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The Mandala in Jungian Depth Psychology and Tibetan Buddhist Tantra



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Introduction

For countless millennia, the mandala has manifested in the religious iconography and cosmological symbolism of an array of diverse cultural traditions (Jung 1972), and in contemporary times it continues to hold an especially exalted place in the tantric practice of Tibetan Buddhism. Since the early twentieth century, in correlation with the pioneering work of Carl Jung, the mandala has also been understood as a fundamental symbol of psychological wholeness, and this primordial image thus serves as a distinctive connecting link through which to explore the overlapping characteristics and sometimes striking similarities between these otherwise disparate spiritual disciplines (Davis 2016).

Although each tradition arose in substantially different cultural, geographical, and historical circumstances, and despite the fact that each espouses distinctly contrasting notions of an ultimate ontological reality (the disparity between the Jungian *Self* and the Buddhist no-self being a primary example), both systems emphasize the

mind, or psyche, as the foundational basis of existence and the primary means through which liberation (in the Buddhist tradition) and psychic wholeness (as found in Jungian psychology) are pursued (Moacanin 2003). Further, both disciplines employ artistic expression and creative visualization practices as powerful agents of healing and transformation, and each system variously incorporates mythic images and wisdom figures – including those that arise in dreams and visionary experience – into its transformative processes. Among these various images and symbolic forms exists the mandala, which for both traditions variously exemplifies the totality of existence in which all opposites have been reconciled in correlation with the union of masculine and feminine principles.

The Mandala in Tibetan Buddhism

Having originated in India some 2500 years ago, Buddhism arrived on the Tibetan plateau in the seventh century C.E. during the reign of King Songsten Gampo (Tucci 1970/1980). The acceptance and expansion of this imported religion was greatly accentuated through the work of the renowned mystic Padmasambhava and the monk Santarakshita, and in about the year 779, it was officially indoctrinated through the founding of the first great monastery at Samye.

The tantric form of Indian Buddhism that was absorbed on the Tibetan plateau is known in

Sanskrit as *Vajrayana*, the Thunderbolt or Diamond Vehicle (Gyatso 1995). This esoteric system emphasizes the use of such contemplative practices as creative visualization, artistic expression, mantra recitation, the enactment of *mudras* (ritual poses), dream yoga, and various forms of meditation in order to facilitate spiritual development and ultimate liberation. Ultimately all of the various practices, methods, and rituals described above share one fundamental aim – the awakening to the truth of *Dharmakaya*, the timeless, indivisible, all-encompassing, and unchanging nature of the enlightened mind.

The most prominent symbol of enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism is the mandala (Leidy and Thurman 1997). Predating historical Buddhism by many centuries, the word *mandala* is an ancient Sanskrit term that loosely translated means *circle*. Further, from early on this term had “the generative meaning of a circle as a universal symbol for womb, for breast, for the nurturing source of life” (p. 130). It may also pertain to,

any circle or discoid object such as the sun or moon. In etymological studies, it is sometimes divided into *manda* – best part, highest part, highest point – and *la* – signpost or completion. The combination is explained as a place or point which contains an essence. In the Vedic *Brahmanas*, some of India’s earliest and most influential pre-Buddhist philosophical texts, *mandala* already signifies a sacred enclosure and is, at times, understood to mean a place created for the performance of a certain ritual or practice, or for the use of a great teacher or mystic. (p. 17)

Mandalas in the Tibetan tradition are produced with a number of different materials that include thread, sand, and even butter, but the most immediately recognizable forms are the brightly colored paintings typically referred to as *palace architecture* mandalas (Leidy and Thurman 1997). In an external sense, these mythic forms represent a diagram of a cosmos, and in an internal sense, they serve as a guide, or path, to spiritual liberation. Such mandalas exemplify a sacred precinct in which a center, or central point, is understood to represent the ultimate source of all that is – limitless and absolute, yet containing a center.

These complex and elaborate forms are typically comprised of,

an inner circle containing a principle deity (or deities). Enclosed in a multi-level square palace with openings at the four cardinal directions, the palace is placed in a multi-tiered circle. Additional figures are generally found outside this large circle. (p. 17)

As a sanctified space, the palace, which may also be depicted in the form of a temple, constitutes a kind of sacred architecture that is designed as a generative container of a profoundly transformative spiritual metamorphosis (Leidy and Thurman 1997). The mandala’s intrinsic structure and design thus reflect “a matter of imaginal world-patterning directly affecting inner structuring of physical and mental senses through actual brain organization” (p. 143). Accordingly, both the creation of and meditation upon such forms elicits a dynamic inner movement toward harmony and wholeness, which in turn extends the personal boundaries of the practitioner to include a merging with the outer environment and the totality of being. This transcendence beyond the personal self is absolutely fundamental to this process because,

in Buddhist usage, a mandala is a matrix or model of a perfected universe, the nurturing environment of the perfected self in ecstatic interconnection with perfected others. It is a blueprint for buddhahood conceived as attainment not only of an individual’s ultimate liberation, but also as the attainment of such release and bliss *by an individual fully integrated with his or her environment and field of associates*. . . . Within the vision of tantra as a world-creating process, mandalas are models used for creating Buddha-worlds. (p. 127)

Mandalas thus serve as both sacred representations of ultimate liberation as well as powerful agents of instruction and transformation, and in Tibet this consecrated mythic form has been guiding tantric practitioners for more than 1200 years.

The Mandala in Jungian Depth Psychology

The mandala also holds a special place in the tradition of depth psychology, and played a

particularly crucial role in Carl Jung's life and work (Jung 1963). His first rendering of a mandala occurred in 1916 in response to a period of extreme inner turmoil that arose following his break with Sigmund Freud. During this period of psychic upheaval, he began to spontaneously draw and paint mandalic forms, and Jung found that this process provided both psychotherapeutic relief and a degree of psychic cohesion to his fragmented condition. Toward the end of the First World War, his symptoms began to subside, and he observed that the restoration of his psychological well-being was aided significantly by his drawing and painting of mandalas, many of which are impressively portrayed in Jung's (2009) *The Red Book*. As a result of this process, Jung concluded that such forms emerge as part of the human psyche's inherent mechanism for the healing of inner fragmentation. He therefore determined that this dynamic symbolic form not only exists as a very effective therapeutic tool but also constitutes a potent representation of psychic unity and wholeness. Jung reflected on his discoveries as follows:

I sketched every morning in a notebook a small circular drawing, a mandala, which seemed to correspond to my inner situation at the time. With the help of these drawings I could observe my psychic transformations from day to day. . . . My mandalas were cryptograms. . . . in which I saw the self—that is, my whole being—actively at work. (1963, p. 195)

As noted in the above passage, Jung (1963) observed that during this long period of psychological discord, an unconscious aspect of his being was "actively at work" providing the creative impetus for the manifestation of these mandalas, which in turn served as the very instruments of his recovery. And it was the creative formulation of these images (which also arose in the dream state), and the resulting calm and psychic cohesion they produced, that led him to the conclusion that "the mandala is the center. It is the exponent of all paths. It is the path to the center, to individuation" (p. 196). In time, Jung would refer to this "center" as the *Self*, which represents the totality of one's being and exists as the very source to which the process of individuation (i.e., psychospiritual development) is directed.

The mandala thus represents the human psyche in a state of wholeness, or completion, and at the same time serves as a dynamic agent of healing and transformation. This process of transformation represents a binary relationship between ego-consciousness (one's normal waking state, or *little self*) and the Self (the totality of being), with waking consciousness forever expanding and moving toward completion through the integration of unconscious material — the as yet unrealized inner potential of the Self. Mandalas and other archetypal forms arise from the Self and serve as essential connecting links between the conscious ego and the unconscious, thus orchestrating and deepening this inner movement toward psychic wholeness.

In correlation with his own experience, Jung (1972) encouraged his patients to paint their own mandalas as part of the therapeutic process, and the works they produced were instrumental in helping him to procure a diagnosis of their personality disorders as well as their developmental inclinations and spiritual potentialities. This led him to the understanding that,

mandalas are important indicators of the process of personal growth that moves you toward fulfilling your particular identity and purpose in life. The mandalas we create indicate our premonition of a center of personality, a kind of central point within the psyche, to which everything is related, by which everything is arranged, and which is itself a source of energy. The energy of the central point is manifested in the almost irresistible compulsion and urge to become what one is, just as every organism is driven to assume the form that is characteristic of its nature, no matter what the circumstances (p. 73)

As Jung (1936/1958) would later discover, this notion of a central point to which everything is related is a key aspect of the Tibetan tantric tradition as well, and Jung's understanding of the mandala as a mythic symbol representing both healing and wholeness served to further his growing interest in Eastern spirituality and its complex symbolism, especially as found in the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. This would contribute directly to Jung's (1959) seminal theory of the *archetypes of the collective unconscious* (i.e., universal mythic images that manifest worldwide

throughout human history), with the mandala representing “the psychological expression of the totality of the self” (1972, p. 20).

Conclusion

For more than 1200 years, the mandala has served as a fundamental guiding force in the religious practice of Tibetan Buddhism, and has acted as both an instrument of spiritual development and a sanctified representation of enlightenment. In the twentieth century, the mandala would play a prominent role in the life and work of Carl Jung, for whom it served as both an agent of psychological healing and a numinous symbol of psychic wholeness. Jung’s passionate interest in Tibetan Buddhism and other Asian spiritual disciplines would prove instrumental in the emergence of the East-West dialogue that over the past decades has sought to explore the intriguing intersection between modern Western psychology and ancient Eastern religious traditions (Clark 1994). These correlations have been especially well exemplified by the primordial image of the mandala, which in Jungian psychology, Tibetan Tantra, and countless other traditions has signified the *center*, the immeasurable and undivided totality in which all things ultimately arise and return.

See Also

- ▶ [Buddhism’s Vajrayana: Tantra](#)
- ▶ [Depth Psychology and Spirituality](#)

- ▶ [Jung, Carl Gustav, and Eastern Religious Traditions](#)

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