci, 1970). Navajo sand painters use this circular form as the frame for their

drawings and in their healing rites (Congdon-Martin, 1999; Sandner, 1979). Native Americans use the Medicine Wheel, a mandala form, to connect to and be inspired by earth energies and the wisdom of nature (May & Rodberg, 1996; Underwood, 2000). Mandala art is said to activate the regenerative and curative powers of the mind, and also open the heart to the healing power of unconditional love (Arguelles & Arguelles, 1995; Cornell, 1994; Fincher, 2000).

The very fact that mandalas are drawn round can lead us to an experience of wholeness when we take the time to make them and then



wonder about their meaning. In the strict use of the mandala, there is a central point or focus within the symbol from which radiates a symmetrical design. This suggests there is a center within each one of us to which

everything is related, by which everything is ordered, and which is itself a source of energy and power. Many spiritual and religious systems assert the reality of such an inner center. In his book, *Psychosynthesis* (1965), Assagioli said "the experience of the Higher or spiritual Self is a sense of freedom, of expansion, of communication with other Selves and with reality, and there is a sense of Universality. It feels itself at the same time individual and universal" (p 87). He also said that "abstract or geometrical symbols can point toward or lead to an experience of this spiritual Self" (p. 203). In *Man and His Symbols* (1972), Jung also spoke of an inner guiding intelligence that "the Greeks called man's inner daimon, in Egypt was expressed by the concept of the Ba-soul, and the Romans worshiped as the "genius" native to each individual" (p. 161).

SYMBOLIC DIMENSION

How do we begin to connect to this inner

center? We need to learn how to work with imagination to see into the inner self. When we begin to play with images and symbols, we move from a cognitive, rational, intellectual, and narrow frame of reference to an expanded state of awareness. One of the primary functions of imagination is to help us see how our inner energies are operating, all at once, in a way the rational mind cannot perceive. Within each of us are a multitude of drives and desires, hopes and fears, wounds and latent abilities that need to be acknowledged and consciously dealt with if we hope to continue to grow as human beings, if we want to learn from our experiences and move toward the synthesis of our biological, personal and spiritual potentials.

We cannot see into the unconscious directly and so we need some kind of mirror with which to see the dynamic forces that operate within us. Mandala art provides such a mirror. Where once we might have experienced ourselves as a fragmented collection of subpersonalities and warring elements in opposition to one another (father-vs-professional, for instance, body-vs-mind, emotions-vs-reason, sexuality-vs-spirituality, etc.), through mandala art we can see how these parts fit complementarily together in the wholeness we truly are within. This is a critical point of view, and when we begin to take all of ourselves into account, when we begin to honor and balance the dynamic forces within us, we can act in the world in ways that honor our essential wholeness, get our needs met, and allow us to share with others the very best within us.

PSYCHOSYNTHESIS

Psychosynthesis is a psychological and educational approach to human development first articulated by the Italian psychoanalyst Roberto Assagioli (1888-1974). Offering both a conceptual model for understanding how we can heal, develop, and transform consciousness and practical tools to achieve these goals, Psychosynthesis refers to a process directed toward the integration and harmonious expression of the totality of human nature--physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. One of the fundamental

concepts in Psychosynthesis states that the human unconscious can be understood to involve three levels, and mandala art can help both explore and document discoveries made on these three levels.



A simple description suggests that the lower unconscious represents the past and in it is stored experiences, memories, elements and dynamics that remain repressed or unresolved. The middle unconscious represents the present, and in it is stored information, patterns,

and dynamic energies necessary to function in the current life space. The higher unconscious represents the future and can be thought to contain unutilized talents and potentials waiting to be developed. The concept of the Higher Self expresses the presence of an inner guiding principle, the genius within, the divine spark to which the “I” aligns in cooperation with a naturally unfolding and evolutionary process. When we employ the discipline of mandala artwork over time, symbols come from and express these various levels of consciousness as our energy and life experience passes through them. Thus can be created a comprehensively map or chart of the patterns and movements within us—low, medium and high, informed and guided by the Higher Self.

Practitioners of Psychosynthesis to assist individuals and groups in the soul-work of transformations of consciousness so that they can align with the guidance and inspiration of this Higher Self and thus find the energy and wisdom necessary to understand more deeply, work more creatively, love more authentically, and successfully meet the challenges which confront us at each stage in life.

HOW TO CREATE A MANDALA

There are many ways to create a mandala. First we must lightly draw a circle on a sheet of paper or on a canvas. We can fill the circle in spontaneously, letting the drawing emerge step by step in a creatively unpredictable way, like doodling. Or, we can fill in the circle with special images that have come to us in deep relaxation, meditation, through the use of visualization techniques, etc. Within the circle we can capture important scenes from everyday life, or objects of fascination from the world of nature. Filling the circle in is the first step.

Mandala art is a tool of integration for many reasons. The creation of these symbols involves many parts of us. Our body is involved in the mechanical act of drawing, and we experience our own nervous system in a new way in the fine movements required by the act of drawing. Our mental patterns are reflected in the specific forms and structures that emerge within the circle. Our feelings are reflected by our use of color. When the mandala is complete, we have an interesting, often beautifully wholistic snapshot of what is going on within us and of our present reality. We can then look at the symbol with curiosity and wonder, figure out what the structures, colors, and interacting elements mean and thereby gain an expanded view of how our lives are working.

THE VALUE OF MANDALA ART

What is the value of mandala artwork? First of all, by drawing these symbols, we shift our attention from external preoccupations and concerns and connect to our own inner space. This inward attunement is often quite relaxing, refreshing, and energizing. Second, mandala art is a private process of self-confrontation and self-expression for which we need not depend on a guide or therapist or outside consultant. In the search for the meaning of our experiences in life, we can sit down anytime we want to, draw a circle, fill it in, capture a reflection of what is going on inside and figure out what it means.

Third, through the mandala we can discover where our energies are blocked, where our resistance lies, in what roles and patterns we are stuck. Or, in compelling and graphic ways, we can celebrate our successes, portray the things which have inspired or touched us in life and, in this way, learn the most from them. Fourth, mandala art can help us connect to, accept, love and learn from the very center of ourselves, the Higher Self so to speak, which struggles to live ever more freely and creatively in the world. One of the greatest challenges in life is to discover and nourish the deep springs of inner wisdom that flow within us, and spending time with mandala art encourages our inner genius to awaken, communicate, and express itself directly.

Fifth, mandalas can help us see the larger cycles that operate in our lives if we do them regularly, then review a series of drawings that have developed over time. Last, mandalas are powerful images to share with others. Through them we can share our inner realities with family and friends in honest and open ways, whenever we choose, and by this encourage our loved ones to share with us their depths as well.

We need to find ways to connect to our inner depths, to heal our wounds, and nurture the growth of new potential within us. Mandala art is one of the most creative, direct, and transformative ways to accomplish these important goals.

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Michael began creating mandala art while in training in LSD psychotherapy at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in Catonsville, Maryland in 1973. Since then, he has drawn more than 2000, including the four mandalas featured in this article. Michael regularly conducts seminars, workshops, and retreats on how to use mandala art as a tool for transforming consciousness, and uses it with all of his counseling clients as one of a dozen Techniques for Better Living.

For a comprehensive listing of mandala resources on the Internet, go to: www.abgoodwin.com/mandala/



VHS VIDEO: SYMBOLIC ART: PATH TO THE HEART AND SOUL. 30 minute documentary aired on Richmond Channel 38 TV explaining in great detail how to create mandala art, showing an exhibit displayed at the Richmond International Airport, 9/97-6/98, descriptive poetry, and two interviews with artists. \$9.95.