

# **The Mandala: A Comparison of Eastern and Western Views**

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## **Abstract**

Humans are surrounded by circles and cyclical concepts from a young age. The mandala is one such circular image which has a strong tie to Tibetan Buddhism but also to modern art therapy techniques. Mandalas, in these two differing fields, have extremely dissimilar functions, meanings, and intended purposes. This research paper explores the diverging ways in which the mandala is employed and used in these two opposing disciplines of religion and science.

## **1. Introduction**

Defined as any type of drawing with a circular orientation, the mandala has been used throughout history and in many cultures for a variety of functions. In Africa, Europe, and North America, designs with circular and swirling motions have been found in ancient rock carving designs. While the purpose of these carvings is unknown, the circle was clearly important to these ancient cultures considering how often it was depicted throughout history.<sup>1</sup> In her book, *Creating Mandalas*, Suzanne Fincher discusses the possible reason for reverence of the circle. Fincher says the human fascination with circular and spiral designs originates from the fact that humans have been surrounded by naturally occurring circles our entire lives. From conception as an egg to birth through a circular opening to a world full of cyclical processes and natural rhythms, the circle represents the world revolving around us. The way in which our ancestors lived was exceedingly dependent upon and in tune with these cycles of nature such as Earth's daily rotation and the rising and falling of the sun creating day and night. Fincher suggests this connection with geological cadences as the reason for the historical admiration of the circle in art and in life.<sup>2</sup> While the circle and early mandalas have been found throughout history, the most historically prominent mandalas originated in Southeast Asia, primarily in India and Tibet. Traditional Buddhist and Hindu principles regarding life and death, rebirth, karma, and the ultimate goal of escaping this cycle of life—achieving enlightenment or reaching nirvana—all reflect this importance of the circle and cyclic nature.

The basic appearance of the traditional mandala consists of an inner circle with circles and/or squares surrounding it. Giuseppe Tucci wrote in *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala* that "it is a geometric projection of the world reduced to an essential pattern."<sup>3</sup> While there are many variations of mandalas depending on the culture from which they are derived, the intended purpose of the mandala, and the symbols utilized, this comparison concentrates on the traditional Tibetan mandala and how it has inspired and influenced the Western view of the mandala.

## **2. Comparison**

Traditional Tibetan mandalas have a variety of functions in Southeast Asian culture and religion. These images are considered sacred in Tibetan culture because of the deep complexity of the symbols and iconography as well as the spiritual ideas that they represent. In order to attempt to clarify the precise Buddhist concepts employed in the

mandala so that outsiders to Buddhism could understand the intricacy of the mandala, Martin Brauen wrote *The Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism*. This text was approved and endorsed by the XIV Dalai Lama as a valuable attempt at simplifying and explaining the complicated mandala. When discussing the two-dimensional mandala, Brauen writes that the mandala primarily serves as a visual aid for the viewer with the purpose of helping to map out the cosmos. These mandala drawings and paintings were not considered works of art but rather were representations of the universe. Brauen points out that when used as a specific ritual offering, the “term ‘mandala’ can be applied to the whole cosmos.”<sup>4</sup> Tibetan mandalas are also used to demonstrate manifestations of a deity within the cosmos. The repetition of various postures, heads, and images of the deity as well as the symbols around the gods characterize different elements that the deity embodies. The specific intention of these mandalas varies greatly depending on the symbols and representations within the image. Some of the more well-known Tibetan mandalas include the Kongokai (Diamond) World Mandala (Figure 1), the Womb World Mandala, and the Kalachakra Mandala (Figure 2). Each of these mandalas has different interpretations based on the referenced deities and symbols. There are therefore many different ways in which one can view and appreciate the meaning of these various mandalas. In addition to a variety of meanings, Tantric Buddhists also believe there are various types of mandalas including the outer mandala that is representative of the cosmos, the inner mandala or the person, and the other mandala which refers to the junction of these two. In Denise Patry Leidy’s book, *Mandala: The Architecture of Enlightenment*, she provides the reader with multiple purposes for the ancient mandala including “a place or point which contains an essence...[and] a place created for the performance of a certain ritual or practice, or for the use of a great teacher or mystic.”<sup>5</sup> In order to fully grasp the difficult concepts represented in Tibetan mandalas, both Brauen and Leidy suggest that the worshipper follow the guidance of a spiritual teacher or guru. Characteristics of the traditional Tibetan mandala include a palace-architecture design with a circle in the center and multi-tiered squares surrounding it, oriented in the four cardinal directions. Surrounding these squares are additional circles in examples like the Kalachakra Mandala. This structure represents the multiple levels of consciousness that one must transcend in life in order to achieve enlightenment. In this respect, the traditional mandala exemplifies a guide for worshippers on how to reach nirvana and spiritual realization.

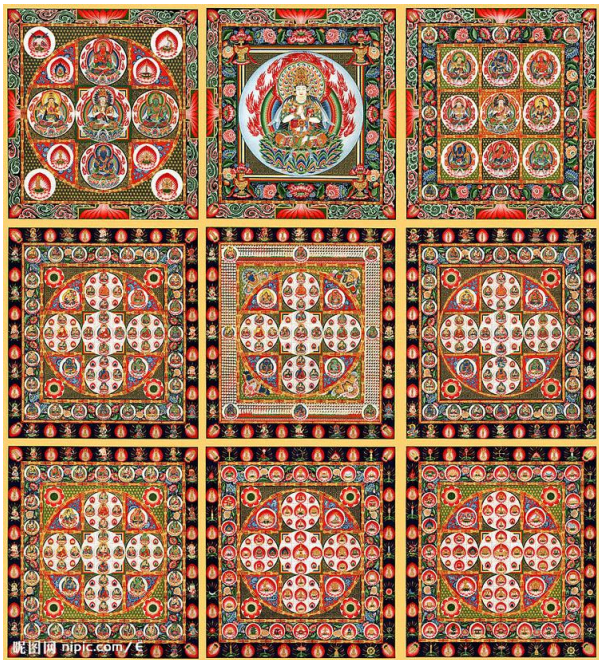


Figure 1 – Kongokai World Mandala



Figure 2 - Kalachakra Mandala

In contrast to the ancient function of the Tibetan mandala, modern and Western perceptions of the mandala are typically extremely different. Fincher writes about the mandala as a tool for learning about oneself and frequently

references the Swiss psychiatrist, Carl G. Jung, who studied the relationship between mandalas and the Self. Jung refers to the mandala as “our own sacred space, a place of protection, [and] a focus for the concentration of our energies.”<sup>6</sup> In her book, Fincher focuses on the mandala as “an active meditation for the purposes of personal growth and spiritual enrichment.”<sup>7</sup> In this approach, the mandala is utilized as a tool to understand one’s conscious and unconscious thoughts as well as a means for healing and understand self (Figure 3). While Fincher and Jung’s type of mandala meditation refers to drawing within an empty circle and thoroughly analyzing the contents, there are other ways that the mandala has been studied in Western culture. In recent years, multiple research studies examining the value of art therapy interventions have investigated the anxiety-reducing and meditative effects created by coloring a pre-drawn mandala or circle shape. The mandala as an art therapy tool is believed to create a meditative state in which one reflects inward in making decisions about specifics about the mandala. In the Western perspective, the function of the mandala is not rooted in religion, but instead in identity and understanding elements of one’s personality and inner self.



Figure 3 - Jungian Mandala

Eastern views of the mandala vary greatly depending on the type of mandala. However, there are a plethora of symbols that have consistent meanings in the context of the Buddhist mandala. The eight auspicious symbols (Figure 4) are the most commonly depicted on everyday surfaces including on decorations and ritual tools, carved onto doors and thresholds, woven into fine fabrics, and adorning stupa exteriors. These eight symbols include the two golden fish, the treasure vase, the parasol, the lotus flower, the conch shell, the endless knot, the great banner, and the golden wheel. Each of these significant symbols has a meaning that is vital to understanding an element of the Buddhist faith. The golden wheel, or the wheel of the law, stands for creation, protection, the sun, continuity, change and movement; it is the ultimate symbol of the Buddhist doctrine. The endless knot is similar to the modern symbol of infinity, but represents the endless love and compassion of Buddha. The lotus flower is used to symbolize purity and divinity. The two golden fish characterize happiness by referring to the freedom of fish in water. It also denotes the idea of abundance. One or all of the eight auspicious symbols may be found in a mandala, representing several concepts that Buddhist worshippers may need to consider on the path to enlightenment. Other symbols that are commonly found in mandalas include thunderbolt scepters, daggers, flames, meditating worshippers, lotus or flower petals, and different personifications of deities through the use of body posture and gesture.<sup>8</sup> In addition to these object-based icons, the structural symbolism of the mandala represents the three-dimensional form of the mandala: the stupa. A stupa is a mound of dirt, grass, stone, or other materials that is built in order to represent the Buddha’s lessons and teachings. Similar to the way in which the mandala is worshipped (beginning at the outside with the goal of reaching the center) the stupa’s structure is revered in similar fashion. The worshipper begins at the external gates and circumambulates, or walks around in a clockwise direction, the mound until s/he experiences a spiritual connection with the center. The structure of the stupa with its multiple levels, orientation with the cardinal directions, and four entrance gates is reflected in the two dimensional mandala and shows that the two are venerated in similar ways. In mandalas that depict figures, each figure is symbolic of a number of concepts including the “functioning as a specific deity, as a manifestation of the central deity’s power, as a focus of visualization and meditation, and as a signpost for a spiritual process.”<sup>9</sup> As the practitioner moves through the visualization process of the mandala, each figure serves as a reminder of a specific force with which the practitioner is supposed to identify



and understand that all the manifestations of the deity represent pieces of the whole.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of the simplicity of the symbols within the Tibetan mandala, every element of these mandalas has a reason and purpose.



Figure 4 - Eight Auspicious Symbols

In the art psychology field, the symbols that are found in therapeutic mandalas are also very significant and meaningful. However, these symbols are not representative of the field or of a bigger picture, but rather of the individual and the unconscious. Carl Jung's theory of the unconscious emerging through the art of drawing mandalas is assumed when analyzing the meanings of symbols in these westernized mandalas. Fincher describes some of the meanings of common symbols found in mandalas created about self such as the spiral that is reflective of the idea of cycles and the flow of the universe. In a mandala, a spiral can represent a person who is focused on growing and searching for wholeness. In contrast, a five-pointed star in a mandala is thought to signify a well-grounded person who is sure of their personal sense of identity. The symbol of a hand in a mandala may represent a feeling of eagerness to interact with life. Hands are a tool we, as humans, use to engage with others and objects, so it makes sense to imagine hands as reaching outward to take on life. Flowers in a mandala have many connotations about the self. Much like the blooming of flowers in spring, the image of a flower can represent personal growth and blossoming as well as the accomplishment of a goal that took a lot of dedication. The flower can also be more deeply interpreted by looking at the color(s) of the flower and the number of petals. Fincher says that analyzing the colors and numbers, in addition to the visual symbols, found within a personal mandala can also provide great insight into a person's unconscious thoughts. In the mandala meditation process about which Fincher talks, once the individual has finished creating his/her mandala, the details in the mandala can be interpreted through the individual's association of the symbols, colors, and numbers with memories and emotions. Using this technique, the artist lists the colors found within the mandala in order of most prominent to least. Next, s/he looks at the numbers represented in the mandala; for example, if a flower is drawn, the number would be the total count of petals on the flower. After making a list of the colors, numbers, and other symbols in the mandala, the artist considers each object on the list individually and thinks about experiences, memories, or ideas that one associates with that object.<sup>11</sup> In this way, the individual's mandala is analyzed based on personal connotations with the drawn objects and symbols that Jung believes can be linked to the individuation process.

In contrast to the Jungian theory of mandalas as representations of the self, traditional Buddhist mandalas are a symbol of selflessness and collectivism. One of the most important Buddhist theories is the idea of letting go of ego in order to understand the emptiness of reality. In Buddhist canon, the "self" is hardly even referenced through a mandala besides the fact that one must visualize the path that the mandala creates as a guide for his/her own liberation. The self is not ever at the center of the mandala because the individual is never thought of as the center of any world. Buddhists believe that the Gods and deities are the true, pure center of the world and the mandala because they are eternal. For this reason, traditional mandalas commonly represent the manifestations of a God. The reason that the self is not exemplified in the mandala is that the individual life is transitory. Therefore the idea of self is not permanent. This is determined by the fact that the individual is made up of forms (matter), feelings, perceptions, mental factors, and consciousness. Buddhists conclude that all of the factors are subject to change and

are therefore transitory. Since they believe that that which is transitory is not eternal, then the conclusion is that the self is not eternal. Thinking in terms of “I” and “me” is thought to lead to feelings of cravings as well as sorrow. Because Buddhist notions are concerned with letting go of wants and desires, the goal is to release this idea of the self and instead focus on selflessness. The key reason that the Buddhist mandala represents the cosmos and a divine center is because everything of the earthly world (people, landscapes, earth) is forever changing, and therefore cannot be eternal.<sup>12</sup> The Tibetan mandala is not concerned with learning about the individual or self but rather on the individual learning to think outside of the self.

Much like Carl Jung’s belief that symbols in the Western mandala can reflect unconscious feelings or thoughts, the idea of creating a mandala that is a visual map of the self is central to Jung’s theory of psychotherapy. In his 1968 book, *Man and His Symbols*, Carl Jung discusses the overlap between self and symbols. Through his lifetime, Jung committed a large amount of time and research to the idea of the creative unconscious. He believed that the unconscious emerges in dreams and that we create symbols to represent unexplainable ideas from our own interpretation of these experiences. This principle that dreams expose the unconscious states that the ideas in dreams are ideas of the brain that the body has experienced but which have not yet processed by the mind. In applying this theory to the idea of the mandala, Jung believes that the “mandala serves the creative purpose of giving expression and form to something that does not yet exist, something new and unique.”<sup>13</sup> These unprocessed ideas are revealed through subliminal thoughts, intuition, and instincts, and when realized, take shape in the form of symbols in an individual’s mandala. Jungian psychology also supports the belief of the ego as a light that allows the Self to realize its potential.<sup>14</sup> While in Buddhism, self and ego are considered qualities that create unwanted desire, Western culture thinks of them as the fuel that starts the journey to understand oneself and the existing world. The circle is thought to represent wholeness and totality which is a concept that Western culture values and therefore strives to achieve.<sup>15</sup> It is assumed in Western culture, that everyone lives for the purpose of not only realizing one’s full potential, but also in understanding self and identity.

The Tibetan mandala is often considered a metaphor for the path to enlightenment. Because the mandala is often used as a diagram of three-dimensional structure, it has architectural features that reflect this metaphor. First of all, there are several levels of the traditional mandala that are usually depicted as a combination of circles and squares. These levels represent the elements of the cosmos. For example, in the Kalacakra mandala (Figure 2), the various circles of the mandala represent air, fire, water, earth, mountains, and other components of the universe.<sup>16</sup> The lines in cardinal directions and T-shaped entrance gateways orient the viewer and provide various methods to reach the center, or enlightenment. The three dimensional mandala, or the stupa, is revered by circumambulation of the levels of the stupa. These levels represent levels of the mind and of advancement of worship. One of the best representations of this process can be seen in the Borobudur stupa (Figure 5) in Java that has over ten levels on which the worshipper could circumambulate. The typical stupa is categorized vertically with the highest point, also the center point in the mandala, representing the most sacred realm. The higher the worshipper climbs mentally, the closer s/he is to reaching the ultimate goal of understanding the cosmos’ purpose of allowing one to let go of self and earthly desires and instead wish for the betterment of others.<sup>17</sup> This pathway is created in the mandala as the mandala represents a ground plan for the stupa. These components of mentally traveling through the echelon of the cosmos are echoed in the directions, lines, and gateways that are typical of the Tibetan mandala. The symbols on each level embody challenges or matters that the worshipper may face at such point in the mental process. In this way, the mandala can be viewed as a map or a guide for how to maneuver one’s way through the universe.



Figure 5 – Borobudur Stupa

In the realm of viewing mandalas as representations of the self, the format of the mandala is thought of as revealing the self by way of the ego. Jung describes this as the process of individuation that is a gradual development of understanding of the self and how the conscious and unconscious work together to produce the self. He believes that the self is tucked away in the nucleus of the sphere that represents the individual.<sup>18</sup> Fincher expresses Jung's description of the archetype of the Self as "that aspect of the human psyche that creates pattern, orientation, and meaning."<sup>19</sup> In Western culture, the mandala is thought to portray the Self as well as provide a direction for one's life. It is thought that the symbols and motifs within the mandala depict experiences of the individual. In the practice of the mandala as a tool of self-expression and insight, it is thought that the circular shape of the mandala is representative of the individual's search for wholeness. In this pursuit of realizing wholeness, the individual must connect with the Self. Fincher suggests that creating mandalas is and has always been a method by which human consciousness searches for identity on the path to maturity. She also references Erich Neumann in *Art and the Creative Unconscious* when he discusses the use of mandalas by children as part of an "inborn process of orientation which allows the child to establish a sense of self as one existing in the real world of time, space, and location."<sup>20</sup> In this way, the Western view of creating mandalas can be thought of maneuvering through a maze that ultimately leads to the realization of self and purpose.

### 3. Conclusion

Although Eastern and Western views of the mandala may be extremely contradictory, the mandala has served as ancient link connecting cultures throughout history and across oceans. Neither model of the mandala can be determined as the "right" way to think about the world and self because it all boils down to spiritual beliefs. However, what can be recognized is the significance of natural cycles in the universe. Buddhists believe in the cycle of rebirth with a goal of escaping the suffering of life by achieving enlightenment. The Westerner is commonly concerned with Self, but also with determining the individual's purpose in the world. While Buddhism seems to provide a clear path and purpose in life for followers, religious beliefs characteristic of Western culture promote the idea of determining one's own path. Either way, both cultures are attempting to follow the "proper" path of life. Mandalas provide a visual representation of this maze we call life and the various directions we can take it.

### 4. Acknowledgements

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### 5. References

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### 6: Endnotes

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- 1 Fincher, Creating Mandalas, 2.
  - 2 Fincher, Creating Mandalas, 3.
  - 3 Tucci, The Theory and Practice, 25.
  - 4 Brauen, The Mandala, 11.
  - 5 Leidy, Mandala, 17.
  - 6 Fincher, Creating Mandalas, 24.
  - 7 Fincher, Creating Mandalas, 25.

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8 Levenson, Symbols of Tibetan Buddhism, 56-59.

9 Leidy, Mandala, 41

10 Leidy, Mandala, 41.

11 Fincher, Creating Mandalas, 24-32

12 Brauen, The Mandala, 15.

13 Jung, Man, 225.

14 Jung, Man, 162.

15 Jung, Man, 219.

16 Brauen, The Mandala, 22.

17 Brauen, The Mandala, 29.

18 Jung, Man and His Symbols, 161.

19 Fincher, Creating Mandalas, 20.

20 Fincher, Creating Mandalas, 21.