



Mandalas for Meditation and Meaning

Creative Wellbeing Workshops, LLC



Mandalas are circular designs that are used in spiritual practices and in therapy as a means to center, ground, and engage in self-reflection. It may seem odd that such a simple form could have such powerful associations, especially when we consider that the Sanskrit word “mandala”, at its simplest, just means circle. And yet mandala images appear throughout the world as containers of magical and sacred properties. In addition, research has shown that when people draw mandalas it helps them focus, relax, and connect with themselves and others better.

The mandalas that most people are familiar with are the sand paintings created by Tibetan monks. The symbolic meanings in the designs they lay out grain-by-grain serve as tools to facilitate contemplation and meditation. Once they are complete, a process which often takes days, they are swept away to signify the impermanence of life.



The ritual that goes into making Tibetan mandalas has been likened to a highly orchestrated symphony. Mandalas are also used more informally in art therapy to warm people up to the art process, a practice



that might be likened more to improvisational jazz. Sometimes people will draw their own circle or use a pre-drawn circle. Other times they will use mandala coloring sheets that have designs in them already. This might be akin to doing a personalized interpretation of someone else’s music.

In art therapy, we often explore with the artists how they responded to the circle—whether they drew inside of it, went outside of the outline, or ignored it altogether. We also look at the images that they included and what is communicated by the visual elements (color, intensity, line quality, texture, proportions, etc.) to see what meaning can be determined from the metaphors they suggest. This is based on the notion that what appears in the artwork, not matter how simple, both intentionally and unintentionally reflects something about the person who made it. Art externalizes our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs and gives us an opportunity to see them in ourselves in a new light.

The real purpose of mandala is to inspire the transmutation of sight into insight. Carl Jung

Sigmund Freud was one of the first to use art with his patients to help them discover more about the unconscious workings of their minds. His disciple Carl Jung believed that, because certain imagery seemed to appear universally, it contained information not only about the individual person but also about the collective human experience. He was particularly taken with mandalas images, such as the sacred circles we see in Tibetan sand paintings, Native American medicine wheels, paintings, the Aztec Calendar, the yin yang symbol, and the Rose windows in Cathedrals, which he believed represented unity and spiritual wholeness.



Anthropological studies confirm that we share universal understandings of visual imagery; e.g., that the sun is associated with masculinity and the moon with femininity; and that circles seem to be associated with unity and wholeness. The circle also seems to have developmental significance—it is the first controlled shape that we draw as children—and research confirms that coloring in circular shapes is more relaxing than coloring other shapes.

Jung was so taken with the power of mandalas that he drew them every day. He believed that they held



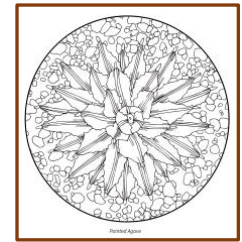
a key not only to the complexities of his personal thoughts and feelings but also access to the collective unconscious, a universal pool of human experience. In other words, he saw



mandalas as messages both from the self to the self and from the universe to the self.

Using mandalas for meditation may be done by incorporating them in rituals to initiate a spiritual journey or more spontaneously to see what emerges in the artmaking process and the images. In addition, because just coloring mandalas frequently induces focus, flow, and the relaxation response, just making them can be deeply calming and meditative. This can be especially helpful for people who have anxiety or who get discouraged because they can't quiet their minds or sit still enough to engage in traditional meditation.

Mandalas can start by drawing a simple circle freehand or tracing a circle with a plate—any size that feels right. You can also use mandala coloring books that already have designs in the circle. The level of detail may influence which ones are most appealing. For example, the images in the *Miraval Mandalas Coloring Book* are fairly complex outlines of animals and nature; whereas others may be more simple abstract shapes. Some may be endowed with special meaning and others might just be beautiful designs.



There is no right or wrong way to create a mandala. Experiment with different art materials, colors, marks, and images and find what works for you. You might start with an intention—something you want to focus on or learn more about—or you can just jump in and let the process take you wherever it goes. Sometimes your mandalas may seem more artistically successful than others, regardless, they are capturing something about you at that moment. If you have the opportunity to work with an art therapist, you can go deeper into the meanings and metaphors that emerge in the symbols and visual elements and the way those come together.

Like Jung, some people engage in a regular practice of mandalas. They become a road map to their internal world and a record of their journey through life. Others just enjoy occasionally coloring them as a relaxing pastime and a way to unwind. Whatever approach you take to these “sacred circles”, we hope they provide you with a source of mediation, relaxation, and personal growth.

Resources

- The Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism. Martin Brauen.
- Mandala: Luminous symbols for healing. Joseph Cornell,
- Mandalas of the world: A meditating and painting guide.
- Coloring mandalas for insight, healing, and self expression. Susanne Fincher.
- The archetypes and the collective unconscious and Mandala Symbolism. Carl Jung,
- Mandala: Path of beauty. Joan Kellogg.
- The Miraval Mandalas Book, 2016. Rebecca Wilkinson.
- Positive Art Therapy in Theory and Practice: Integrating Positive Psychology with Art Therapy. Routledge. Rebecca Wilkinson and Gioia Chilton.

“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.” Carl Jung