

The Way of the Mandala¹



Huichol nieli'ka Mandala, Mexico



Kalachakra Mandala, Tibet



Sriyantra Mandala, India



OraWorldMandala logo

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1. Introduction

An integrated structure organized around a unifying center
Longchen Ramjampa, 14th century Tibetan scholar-saint

Rooted in Indian soil and in Sanskrit language, the word “mandala” translates as “circle” (notice the prominence of the circle in the figures above), even though the less literal meaning it conveys, is both that of *matrix* and *representation* of existence as will be discussed later. Hindu and Buddhist sacred art have contributed to the popularity of the mandala form, which has symbolic and ritual significance. Particularly in the Vajrayana Buddhism of Tibet, the mandala serves as an aid to spiritual development, an entry into sacred space where the micro and macro dimensions of the cosmos are recognized as reflections of each other. Tibetan lamas create temporary sand mandalas (which are dismantled after the ceremony) – that are reminders of the impermanence and ephemeral nature of reality – as a basis for ritual initiation into spiritual practice.

Though prevalent in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, mandala making is practiced also by native populations, particularly of the Americas. The Navajos of North America create sand mandalas that are used in ceremonies to cultivate a harmonious relationship with the spirit world and are erased afterwards. The Huichols of Mexico place in their sacred sites mandalas made of coloured yarn – called *nieli'ka* – which depict deities and stories of creation. Besides Indian Indians and American Indians, the creation of “integrated structures organized around a unifying centre” is common to cultures the world over and in that sense if we wanted to write an executive summary of this article we could well say that, knowingly or unknowingly, all people in all places are busy making mandalas all the

¹ The first draft was conceived in 2010.

time.

A mandala is a way to view and represent phenomena in time and space, meaning the space occupied or unoccupied by matter – or thought - over time. It shows simultaneously the various points of convergence between these two dimensions in the existence of any given phenomena, tangible or not. The mandala depicts the infallible law of transformation at every point in time and space. By illustrating the process by which diverse elements give birth to a larger system, the mandala is a poetic metaphor for the intrinsic interrelation of micro and macro cosmology. This perspective points to a dynamic whole that can easily – but not necessarily – be represented as a pictogram.

Much has been written about the mandala as a pictogram, its symbolism and uses, particularly in sacred rituals within the scope of religion. Here, however, we shall look mostly at the mandala as a principle, a perspective, an approach to reality and to the dynamic nature of life. We shall not so much try to understand the “form of the mandala” but rather seek to travel “the way of the mandala”. The mandala principle serves a double purpose and offers a double insight: on the ontological level (the way things *are* in their true essence) it guides us to a broader view of reality, and on the practical level it points to a course of action that is consonant with that view. As such the mandala can represent all aspects and levels of life, whether commonly perceived as ‘sacred’ or ‘profane’.

Let’s look at the broader view first.

The universe – meaning everything that exists - is already perfect as it is. It flows with perfect harmony. If we looked at the universe as *the universal mandala*, that would be a mandala of perfection.² We say that the universe flows perfectly because this is what we observe, and, even more simply, because of the very fact that we *can* observe it. However, allowing ourselves to be struck by the vision of the subtle perfection of existence may require that we summon the courage to let go of our all-too-familiar narrow perceptions and embrace the widest possible panoramic view of space and time. We may find, then, that space and time are beyond “here and there” and “before and after” but instead they together constitute that ‘where and when’ from which all events can manifest and flow. This is in fact the first aspect of the mandala principle, which expresses itself as totality and equanimity.

Before we move on to the next chapter, it is necessary clarify a few points. The mandala is in essence holographic and multidimensional, and it accommodates spontaneously and simultaneously all the elements that make up its configuration as well as all possible relationships existing between these elements, including their dynamic processes in space and time. Since the medium of words does not allow for simultaneity, the various aspects of the mandala principle will have to be examined separately. Let us remember, however, that these aspects CANNOT exist separately and therefore, as we read on, let us allow enough spaciousness in our attention to retrace the connections, even when not immediately obvious.

² Let us clarify that there is nothing here to be read “between the lines”, nothing that is hidden from the lines. We are not trying to obliquely suggest that this perfection is the function of a creator or that it serves as proof of the existence of god. We are not talking about god here, we are just talking about existence.

2. The mandala of essence: totality and equanimity.

Awareness of the mandala may have the potential
of changing how we see ourselves,
our planet, and perhaps even our own life purpose.

Bailey Cunningham in 'Mandala: Journey to the Center'

There is not one single definition of mandala but rather infinite interconnected definitions. Yet, we have to begin somewhere, so let us begin with an 'overall' definition. Let us say that a mandala is a template for the complexity of reality. In simpler words, it is a way to make sense of apparent chaos. A mandala could represent a photon, an atom, a molecule, a flower, an organizational chart, a community, a whole society, nature, the earth, the solar system, the cosmos, the universe, the human community or one single consciousness, all of whom share the characteristic of existing in space and time. Space and time are the essential coordinates of our navigation in life but we take them so much for granted that we end up ignoring them. Just for once, let's examine our ordinary perception of them as against the mandala perspective.



The mandala can be said to contain space and time, and yet it is not bound by them. The mandala seems to deal with space and time in a *total* way. Let us take an easy example: let's try making a tree-mandala. If someone asked us to sketch a tree, we would come up with an image that, like the example shown here, includes a trunk, branches and leaves and perhaps fruits, with due differences based on the kind of tree we are most familiar with (our personal tree-template). We would normally think of this picture, *but also of a real tree*, as something "standing separate" from us and made up of these few simple characteristics. But if someone asked us to write an essay about the tree, we would definitely get into a much more comprehensive examination of our subject and describe how it is born, how it grows, how forests are important to the air we breathe, how much we depend on trees and so on. Now if we were asked to bring the sketch and the essay together and summarize their content in a single picture that conveys the *totality* of the tree in time a space, we would have no other choice than to draw a mandala.

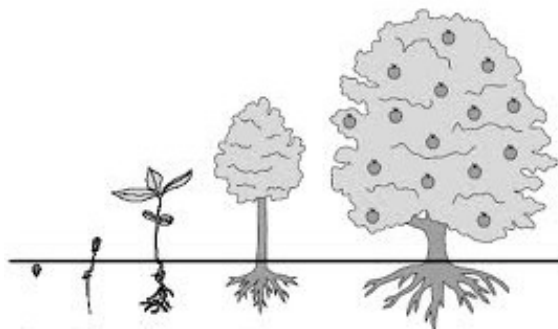
Our Tree Mandala would likely end up looking somewhat like the picture below. If you viewed a tree from the roots up and from the top down simultaneously, you would have the seed (the primary cause of the tree) in the centre, surrounded by the concentric circles of the trunk (as in the cross section that marks the tree's growth), the roots (emanating from the centre but visible only at the periphery), and by the canopy of leaves. Moreover, the "totality" of the tree would have to include the natural elements that allow the seed to sprout and the tree to grow and stay alive. These could be represented as embracing the tree, protecting it and supporting it. In the picture above these elements are symbolized by the four outer circles: earth, water, fire (heat) and air (oxygen). In a mandala the fifth element, space, is often subsumed and not visibly shown, since space permeates every thing and without it nothing could exist. But here the outer circle has been made larger to

accommodate both the elements of air (represented by the wiggling doodles) and space (the deep blue color).



Tree Mandala © hand painted by Mudita Mathur

You would now clearly see that in this tree-mandala, both time and space get *compressed* - or *flattened* - such that the leaves are on the same *space-plane* as the seed, the trunk and the roots, which does not happen in a frontal picture where the roots are below, the trunk in the middle and the canopy above (see the full grown tree below). “At the same time”, the seed is on the same *time-plane* as the trunk and the leaves, which does not apply in a linear depiction of the same tree as seen in the following time-line picture.



In conclusion, viewing the tree as a mandala, helps us to clearly perceive its essence, the *treeness* that is its total dimension beyond space and time.

In the mandala, space and time become almost fused, or in the least interchangeable, in the same way they do, *interestingly*, at the level of quantum reality, what we could call, for

simplicity, the microscopic dimension. We say *interestingly* because this brings the mandala perspective closer to a scientific view of reality that is based on direct examination of physical phenomena. It is as if the process of drawing a mandala functions somewhat like a magical pantograph that can *precipitate* onto an empty circle the essentials of a much larger and complex system. A mirroring process from macro to micro. Conversely, if we were to draw the mandala of an atom, we would be *exploding* the size from micro to macro, just as a pantograph can do. It is almost a magical process, a sort of alchemy. In fact cutting-edge quantum physics (particularly superstring and M-theory) are almost alchemical in trying to reconcile the laws of the smallest particle with those of the largest galaxies. *This startling vision culminates in a vibrant eleven-dimensional "multiverse," pulsating with ever-changing textures, where space and time themselves may dissolve into subtler, more fundamental entities.*³

Have you noticed that if we count the layers of our Tree Mandala, we get eleven of them i.e. nine inner circles plus two for the double outermost layer = eleven? It is probably just a coincidence, but it does show that a tree can have *at least* eleven dimensions. Why is it so important to touch base with this vision? It is important because this *way of seeing*, this *view*, is the closest approximation of the way things actually *are*. We could call this view the “basic mandala”, the basic “circle”. The circle is a symbol of perfection, where all directions are equally present, thus beyond space. Having no beginning and no end, the circle is also beyond time. When we look at anything from such a perspective, something opens up in us that it would be difficult to describe in words. It is a feeling of longing, magic, peace, déjà vu, perhaps goose pimples and a sense of having touched on something precious.

Now, when we say that the elements of a mandala exist “on the same plane”, do we also mean that they are equally important? If we look at the tree example, we would be tempted to say that the seed is the most important factor because it is the primary cause of the tree. However, one seed alone could hardly be conceived as serving the purpose of a tree. Similarly, the trunk is very important - without it there would be no leaves, no flowers, no fruits and no further seeds - but if we had just a trunk, it would not fulfill the complete function of the tree. And the same goes for the roots, the leaves etc. Therefore every element of the mandala is *equally* important. This state of affairs, this state of *being equally important* is what we call equanimity.

To most people the word equanimity does not resonate with an objective quality of phenomena but rather with a subjective emotion. We think that we need to make an effort to consider as “*equal*” things that are otherwise not so in reality. Blinded as we are by the dualistic habit of over-emphasizing differences, we like to think of things in terms of important and useless, good and bad. Not so. Equanimity, far from being a subjective emotion, is *part of the very nature of things as they are*. In the process of coming to terms with this “novel” view, much of our self-importance is redressed.

But let's look beyond the tree. Let's look at social mandalas - what we call social systems - through our newly found mandalic view. In the case of equanimity, we will have to accept that infants are as important as adults, women as important as men, artists as important as

³ Brian Green, The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of reality

intellectuals and so on. The moment we push one group aside, the moment we make “priorities” and “divisions” and “rejections”, we are defying the natural law of equanimity, which leads to an inevitable state of imbalance.

The same is true on a larger scale. Take the environment mandala and the imbalance caused by the misjudgments of the human community. As a matter of fact, until we are “struck” at the very core of our being by the realization that every part is equally important to the survival of the whole, we shall not attain peace. Vice versa, the moment we truly realize equanimity, it is no longer possible for us to harm anybody or anything. True ahimsa, then, is rooted not just in a general concept of non-violence but in a deep, heart-embedded appreciation of equanimity, whose highest point, in human terms, is the realization that all sentient beings on earth equally strive for happiness and equally seek freedom from suffering.

To sum up the first insight offered by the mandala principle: understanding *totality* and *equanimity* points to the possibility of *being* in a manner consistent with the way of the mandala and trains us to develop an approach to *doing* that will eventually resonate with the dynamic flow of the mandala.

Until then, we must operate in the dimension of linear time and within the within the borders of imperfect mandalas created by beings of limited scope. Wherever we look we can’t help but notice that there is an enormous gap between the way things are and the way we think them to be. This gap is the most fertile soil for the proliferation of all kinds of distorted views, which in turn fuel the growth of negative emotions and destructive activity. In due course, the gap becomes an ego-mandala obeying to the dictates of ignorance, greed and hatred. Soon we lose touch with the basic mandala, until it is forgotten altogether. Fortunately, every mandala, even the ego-mandala, must respond to natural laws. Progress, then, towards reclaiming the gap must necessarily include a closer comprehension of these indisputable laws, the most important of which is interdependence⁴.

The Mandala of motion: interdependence

**Humankind has not woven the web of life,
we are but one thread within it.
Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.
All things are bound together. All things connect.**

Chief Seattle - as quoted in www.clareultimo.com



A symbol of interdependence

Before we explore the second insight, which is rooted in the recognition of interdependence *as the way things happen*, we must understand that interdependence itself

⁴ interdependence is a term used in Indian philosophy, particularly in the Buddhist context, to underline the fact that everything depends on everything else. We have preferred it here instead of interrelation or interconnection, because it is important to understand the relationship of “dependence” that exist between phenomena in the web of life. This is one of the best ways to understand the *way things are*.

happens within the sphere of totality and therefore we can appreciate that the totality we spoke about earlier is not a very crowded place but rather a field of spacious openness that is *capable* of accommodating the dynamics of phenomena, as they *become, evolve, connect*. This field of spacious openness could be called the *ground* of being and it must be permeated by our own conscious awareness, which cannot be shown in diagrams but without which the idea of the mandala might as well not exist since there would be no one to observe existence in the first place. Consciousness, then, could be said to be the “hidden” basis of existence.

Back to the tree-mandala, when we look at it from the point of view of interdependence, we begin to see it *in action*, we can see the water and the heat as they enter the seed and cause it to open; how the roots travel into the earth to find and draw in the water and the minerals that are needed for the trunk to grow and branch out and give birth to the leaves; how the leaves interact with the air element to release oxygen and so on. We can also see that the moment the leaves get infested by pests, the whole tree-mandala is suffering. If the roots dry up, the tree dies.

In a mandala, then, every element is not only as important as the next, but also *actively* connected to every other element to weave what some ancient traditions call the “magical net” of existence. That is to say every mandala is a big web of interdependence. Even if a small thread in the fabric of the mandala snaps, the whole net suffers. The motor of such mutual dependence is the natural law of cause and effect, whereby each phenomena is the result of a cause and in turn acts as the cause for some other phenomena to come into being or to change and evolve or to come to an end and die.

Interdependence is a dynamic process in perpetual motion, infinitely complex and minutely precise. No wonder some cultures of wisdom have called it “magical”. It will never happen that an apple seed gives birth to a banana tree, neither will ever peace grow out of violence. Interdependence teaches us that, no matter how self-obsessed we might be, we can only live in inter-action with others and the environment. Thus, separately from other beings and things, *we CAN NOT and DO NOT exist*. This obvious but much ignored ontological paradigm translates into a natural law that Eastern traditions call *shunyata* – lack of independent existence.

Therefore, since we depend on other beings and things, it is in our very interest to treat them well and inter-act with them with gratitude, loving kindness, respect and open-heartedness. Anger and other destructive emotions do not get along well with the law of interdependence and if we make use of them we are doomed to self-destruction. Interdependence, then, also teaches us that whatever we do brings consequences. And not just as an abstract, general concept with which we would all readily agree, but in very precise practical terms. We denude mountains of their forests, we get floods. We drink poison, we die. We harm others, we beget harm.

We are seeking another basic outlook: the world as an organization. This would profoundly change the categories of our thinking and influence our practical attitudes. We must envision the biosphere as a whole with mutually reinforcing or mutually destructive interdependencies.

Ludwig Von Bertalanffy

Interdependence also shows us something equally subtle and profound; the *impermanent* and ephemeral nature of everything. When the factors that keep something alive no longer function, that ‘something’ comes to an end. It is to honour this process that in certain traditions sand-mandalas are first made and then destroyed. Unfortunately we humans prefer to blind ourselves to this inescapable truth and in a desperate attempt to go against all evidence, we create imaginary, solid, permanent, frozen mandalas.

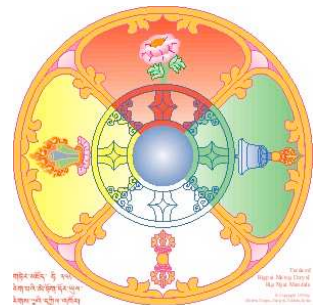
These imperfect mandalas do not flow freely and harmoniously with the energy of the universe, because at every step they are jammed by what we could describe as the “deadly glue” of grasping, aversion and confusion that fill up the “personal agendas” of individuals, organizations and entire social communities. In due course of time, these systems get frozen in space and/or in time to the point when they cannot function anymore and then, when the whole structure is completely out of sync with the perfect universal mandala, these systems erupt, tear off, and those ruptures manifest as crises, wars, devastating upheavals in the natural, social, political and economic structures. Since the imperfection of our social structures depends mainly on our mental obscurations, it is worth examining at least briefly the domain of consciousness.

The Inner Mandala: consciousness



We have earlier pointed at our own conscious awareness as a foundational aspect of existence, the “hidden” basis of any mandala. A detailed review of the mandala of consciousness would require a very long discussion and a survey of different traditions, which is not within the scope of this article. However, having understood that the inner and the outer worlds are interrelated, we may now want to know in essence what is the common basis of such a close relationship.

According to the Indian traditions from which the principle of the mandala originates, the texture of reality, both physical and mental, is woven through the frequencies of the five elements⁵ whose interactive play creates existence, movement and history, acting at progressively subtler levels, starting from matter all the way up to conscious life and the spiritual domain. In fact every system is built on the basis of the five-elements-mandala (figure on the left). Within that, living things resonate with the different frequencies of the five elements on the pranic (energy) level. Within that, conscious beings can either express the subtle perfection of the elements as five wisdoms⁶ (figure on the right), as in the mandala of enlightened consciousness, or they can manifest imperfection in the form of the five destructive emotions⁷, as in the mandala of the ordinary mind. The philosophy of the five elements, on which ayurveda and, later, Tibetan medicine are



⁵ Space, Earth, Water, Fire, Air

⁶ Suchness, Equanimity, Clarity, Discernment, All-accomplishment

⁷ confusion, arrogance, anger, attachment, envy

based, teaches methods that can heal the physical elements of the body, the life energies coursing through it (what the new age calls “the spirit”) as also ways to clear the mind of negatively charged attitudes.

The Mandala of doing: inter-action

Given that it may require the complete awakening of the potential of consciousness for somebody to appreciate the self-perfection of the universal mandala and to overcome the ignorance that creates an imperfect world mandala, and though it takes time and effort to re-appropriate that initial state of perfection, there are many beings who are striving toward this goal. In this journey towards the rediscovery of the perfect dimension, we will need to bring balance and equanimity into our own personal mandalas and at the same time do what we can to heal our social, national and global mandalas. Every one of us can do that at the individual level. But there are also ways to expand this action to larger circles. An example of that is OraWorldMandala, a project that activates positive energies in different parts of the world by harnessing the mandala principle. For instance, by connecting people at the opposite sides of the globe – India and Mexico – it has already switched on a stereophonic resonance for peace that will in turn multiply around the world. You will find details of OraWorldMandala’s work further in this book.

In creating actions that resonate with ideals of perfection one injects the harmony and the beauty of the original balance into the post-rupture mandalas, to assist the healing of systems that span all social, political, cultural, scientific, economic, psychological and individual dimensions. These actions may appear ordinary on the external level (for instance cleaning up the environment) but when they are born from an inner motivation for truth, they reverberate with a higher power and generate tremendous awareness in others. This was in essence the way in which the Mahatma Gandhi carried out his social and political work in India. This is the way masters conduct themselves. This is the way of the mandala.

For one inspired by this vision, there can be many different ways of manifesting the power of the mandala in action. OraWorldMandala for example follows a method that relies primarily on art. Art is one of the best and least harmful ways of working towards the achievement of social harmony and equanimity. Why is it so? Have you noticed that when somebody does his ‘job’ with the maximum of perfection, competence, excellence and harmony that it is possible in the field of his competence, we call that “a work of art”? Art of motorcycle maintenance, art of archery, art of cooking, and so on, all the way up to art of living, art of happiness, art of enlightenment.

Art seems to have the uncanny capacity to lend wings to our quest for perfection. Moreover to art, mud and gold can be equally important or equally irrelevant, which reflects equanimity. That is why art can be so quietly and so ‘economically’ powerful. Art can be the fire that ignites the process of transformation – or should we say transmutation – from the imperfect to the perfect, leading to the fulfillment of the intrinsic purpose of the mandala. The Way of the Mandala is undoubtedly a Work of Art.

Colophon

My friend Sonia had been asking me to write about the mandala principle, perhaps while remembering the unusual days and ways in which I got involved in the initial formulation of the OraWorldMandala project, all of ten years ago. Though I am not at all an expert I acceded to her request in the name of our singular friendship. This effort led me to much study and reflection and to the difficult task of integrating the resultant glimpses that shifted between simplicity and complexity. I hope I have been able to convey a sense of that process. Having concluded my effort on the eve of the second decade of this century, I looked at one of the initial quotes again and it felt as if our search for 'the way of the mandala' may just have come around full circle. That's why I am closing with the same quote. It has been a privilege to draw this full mandala circle with you. I have added one last quote with the wish that it may serve as an auspicious prelude to the starting of another circle...

Awareness of the mandala may have the potential of changing how we see ourselves, our planet, and perhaps even our own life purpose.

Bailey Cunningham in 'Mandala: Journey to the Center'

As is the atom, so is the universe.

The Upanishads

Antonella Simonelli

