

## About Mandala

Mandala comes from the Sanskrit word 'mandala' meaning 'circle' or 'centre'. A mandala is a geometric configuration of symbols that have repeating colors, shapes, and patterns radiating from the centre. Often associated with circular designs, mandalas can also be drawn in squares. The unique beauty of a mandala is that it could be precise and perfectly symmetrical, or in contrast, free flowing and asymmetrical.

In various spiritual traditions, such as Hinduism (where a mandala is also called a 'yantra'), Buddhism, Jainism, and Shinto, mandalas are spiritual tools or objects of meditation that aid in enhancing focus and establishing a sacred space. A mandala represents the progression of the spiritual journey, beginning from outside to the inner core, through layers. The imagery of a mandala depicts the universe and the symbols represent the cycles of birth-life-death, and the communion of all living things.

Circles have a powerful significance in many spiritual traditions, particularly in Hinduism and Buddhism. A circular mandala is symbolic of a magic circle, a distinct, separate space that represents wholeness, totality, infinity, timelessness, and unity.

Jainism says each person has divinity hidden within them. Buddhism says each person has inert knowledge. It is a question of awakening these inherent virtues.

There are five primary components of a mandala: symmetry, geometry, colour, number, and intention. In these layers, various symbols and geometric patterns are used with a specific meaning. By understanding these attributes and consciously combining them, mandalas are used to transform and empower not only the space they are displayed in but also the lives of those who view them.

The basic design of mandala is several concentric circles. Usually, there are ten circles. There is a point in the centre of the mandala. It might have a few circles towards the outside and a square in the middle. In the innermost central circle, a Buddhist deity, or a lotus flower, or a mantra are drawn. The designs always contain bilateral and radial symmetry.

In certain mandalas, concentric circles are drawn from the outside to the inside and also carry a square till the middle. This is a symbol of a mandala palace itself – a sacred place inhabited by deities and the Buddha. This signifies respect to the deities and an invitation to be seated on this spot. Each side of this square has a 'T'-shaped door. These doors represent four boundless thoughts – kindness, compassion, sympathy, and patience. Basic shapes are presented in this mandala. There can be variations in these layers.

The basic map of a mandala is designed like that of architecture. As described in the scriptures, it represents Brahmand and nature in circles, a mandala palace, and a dot in the centre.

The central circle has a dot, surrounding which are an inner rim and an outer rim. Between these two rims are four spokes, which are in the shape of a petal. The outer rim is a thin circle surrounded by a square (the inner square) which has a small bay or buttress-like structure opposite doors.

Outside this inner square, two or three squares are drawn in a sequence. The outermost square line is called a parapet. Outside this parapet, four doors are drawn which are encircled by a series of circles. These circles are represented by fire, flowers, water, mountains, space, clouds, air etc. Fire symbolises wisdom. Flowers represent the existence of all creation in the universe. Few people are aware of the charnel grounds that are depicted in some mandalas. The motif of the charnel ground indicates the impermanence of life and reminds us to always be mindful of death. It is painted in black and presents a few objects with bones.

This fortress-like structure with a number of concentric circles takes the practitioner towards the centre, beginning with the physical body, speech, and finally the mind.

In Buddhism, different mandalas are prepared for various purposes and activities. They are Kalachakra mandala, Healing mandala, Flower mandala, Sand mandala, Teaching mandala, Mantra mandala, Therapy-Medicine mandala, and many more.

### **1. Kalachakra Mandala**

Traditionally, Kalachakra (meaning 'cycle/wheel of time') mandalas are closely guarded and secret. Tibetan Buddhist practitioners go through their initiation ritual. On completion of this ritual this mandala is thrown open for the public to see. Later, the Dalai Lama introduced the tradition of presentations of the Kalachakra mandala to the general public as a cultural offering. Circle mandalas are extremely effective at encouraging and inspiring. A circle is a symbol of the wholeness of man. It boosts concentration and enhances focus.

### **2. Healing Mandala**

Healing mandalas are intended to deliver wisdom, evoke feelings of calm, and channel focus and concentration.

### **3. Flower Mandala**

Flower mandalas are associated with unlocking good health and a mindful lifestyle. Geometric mandalas are symbols to understand the mechanism of nature, along with the inner and external structures of the

human body. Thus, these complex designs allow thinkers to form a deep connection with man, nature, and spirit.

#### **4. Sand Mandala**

Monks make mandalas from fine multi-coloured sand which represent the impermanence of human life. While making the mandala, they chant and meditate to absorb the positive vibrations residing within the sacred patterns. This energy has healing power that extends to the entire world. People interact with this mandala for a specific period declared in advance by the monks. Soon after, the monks release the mandala, after rituals such as blessings, prayer, and purification, into flowing water. This signifies that nothing lasts forever, and everything is in constant change.

#### **5. Teaching Mandala**

Monks learn to create mandalas based on principles of design and construction during their monastic education. These could be visualised, by both creator and viewer, as colourful mental maps that describe Himalayan culture.

#### **6. Mantra Mandala**

Mantra mandalas have certain Buddhist deities or symbols in the centre and are surrounded by mantras. These are either words or phrases from Buddhist teachings. They are chanted out loud or internally for meditation. Mantra mandalas are like two sides of a coin; mantras are sacred texts and mandalas are sacred spaces.

#### **7. Medicine Mandala**

Medicine Buddha or the Healing Buddha mandala is hand painted on a handmade cotton canvas. Only vegetable colours are used in this mandala. Medicine Buddha, acknowledged as the master of medicines and 'doctor of souls and bodies', is painted in the centre of the mandala which is surrounded by 12 lines of the sacred chant 'Aum mani padme hum'. Besides this, the centre may be drawn from the Tibetan book of the four medical tantras. Its circular rings depict from inside to outside, the symbol of the eight medicine Gurus, of which seven are previous medicine Buddhas and Buddha Sakyamuni, sixteen major bodhisattvas, ten guardians, and twelve geras (yakshas). The Medicine Mandala is believed to have healing powers.

Mandala designs differ as various sects developed in Buddhism.

## **Vajrayana**

In Vajrayana Buddhism, sand mandalas are made. They are key to Tantra meditation practices.

## **Theravada Buddhism**

Theravada, Buddhism's oldest existing school, is a word from the Pali language, which contains the oldest records of the Buddha's teachings. 'Thera' means 'elders' and 'vada' means 'doctrine'. Examples of the Theravada Mandalas are: depictions of eight great disciples placed in eight major directions describing the Sakyamuni Buddha in the centre, nine major Buddhas of the past and the present Gautam Buddha placed in ten directions, and eight deities occupying and protecting the eight corners of the universe.

## **Shingon Buddhism**

Shingon is a major school of Buddhism in Japan and a surviving sect of Vajrayana Buddhism. Shingon Buddhism believes that pure truth cannot be expressed in words but only through art. Mandala and fire are especially used in their rituals. Two mandalas are particularly important for them. One is 'garbhadhatu', i.e., the womb mandala which represents the matrix of existence and 'vajradhatu' mandala, i.e., the diamond ring, which represents the world of the Buddha.

## **Shinto**

Shinto mandalas represent paradise, 'kami' (the deities, divinities, spirits, phenomena, or 'holy powers' that are venerated in the Shinto religion and are associated with elements of the landscape or forces of nature), or actual shrines.

## **Nichiren Buddhism**

In Nichiren Buddhism the mandala is called a 'moji' mandala or Gohonzon. The Gohonzon is rectangular in shape. It is a paper hanging scroll or a wooden tablet which displays Chinese characters and medieval Sanskrit script (Siddham). The mandala depicts Buddha's enlightenment, protective Buddhist deities, and certain Buddhist philosophies.

## **Hinduism**

In Hinduism, the basic mandala is called a yantra – a square with four gates containing a circle with a centre point. Each gate is in the shape of a T. The yantra may have two or three-dimensional geometric compositions used in spiritual practices, worship or meditative rituals, sometimes also incorporating a mantra into its design. Symbolic of the abode of the deity, each yantra is unique, revealing cosmic truths and bringing the practitioner into the divine presence of the deity through the elaborate designs.

## **Jainism**

Siddhachakra, also called Navapada, is a popular mandala used for worship in the Svetambara tradition of Jainism. It represents the legend of King Shripala and his wife Mayanasundari. Siddhachakra involves a complex ritual in which the entire mandala is created on the floor, using lentils. Mantras are recited alongside performing puja, starting in the centre and moving towards the outside. In the centre is a fully bloomed lotus and Navapada or the nine elements are worshipped.

Mandalas go back a long way. In the Mogao caves near Dunhong city in China, mandalas have been carved out on the walls of the caves. Dunhong was a popular city because it was the last habitable spot on the Silk Route from the east to the west to trade before entering the Taklamakan desert. It is said that Buddhist monks arrived in China in the first century CE and contributed to the development of this city. The caves carved out by the monks, originally used for meditation, developed into a place of worship and pilgrimage called the Mogao Caves or "Caves of a Thousand Buddhas".

The Mayan Empire which started developing in 250 CE, created calendars which resemble mandala. In Aztec culture developed in Mexico, a Sun Stone is thought to be a ceremonial representation of the entire universe. In some ways it resembles a mandala. The temples of Borobudur, on the island of Java in Indonesia, the world's largest Buddhist temple complex, is based on mandala. It was constructed around 800-825 CE. Australian aborigines also have used mandalas.

## **Modern-day Applications**

Mandalas have a variety of modern-day applications. In the practice of yoga, mandalas are used to create a sacred space and to infuse positive energy. They are also used to enhance focus and concentrate in meditation. Native Americans use mandalas to create healing circles which help to restore mind, body, and the heart. Western cultures use mandalas in dream catchers to prevent nightmares and ensure restful sleep. Mandala colouring books have become a popular tool for relaxation. Therapists and meditation guidance counselors advise drawing mandalas to channel focus and concentration, and help to reduce mood disorders such as anxiety.

Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung turned to mandala as an instrument for healing; the mental exercise involved in these geometric and archetypal protocols helps to unwind the mind and streamline thoughts. Jung opined that the urge to spontaneously draw a mandala is a sign of progressive intense personal growth. It brings re-balance in life in a positive way and results in a better integrated personality. To reduce stress in life, reduce anxiety and concentrate in dhyana, meditation counselors' advise drawing mandalas.