

The Maṇḍala and Mandalization.

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The now rather commonly-seen *maṇḍala* art object found in Asian-oriented gift-shops and art museums is traditionally used as a symbol of the cosmos, and of the God-Self or Buddha-nature that is the ultimate source of the cosmos. The word “*maṇḍala*” (pronounced “MUN da la”) is a Sanskrit term and literally means “circle” or “ring.” The Tibetan equivalent, “*dkyil-ḥkhor*,” is sometimes rendered “center,” or “that which surrounds.”[1]

Maṇḍalas were and are consciously, deliberately created in the *Tantra* schools of Hinduism and Vajrayāna Buddhism to serve as visual concentrative meditation objects, also known as *yantras*. That these are *not* simply schematized works of art but are *sophisticated instruments in an overall science of consciousness* was confirmed by a Tibetan *lama*, Lingdam Gomchen, who explained to psychiatrist Carl Jung in 1938 that the true *maṇḍala* is always an inner, mental image (*dmigs-pa*), which is gradually built up by a competent *lama* through active imagination, and that the *maṇḍalas* to be found in monasteries and temples are actually of *no particular significance* because they are external representations only.[2]

Jung maintains that *maṇḍalas* “originated in dreams and visions, and were not invented by some Mahāyāna [Buddhist] church father. On the contrary, they are among the oldest religious symbols of humanity and may even have existed in paleolithic times (cf. the Rhodesian rock paintings). Moreover, they are distributed all over the world....”[3]

Jung thus claimed that the *maṇḍala* is “an archetype which is inherent in the collective unconscious and thus beyond individual birth and death. The archetype is, so to speak, an ‘eternal’ presence, and the only question is whether it is perceived by the conscious mind or not.”[4]

Jung himself found that *maṇḍalas* spontaneously arose in the dreams of his clients and also in drawings made by them during the course of psychoanalysis. He concluded that the *maṇḍala* “portrays an autonomous psychic fact, characterized by a phenomenology which is always repeating itself and is everywhere the same.”[5] Jung further stated that the appearance of the *maṇḍala* in the psychic contents of a client signified that “a rearranging of the personality is involved, a kind of new centering. That is why *maṇḍalas* mostly appear in connection with chaotic psychic states of disorientation or panic. They then have the purpose of reducing the confusion to order, though this is never the conscious intention of the patient. At all events they express order, balance, and wholeness.”[6]

We have learned that the *maṇḍala* is an “eternally present archetype,” that *maṇḍalas* appear spontaneously during “chaotic psychic states of disorientation or panic in order to effect wholeness,” and that they are also deliberately visualized by relatively sane individuals (i.e., the practitioners of *Tantra*) for the purpose of concentrative meditation. Unknown to us are the psychodynamics and/or motives which led to the creation of those other *maṇḍalas* that have come down to us from diverse times and places, the *maṇḍalas* that have mainly functioned, not so much as concentration or catharsis-devices, but as religious/magical art, or as cosmological maps or schemas. A list of these would include the zodiacal chart, the Aztec Sunstone Calendar, the Mexican calendar, the Emerald Table of the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus, the Chinese mythic Golden Flower, the Yang/Yin symbol, the images of “Earlier Heaven” and of “Later Heaven” from the *I Ching* (Book of Changes) and the Chinese mirrors of ancient times, the Hawaiian “Cross of the Solar Flower,” the “God’s Eye” of Mexican peyote cults, the Christian images of the Christ crucified, surrounded by the four evangelists in their symbolic form, the Christian “rose windows” from Gothic cathedrals, the Tibetan Buddhist “Wheel of Life, the “Magic Circle” of Western alchemy, the Uroboros (serpent swallowing its tail) of Chinese and Western alchemy, the Australian “Tjuringa stone” (“Map of the Journeying of the Ancestors of the Dream Time”), and the Navaho sandpaintings, “Four Houses of the Sun” and “Slayer of Alien Gods.”

Jose and Miriam Argüelles, in their comprehensive book, *Mandala*, declare that “all sacred religious structures partake of the Maṇḍala principle: the Egyptian and Mexican pyramids, the temples

of India, Buddhist stupas, Islamic mosques, the pagodas of China and Japan; and the tipis and kivas of North America. The most highly developed cruciform Maṇḍala is in the churches and cathedrals of the Christian World.”[7]

Aside from man-made maṇḍalic structures, nature has come up with some *maṇḍalas* of her own, at least as they are perceived by man: the lotus, the rose (and many other flowers), cross-sections of stems (as revealed by photomicrographs) and tree-trunks, tiny animals such as the Arachnoidisus Ehrenbergii, spider webs, the snow crystal (and elemental crystalline structures), x-ray diffraction patterns of the elements, certain galaxies, and the eye—especially the human eye. The Argüelles write,

“The Maṇḍala has appeared throughout man’s history as a universal and essential symbol of integration, harmony, and transformation. It gives form to the most primordial intuition of the nature of reality. . . The circle is the original sign, the prime symbol of the nothing and the all. . . the all encompassing form beyond and through which man finds and loses himself. This is the originless Maṇḍala. No race is without it, for it comprises the All, its source and its ending.”[8]

The circle symbolizes the sun, a sphere, and, because of its unbroken continuity, it symbolizes eternity. Mathematically, it stands for the number ten, *signifying* the return to unity from multiplicity.[9] None of this, however, would seem to be enough to account for the human’s fascination with the circle. Kathryn Ridall has convincingly maintained[10] that a psychological factor which would account for the circle’s relevance to humans is that the circle is one of the first shapes presented to the newborn infant: namely, as the shape of the aureole around the mother’s nipple, and also as the shape of her face and the pupils of her eyes. Indeed, the mother’s aureole, with the nipple in the center, is not only a beautiful visual *maṇḍala*, but also a most nourishing, comforting, and warmth-giving one as well. Anyone attuning his/her consciousness to a *maṇḍala* is, therefore, very likely going to recover and re-experience the feelings of love, acceptance, nourishment and warmth that accompanied his/her relation to that maternal *maṇḍala* encountered at the beginning of this earthly life.

So far we have been referring to the *maṇḍala* as a finished product. We should know that the creation of the *maṇḍala* is also of great importance in what may be called the overall “maṇḍalization process” (for a clarification of this term, see below). If it is true that, as Jung maintained, the *maṇḍala* is an archetype and represents an autonomous psychic fact, then the construction of a *maṇḍala*, and the subsequent visualizing of the *maṇḍala* as a mental image (that is, in those traditions where this visualization is done) becomes a most significant event in that it is the bringing into consciousness what was previously un- or subconscious, the actualizing of the latent, the uncovering of that which was covered by ignorance. In the cultures where this significance is appreciated, especially in the Hindu and Buddhist Tantra sects of the East, the creating of the *maṇḍala* and subsequent work with it becomes a most sacred ritual, a way of divinizing human experience. It would take too long to describe the ways in which this ritual is carried out; the interested reader might consult the references at the end of this paper.[11]

Earlier we talked at length of the *maṇḍala*-as-circle. But it is actually the center of the *maṇḍala* that may be considered the most important principle. About the *maṇḍala* and its center the Argüelles observe:

“Universally inherent in man’s consciousness, the Maṇḍala has continually appeared in his constructions, rituals, and art forms. From its various manifestations we can derive three basic properties: a center, symmetry, cardinal points. The first principle is constant; the latter two vary according to the nature of the particular Maṇḍala.[12]... The universality of the Maṇḍala is in its one constant, the *principle of the center*. The center is the beginning of the Maṇḍala as it is the beginning and origin of all form and of all processes. . . The center is symbolic of the eternal potential.”[13]

An ancient esoteric truth at the heart of most of the world’s spiritual traditions is that *who we really are*, that is, our *true identity*, is God, *Ātman/Brahman, Tao, Allah, Buddha-nature*, which is the divine origin and source of all. Hence the center of the *maṇḍala* is none other than *a symbol for our own Self*. The rest of the *maṇḍala* then becomes a symbol for the Self’s creation(s), that is to say, a symbol for how the formless Self manifests in form—for example, as the personality, the body-mind,

subtle bodies, various worlds/planes, or the entire cosmos. In the usual *maṇḍalas*, these are represented by circles, squares, triangles, octagons, etc., and by variously colored images. But the center of the *maṇḍala*, which often takes the symbolic form of a divinity such as Śiva or (a) Buddha, always remains primary, inviting the individual to find his/her own center. Thus, when an individual looks at or visualizes a *maṇḍala*, s/he must intuit the profound nature of the Self, and realize it to be the center of the *maṇḍala*. Here is what some other authors have said about the centering process. The Arguelles write, “Maṇḍala is a centering technique, a process of consciously following a path to one’s center.”[14]

For Carl Jung, “...mandala symbols... signify nothing less than a psychic center of personality not to be identified with the ego.”[15] Elsewhere, he states,

“The goal of contemplating the processes depicted in the mandala is that the yogi shall become inwardly aware of the deity. Through contemplation, he recognizes himself as God again, and thus returns from the illusion of individual existence into the universal totality of the divine state.[16]... The yogi exchanges his ego for Siva or the Buddha; in this way he induces a shifting of the psychological center of personality from the personal ego to the impersonal non-ego, which is now experienced as the real ‘Ground’ of the personality.”[17]

Mircea Eliade, after a discussion of the similarities between the *maṇḍalas* of Eastern spiritual traditions and the labyrinths of the Mystery Schools, gives us an even richer way of looking at the use of the *maṇḍala*:

“... the functions of the *maṇḍala*—like that of the labyrinth—would be at least twofold. On the one hand, entrance into a *maṇḍala* drawn on the ground is equivalent to an initiation; on the other, the *maṇḍala* ‘defends’ the disciple against any destructive force and at the same time helps him to concentrate, to find his own ‘center.’”[18]

The destructive forces that Eliade mentions are anything that serves to distract and detour the attention of the yogi away from his true Self and fixate it on one of the Self’s manifest forms.

The process of “centering” may be spoken of glibly. We should know, however, that it ultimately involves the *integration and even transformation of our entire being*. This starts with the body, which, during Tantra meditation, itself is felt as becoming a *maṇḍala*. Furthermore, according to the theory of the *kuṇḍalinī* energy which is awakened and “raised” during Tantra meditation, each of the *cakras* (Skt., “wheels”), or psychic energy centers, along the *suṣumnā nāḍī* (central pathway or channel for the flow of energy) are themselves realized to be *maṇḍalas*. Lama Anagarika Govinda claims that “the term ‘*cakra*’ is in fact often used as a synonym for ‘*maṇḍala*.’”[19] Therefore, just as the body becomes a kind of “sacred-temple-*maṇḍala*,” so also “the psychic centres of the body [i.e., the *cakras*] become the five [or seven, or whatever number of *cakras* you believe to be existent] stories of the sacred temple.”[20] Each of the *cakras* are purified, energized, and attuned to a divine principle (e.g., the Dhyāni Buddhas) so as to effect a total transformation of the meditator’s system.

The process of centering in one’s true Self and of *whole-ing, purifying, and edifying* the various aspects of the Self—this process we may call “*maṇḍalization*.”

Maṇḍalization gives rise to the awareness that *all of existence is a maṇḍala*. The *Demchog Tantra (dpa.l bkhor-lo bde-mchog)* states that “one should regard oneself and all that is visible as a divine *maṇḍala*...”[21] Lama Govinda adds, “The meditator must imagine himself in the center of the *maṇḍala* as an embodiment of the divine figure of perfect Buddhahood....”[22]

The Arguelles declare: “The visualization and creation of the Maṇḍala receives its consecration when the individual realizes himself as all things, knowing that the Maṇḍala has been embodied within him.... there is a return to the point of origin. The return depends upon the transference of the mind-contents to the projected Maṇḍala so that the mind becomes transfigured into the Maṇḍala. Because of this mental change the process of the everyday slowly becomes maṇḍalized. Basic bodily functions are experienced as an interrelated whole; feelings and emotional dispositions receive their colors and cardinal points; modes of perception are distinguished and take their places in the compass of being; the will and volitional tendencies become harmonized accordingly; consciousness is transformed into a discriminating tool at once beyond all condition and conception, and at the same time immersed in

the perpetual flow of change. The world and its inhabitants are realized as integral facets of one Maṇḍala.... The maṇḍalic attitude is neither egocentric nor necessarily anthropomorphic. Nothing is excluded; everything finds its place and is understood as an integral aspect of a whole process. And because everything is interrelated and derives meaning only through relationship, things in themselves are seen to be void of any self-nature [i.e., they are *anatta*, as the Buddhists would say]. This openness is the basis of all things and is at the very center of the Maṇḍala [that is to say, the Self is pristine openness in its true nature]. It is what makes the maṇḍalic attitude a perpetually transformative vision, for it is rooted in no-thing, and can adopt itself to whatever configurations the life-flow presents.”[23]

I will let these concluding statements of the Argüelles’ also serve as the conclusion for this paper, re-wording the essential idea in the following terms: The gross *maṇḍala* structure ultimately yields to a *maṇḍalized awareness* on the part of the yogi who has created, gazed at, and/or visualized the *maṇḍala*; the yogi’s maṇḍalized awareness realizes itself to be the indeterminate, mysterious matrix allowing all possible dream-forms to fleetingly appear and then vanish in the delightful, ongoing dance of being. The *maṇḍala* has been realized to be the One’s expression as All.

Notes

1. Eliade, Mircea, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (W.R. Trask, Tr.), Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969, p. 219.
2. Jung, Carl G. *Collected Works of C.G.Jung*, Vol. 12 (Psychology and Alchemy) (R.F.C. Hull, Tr.), Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968, p. 96.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 183
6. Jung, *op. cit.*, Vol 9 (The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious), N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1959, pp. 360-1.
7. Pictures of most of these are to be found in Jose and Miriam Argüelles, *Mandala* (Berkeley, CA: Shambala, 1972).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 33
9. See J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (J. Sage, Tr.), N.Y.: Philosophical Library, 1962.
10. Kathryn Ridall, personal communication, San Francisco, 8/80.
11. The best source for the ritualistic use of the *maṇḍala* is Giuseppe Tucci, *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala* (A.H. Brodrick, Tr.), N.Y.: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1969, ch.4-5. Eliade provides insights and interprets some of Tucci’s work in his *Yoga, op. cit.*, pp. 223-5; Anagarika Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, N.Y.: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1973, is a most useful supplement here and provides an extensive analysis of the symbolism involved in the Eastern *maṇḍalas*. The Argüelles’ *Mandala, op.cit.*, pp. 84-99, is the only book that provides any real cross-cultural evidence on the ritualistic use of the *maṇḍala*.
12. Argüelles, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
15. Jung, *op. cit.*, Vol 12, p. 98-9.
16. *Ibid.*, Vol 9, p. 357.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 358.
18. Eliade, *op. cit.*
19. Govinda, *op. cit.*, p. 181.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
21. Quoted in Govinda, *op. cit.*, p. 181.
22. Govinda, *op. cit.*, p. 181.
23. Argüelles, *op. cit.*, p. 126-7.