



# Mandala Discovery

By Heather Plett

## Welcome to 30 Days of Mandala Journaling!

### About mandalas

#### Introduction

“Mandala” is sanskrit for “circle”, “essence”, or “container”. It’s very simple really - any creative process that happens in circle can be referred to as a mandala.

Is mandala-making an art form? It can be - many mandalas are beautiful works of art. More importantly, though, it is creative process that brings us closer to centre. **Carl Jung, who used mandalas a lot in his psychotherapy work, once commented that it was reductive to refer to it as art.** To call it art implies that the product is the only thing of value, when in reality, the process is more important than the product.

The mandala is a reflection of nature & the universe. It is one of the ways in which humanity has sought to relate to and sum up the awesome universe of which we are part. Mandalas are cosmic diagrams - attempts to represent the essential elements of the macrocosm in an ordered, coherent manner.

Mandalas are both simple and complex, and that’s what makes them fascinating. They are as simple as a circle and as complex as an intricate labyrinthian pathway to Spirit. Mandalas are meditation, ritual, therapy, art-making, and spiritual journeying.

#### From many traditions

Mandalas (or other related circle creative/spiritual processes) have evolved independently in many traditions all over the world. While all traditions use the circle as the basic container, what goes on inside and outside of that container can be vastly different. For some, every shape and colour has symbolic significance, while for others the significance is found in the process, not the colours or shapes.

In **Tibetan Buddhism**, monks make elaborate sand mandalas that often take days to build and are eventually swept up and either poured into a body of water or distributed to viewers. The shapes in Buddhist mandalas are very symbolic. The mandala represents the whole universe, with the square inside the circle representing the temple. The four openings in the square represent gates into the temple. The four gates in Tibetan mandalas symbolize the bringing together of the four boundless thoughts, namely: lovingkindness, compassion, sympathy, and equanimity.

At the centre of Tibetan mandalas are two deities - Kalachakra and his consort, bright-yellow Vishvamatr - male and female





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united. According to Buddhist tradition, as you wind your way around the corridors of the mandala and up the stairways — circumambulating the center and the pinnacle — you will get closer and closer to Buddha-hood.

**Hindu** mandalas are similar to Buddhist mandalas and have similar symbolism. The Hindu mandala is thought to be the abode of the deity. In liturgy (puja) the mandala is the place where a deity is invoked by the mantra. The placing of mantras upon the mandala (nyasa) gives it life, and the mandala is then regarded, like the mantra, as the deity itself, and not merely representing the deity.

In **Australia**, aboriginal artists make circular ground paintings that are like Buddhist sand mandalas, but with more simplicity and different symbolism. The alternately coloured red and white concentric circles mark the exact spot in the desert where the Great Ancestor spirit energy is believed to have first emanated from the ground. It is an initiation ceremony of great power, in which an older man, a shaman, initiates the others into the primal mysteries of Aboriginal life.

**Navajo Indians** also have mandala-like sand paintings. Navajo sand paintings are complex healing ceremonies - performed for the benefit of tribal members who request them. They are reenactments of the native legends which provide the foundation for all aspects of Navajo life.

There are several different types of **sandpainting** ceremonies- known as 'ways' - Blessingways, used for prevention; Holyways, for healing; and Evilways, for exorcism. The appropriate 'way' will be chosen by a Hand-Trembler, or native Shaman, and executed by a trained 'chanter' who will draw the paintings and perform the songs and dances associated with it.

In the sandpainting ceremony, the painting functions as a mandala, with the person who is ill, or out of balance (the Navajo believe that all illness is a symptom of being out of balance with the natural order) placed in the middle of the painting. After the painting is finished, the chanter rubs their skin with sand from the images, bringing him or her back into the balance depicted by the painting.





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In other **Native American** traditions, mandalas take the shape of dream catchers. They emerged out of the **Sioux** nation, but were adopted by the **Ojibwe**, **Lakota**, and other tribes.

The traditional dream catcher was intended to protect the sleeping individual from negative dreams, while letting positive dreams through. The positive dreams would slip through the hole in the center of the dream catcher, and glide down the feathers to the sleeping person below. The negative dreams would get caught up in the web, and expire when the first rays of the sun struck them.



In villages in **India**, women draw **rangoli** designs on their front doorsteps that are mandala-like. Using rice powder or crushed limestone, they start with a grid of small dots, then fill in the design with a series of lines. Rangoli not only add a touch of art and beauty to the home or temple, they also protect the family or holy place.



Also in **Native American spirituality**, the Medicine Wheel can be considered a form of mandala. The Medicine Wheel symbolizes the individual journey we each must take to find our own path. Within the Medicine Wheel are the four cardinal directions and the four sacred colors. The circle represents the circle of life and the center of the circle, the eternal fire. The eagle, flying toward the East, is a symbol of strength, endurance and vision.

There are differences of opinion about which colours represent which concepts, but the most common seems to be: White for north, for wisdom gained through winter stories; Red for east, and enlightenment; Yellow for south, and innocence; Black for the west, and its power. They are also considered the four aspects of human personality: white for mental, red for spirituality, black for physical, and yellow for emotional.

In **Christianity**, mandalas can be found in symbols and icons such as rose windows in cathedrals, the crown of thorns, labyrinths, etc.



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**Hildegard von Bingen**, a Christian mystic and nun, for example, modeled a creative practice in her spirituality that was considered mandala-like. Central to her mandala paintings is the understanding of a 'cosmic equilibrium' and a reverence for all life. In her use of 'quartering of the circle' we recognize the four elements (fire, air, water and earth), an archetypal depiction also used by Native American sand painters for the four sacred directions.

The **astrological zodiac**, with its twelve distinct energy fields, is also a form of mandala.

Mandalas can also be seen in **dance** in many traditions. For example, in Sufism, whirling dervishes spin in circles, evoking the sacred. Like mandala-making in other traditions, this spinning is meant "to find the eye of the chaotic whirlwind within our minds, the silent centre that is the seat of the being."



## Mandalas as therapeutic tools

Carl Jung, in his exploration of his own interior life, began to make mandalas and discovered how good the process was for helping him peel away the layers and get to his centre. He began using them in therapy to help others get to their centres.

Jung saw the mandala as a "representation of the unconscious self". During the time when he explored mandalas for his personal exploration, he is said to have found his "anima" or feminine side.

## Jung on Mandala-making

*"While painting them (mandalas), the picture seems to develop out of itself and often in opposition to one's conscious intentions." - C.G. Jung*

*"Most mandalas have an intuitive, irrational character and, through their symbolical content, exert a retroactive influence on the unconscious. They therefore possess a "magical" significance, like icons, whose possible efficacy was never consciously felt by the patient." - C.G. Jung*

## Why circle?

The circle is an organic, feminine shape that appears naturally in many forms. Circle is the shape of the womb, Mother Earth, tree trunks, flowers, etc. It is the most basic shape in nature on which other shapes are built.

Circle is also the strongest shape structurally. There is a reason why water pipes are tubes - the circle gives them strength. The circle does not put pressure on any one point, but distributes the



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weight evenly. Unlike squares, triangles, or other shapes, there are no weak points or strong points - all are equal. The circle is about community, spirituality, strength, equality, and wholeness.

Bringing circle into our creative practice can help deepen our relationship with Self and with Spirit. *It is like an entry portal into the intuitive.*

*"You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days, when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished."* - Black Elk, Sioux elder.

## About mandala journaling

### *A brief personal history*

I have long been a journal-keeper, and I have long been a doodler. Gradually, those two things started to come together for me in the form of a circle.

Twenty-five years ago, I wrote my first mandala poem - a long string of thoughts spiraling into centre. When I did it, I remember thinking it held some significance and that it was opening me to something new. It would take another 20 years, though, to recognize that the new thing that had evolved for me was the **mandala journal process**. Words in a circle did something for my subconscious mind that words in a straight line had never done before.

Journaling is a powerful tool, but sometimes when we get too stuck in words, we get trapped in left brain thinking. Our left brain wants to define things, give them logic. Words are firmly rooted in the left brain - they serve as boxes for ideas - ways to give them logic and meaning. Those boxes often trap us in limited thinking.

Shifting into mandala journaling, where words emerge only as part of (and often secondary to) colour and shape and circle (all right brain concepts), we integrate our left brain thinking with our right brain thinking, and new pathways emerge in our brains. Surprises show up that take us to deeper understanding when our right brain has space to influence and shape the journey our left brain takes.



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## Mandala journaling - The Practice

I invite you to create space for your right brain to play, explore, learn, and engage with mandala journaling. As you begin this new practice, I encourage you to keep these guidelines in mind:

1. **Don't over-think what you're putting on the page.** The best way to make a mandala is to use an intuitive, spontaneous process of simply allowing whatever wants to show up next to show up. You will learn more by allowing this intuitive process to happen than by trying to direct it.
2. **It's about the process, not the product.** Keep in mind what Jung said about mandala-making not being art. You are not creating a product, but rather you are engaging your creative mind in a process of discovery and spiritual journeying. In many traditions (such as Tibetan sand mandalas) the mandala-makers are quite intentional about destroying their creation once it is complete, which can be a meaningful practice in non-attachment to the product.
3. **There is no "wrong" way to do this.** Start with a circle and then move on from there - it's that simple. Try different forms, come up with your own ideas, and don't let yourself be limited by a certain expectation of what it should look like. Sometimes you'll end up with a mandala that seems ugly to your eye. There is a lesson to be learned even in that process. Just let it happen.
4. **You can break the "rules".** While I will provide guidelines for the mandala-making process, they are simply that - guidelines. Make the process your own and don't worry about pleasing anyone other than yourself and your Creative Source.
5. **Find a space and time that works for you.** Mandala-making is a powerful meditative process, and to get the most of it, I encourage you to find quiet spaces and times in your schedule when you can still your mind and be free from interruptions. This doesn't mean that you can't have fun with it though. Making mandalas with friends or with your kids in a less contemplative fashion can also be a meaningful exercise.
6. **There are no rules for interpreting your mandalas.** While some may be deeply meaningful, others may simply serve as ways of stilling your over-active logic-seeking right brain. Sometimes you will find meaning in a mandala as you're making it, and other times you'll realize it has meaning only a week after you've set it aside. Sometimes the colour or shapes may have symbolic meaning (and you can research more about those meanings [here](#)) and other times they will have meaning only for you.
7. **To find meaning, simply sit in inquiry with your mandala.** As I said before, don't over-think it, simply be curious. Ask yourself questions such as "What might these shapes represent in my life? Why am I drawn to these particular colours? How does the flow of this mandala seem different to what I've done in the past? What feelings did this process evoke in me? Is there a greater sense of clarity in any area of my life after doing the mandala?" If no answers come, simply let it go and walk away. Something may come to you later, or perhaps it will remain in your subconscious mind and you'll never fully be able to articulate it. Remember that you have evoked your right brain thinking and there are not always words to attach to what is going on there.