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# INTRODUCTION

## WHAT IS A MANDALA?

A *mandala* (Sanskrit for "circle") is a sacred symbolic diagram often containing geometric symbols. Buddhist and Hindu mandalas usually include images of Buddhas, *bodhisattvas* (Sanskrit for "enlightened beings") or deities. A *yantra* (Sanskrit for "instrument") is a geometrical diagram, which can represent a deity or divine figure. Called "instruments of worship" in Hinduism, yantras are meant to inspire inner visualizations, meditations, and experiences in the worshipper.



*A mandala usually contains Buddhas or Buddhist deities, while a yantra is mainly geometrical and represents a deity.*

Mandalas usually contain lettering or images of Buddhas or deities, while yantras are mainly geometrical. They are often used in the same manner and the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, while some people use *mandala* to refer to any circular image or diagram.

A traditional mandala is a "blueprint" of a temple of the gods, as well as of the entire universe. The center point (or *bindu*) is the most important part of the diagram and represents Mount Meru, the sacred mountain of the gods, and the center of the universe.

## WHY CREATE A MANDALA?

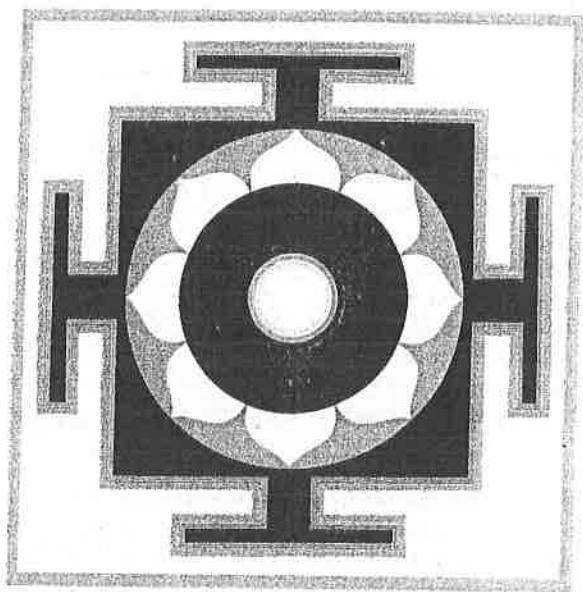
Every society and every culture has its own rituals, which help to maintain the tradition of the community. By performing a ritual, one physically enacts spiritual passages, therefore establishing a connection to the spiritual realm. Symbolic objects or images, such as mandalas, are used to focus prayer or pay homage to a deity.

Mandalas are most often used as meditational tools. This meditation ritual can be used as an aid to prayer or other spiritual practice; for healing; for relaxation; or for self-realization and personal growth. In psychotherapy, mandalas can be used to help resolve problematic emotional states and gain insight into hidden problems. In Tibetan Buddhism, mandalas are often constructed with an intention of planetary healing and are used in peace ceremonies. You can create your personal mandala with any intention desired.

A mandala, like other symbolic illustrations, can translate a subconscious thought or belief into a conscious, concrete manifestation. We believe that any form or image has an energy or vibration that interacts with our own vibrational frequencies, which are neither positive nor negative themselves, but shaped by the intentions one puts into them.

Creating a mandala with positive intentions will broadcast these energies into the universe. You produce everything that is in your life, be it constructive or destructive. Every symbol that comes through you gives you the power to create or enhance whatever you want or need.

Traditionally, the term "construct" is preferred to the word "create" when referring to a Tibetan sand mandala, as they are not original works of art, but rather the formations of already existing designs. However, here you will not learn to construct traditional



*Chinnamasta yantra. Power of will and vision are achieved by worshipping Chinnamasta (a goddess who has chopped off her own head, symbolizing the cutting off of activities of the mind).*

*The universe is change;  
our life is what our  
thoughts make it.*  
Marcus Aurelius Antoninus

Tibetan sand mandalas, as that would require extensive training and a high level of artistic skill. Rather we will help you to create an original mandala sand-painting, regardless of

whether you have any artistic ability or prior knowledge of the traditional custom. We will guide you in designing your own personalized mandala ritual that can be used for healing, self-empowerment, as a prayer for peace, or for any other purpose.

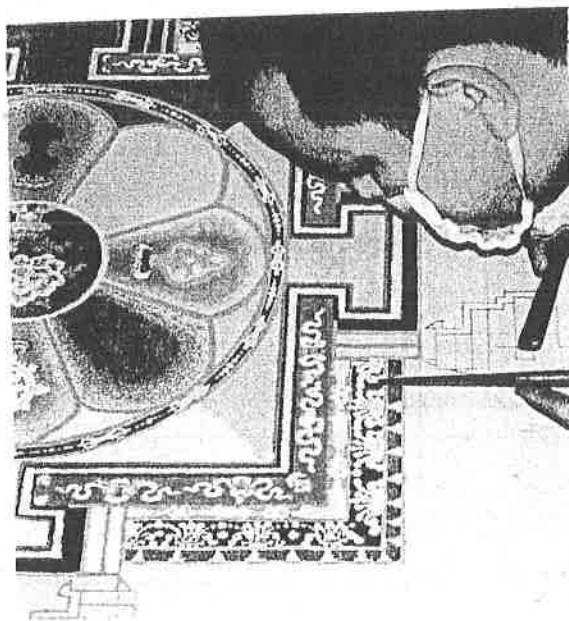
#### WHY USE SAND?

When a sand mandala is constructed, more emphasis is placed on improving the mind of the practitioner and contributing to the greater good of the world, than on producing a work of art.

Throughout history, mandalas have been made in a number of different media including paintings, drawings, etchings, and more. While colored sand is used today, traditionally crushed precious gems were used and in some cultures, mandalas are made from beans, rice, stones, grains, or flowers.

Buddhists recognize that everything in this world is impermanent, so a sand mandala is dismantled to acknowledge the belief of non-attachment. The sand is then deposited in a body of water, preferably one that connects to an ocean or river, so that it may spread throughout the world. The monks believe that dismantling a sand mandala is the most successful method of preserving it, because by spreading the sand, they are spreading the healing energy.

In Tibet, it was often the tradition to dismantle a mandala when its purpose had been fulfilled. Some monasteries kept one mandala on display permanently, based on the premise that as long as there is still suffering—as long as world healing is still needed—the purpose was not yet fulfilled.



*A highly skilled Tibetan monk creating a traditional sand mandala.*

## THE MANDALA IN WORLD TRADITIONS

*Earth is a vast canvas that reveals the Cultural Montage of Humanity. Through participation and cooperation, we harvest the genius and root knowledge of many cultures, thereby empowering ourselves to embody a greater planetary vision.*

Jean Houston

The word *mandala* may be of Eastern origin, but the image of the sacred circle is timeless. It can be found in some of the earliest rock carvings in Africa, Europe, and North America; in sacred aboriginal art; and in ancient formations such as Stonehenge.

The circle has had many valuable meanings throughout history, and many European, African, South Pacific, and Indian traditional creation myths are based on it. King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table were seated in a circle as a symbol of equality, and in the first century B.C.E., a sorcerer was called a "circle-drawer." It has been incorporated into many religious rituals, such as the drawing of a sacred circle or the performing of a circular dance or movement.

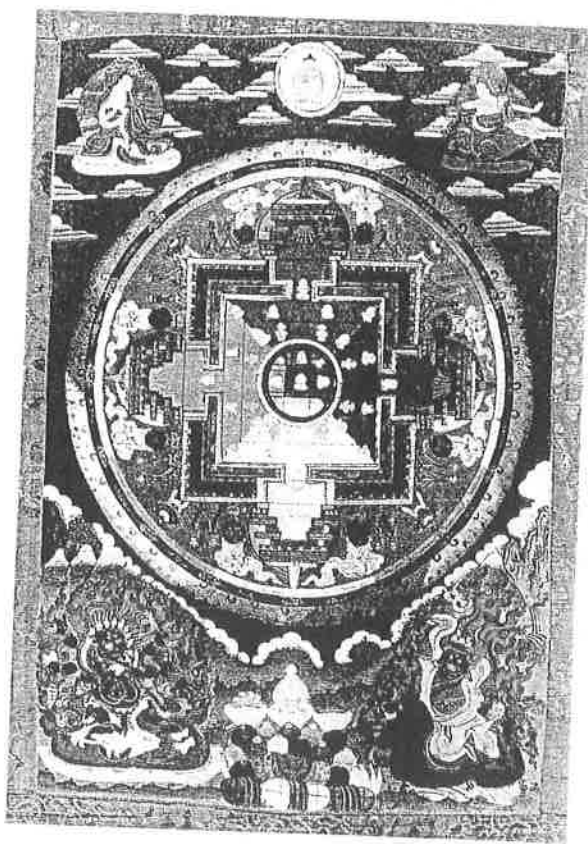
### MANDALAS IN BUDDHISM AND HINDUISM

**Mandalas in Tibetan Buddhism** According to Buddhist philosophy, suffering exists in our lives due to selfishness and desire but can be eliminated by behaving ethically, concentrating, and developing insight. It is the bodhisattva attitude that to eliminate your own suffering, it is necessary to eliminate suffering for the world. Between the eighth and twelfth centuries C.E., much of what we now consider Tibetan ritual arts came to Tibet as part of the Buddhist Tantra from India, Nepal, Kashmir, and China. Mandalas are used in Tantric Buddhism as spiritual and meditative tools. They can be used in healing and prayer for protection, peace, or to signify a passage of life (e.g., birth, puberty, or death). "Mandalas of the dead" are designed to instruct the practitioner in the ways of death.

It is believed that when a mandala is created as a part of *deity yoga*, the practitioner can become a Buddha, or "awakened one." Mandalas can symbolize the grounds and fortresses of a Buddha (or other

deity) or Mount Meru, the center of the world in Buddhist mythology. They can also be maps of the cosmos, symbolizing the universe itself, and are used to give observers a glimpse of enlightenment and hopefully have a positive effect on the world.

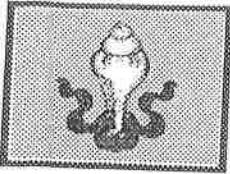
Mandalas have many different forms—simple diagrams, complex paintings, carved sculptures, and of course constructions in sand. There are thousands of variations of Tibetan mandalas, each representing a deity, Buddha, or an aspect of Buddhism. Each mandala, which can take several days to construct, is extremely detailed and requires a high level of patience, artistic skill, and training.



Tibetan thangka ("painting") of a mandala.

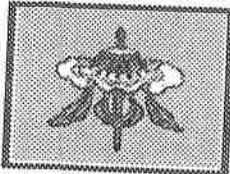


## The Eight Auspicious Symbols



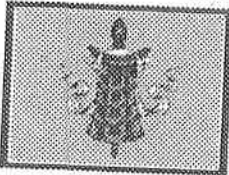
### Right-coiled White Conch

The white conch which coils to the right symbolises the deep, far-reaching and melodious sound of the Dharma teachings, which being appropriate to different natures, predispositions and aspirations of disciples, awakens them from the deep slumber of ignorance and urges them to accomplish their own and others' welfare.



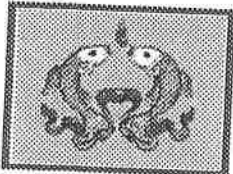
### Precious Umbrella

The precious umbrella symbolises the wholesome activity of preserving beings from illness, harmful forces, obstacles and so forth in this life and all kinds of temporary and enduring sufferings of the three lower realms, and the realms of men and gods in future lives. It also represents the enjoyment of a feast of benefit under its cool shade.



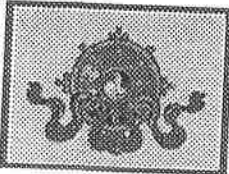
### Victory Banner

The victory banner symbolises the victory of the activities of one's own and others body, speech and mind over obstacles and negativities. It also stands for the complete victory of the Buddhist Doctrine over all harmful and pernicious forces.



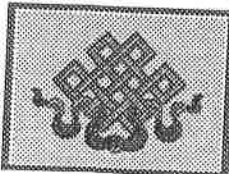
### Golden Fish

The golden fish symbolises the auspiciousness of all living beings in a state of fearlessness, without danger of drowning in the ocean of sufferings, and migrating from place to place freely and spontaneously, just as fish swim freely without fear through water.



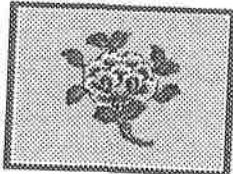
### Dharma Wheel

The golden wheel symbolises the auspiciousness of the turning of the precious wheel of Buddha's doctrine, both in its teachings and realizations, in all realms and at all times, enabling beings to experience the joy of wholesome deeds and liberation.



### Auspicious Drawing

The auspicious drawing symbolises the mutual dependence of religious doctrine and secular affairs. Similarly, it represents the union of wisdom and method, the inseparability of emptiness and dependent arising at the time of path, and finally, at the time of enlightenment, the complete union of wisdom and great compassion.



### Lotus Flower

The lotus flower symbolises the complete purification of the defilements of the body, speech and mind, and the full blossoming of wholesome deeds in blissful liberation.



### Vase of Treasure

The treasure vase symbolises an endless rain of long life, wealth and prosperity and all the benefits of this world and liberation.

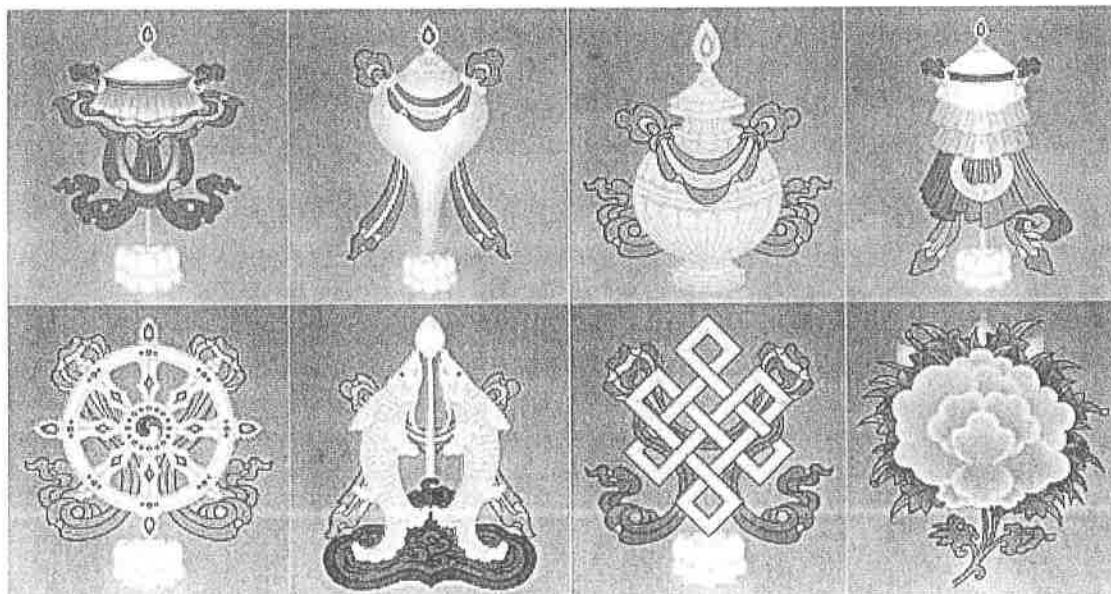
# Eight Buddhist Symbols

## Eight Buddhist Symbols (Chinese: 八大吉祥) Royal emblems and symbols of Buddhist religious belief.

Buddhist missionaries brought eight symbols (Ashtamangala) from India to China as listed below. The first four of these are royal emblems associated with Buddha, and the other four are symbols of Buddhist religious belief.

### Royal Emblems

- 1) The Canopy, parasol or umbrella (Chinese: 伞伞, pinyin: sǎn) is the symbol of a monarch, and represents spiritual authority and shelter for all living beings.
- 2) The Conch shell (Chinese: 法螺) represents wisdom in the voice of Buddha calling people to worship. Shells which spiral clockwise are a rarity and are considered especially sacred.
- 3) The Sacred Vase (Chinese: 宝瓶) holds the water of life, but it also symbolises longevity, abundance and prosperity.
- 4) The Royal Banner (Chinese: 华盖) symbolizes charity and the incorruptible official.



The Eight Auspicious Buddhist Symbols

- 1. Parasol; 2. Conch Shell; 3. Sacred Vase; 4. Royal Banner;
  - 5. Wheel of Life; 6. Pair of Fish; 7. The Endless Knot; 8. The Lotus Flower
- Images above: Bob Jacobson, courtesy of Osel Shen Phen Ling



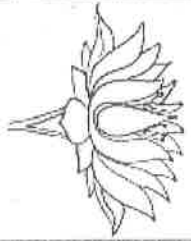
### **Symbols of Buddhist Belief**

5) The Wheel of Life (Chinese: 法輪; Pinyin: fǎlún)  
The wheel of the law-karma represents the ever-turning wheel of transmigration of the soul and it symbolises the Buddhist teachings as well.

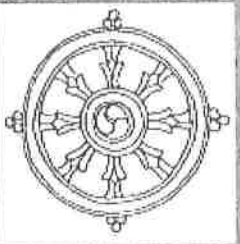
6) A Pair of Fish (Chinese: 雙魚)  
A pair of fish is a symbol of tenacity, domestic felicity, and fertility.

7) The Endless Knot (Chinese: 盤長; pán cháng)  
is a symbol of longevity and eternity. As a fundamental truth of Buddhism, the knot symbolises cyclical change of all things.

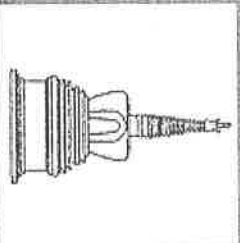
8) The Lotus Flower (Chinese: 蓮花; pinyin: liánhuā)  
Rising unsullied through muddy water, the Lotus Flower is a symbol of purity and enlightenment and refers to many aspects of the eightfold path.



**Lotus Flower**  
Padma - Symbol of Purity. Can be of any colour except blue.



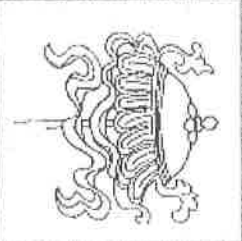
**Dharmachakra**  
The wheel of the law. The eight spokes represent the noble eightfold path.



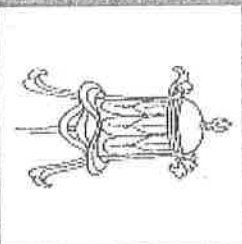
**Stupa**  
Symbolic grave monument where relics of a holy monk are kept. It also symbolises the universe.



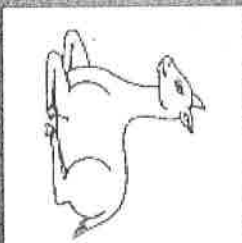
**Triratana**  
The three jewels - the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.



**Chattra**  
Parasol - protection against all evil. High rank.



**Dhvaja**  
Banner - the victory of the Buddha's teachings.




**Deer**  
Symbolises the first sermon of the Buddha which was held in the deer park of Benares.





**Naga**  
Vestige of pre-Buddhist fertility rituals and protector of the Buddha and the Dharma.


**Sacred Geometry** Certain geometric shapes can have powerful effects when viewed during meditation. Some shapes can symbolize human emotions: symmetrical, round shapes can connote relaxation and peace; uneven, jagged shapes can connote anger or anxiety. The most frequently occurring shapes in mandalas and yantras are circles, triangles, and squares.

 **Circle** The circle is the most powerful symbol of the mandala. It is one of the most commonly recurring shapes in nature, science, artwork, and religion (see Chapter 1). A closed circle can represent protection, equality, and perfection. It can also symbolize God, infinity, and eternity, as it has no beginning and no end. It can evoke images of the full moon, the “all-seeing-eye,” and an angel’s halo.

*God is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.*  
Timaeus of Locris

 **Spiral** The spiral was one of the most sacred symbols in Neolithic Europe and could be found on many places of worship. Spirals symbolize a combination of masculine and feminine, the sun and the moon, the body and the spirit, and death and rebirth. A double helix—the shape of human DNA—can signify evolution and upward movement. The spiral also sometimes represents the serpent, and *spiral oculi* are double spirals that are placed like eyes.

 **Infinity Sign** In Indian religions, a sideways figure eight (or *lemniscate*) represents infinity and wholeness. Consisting of a clockwise circle (male) and a counter-clockwise circle (female), this sign stands for sexual union and equality between the masculine and feminine powers.

 **Yin Yang** Like the infinity sign, this Chinese symbol (also called *Tai Chi*) joins female (*yin*) and male (*yang*). It represents duality: dark and light, evil and good, earth and heaven, etc. The small circles of opposite colors remind us that nothing is completely light or dark; everything contains a small piece of its opposite energies.



**Yoni** The yoni can symbolize the external female genitalia, recognized by ancient Tantric Hinduism as the base of female sexual power and all creative action. Sometimes called a *mandorla* (“almond”) or *Vesica Pisces* (“Vessel of the Fish”), it is also related to the halo or nimbus, which encircles holy figures in Christian iconography.



**Triple Ring** The overlapping of three circles creates three yonis. The triple ring has many meanings, including the trinities of body, mind, and spirit; power, wisdom, and love; thought, word, and deed. Three rings have also symbolized the three Fates, three Fate Goddesses, or Saint Faith.



**Triquetra** The *triquetra* (Latin for “three-cornered”) is an ancient symbol of trinity. A circle with three overlapping yonis, in pagan symbolism it represents the threefold nature of the Goddess (Virgin, Mother, Crone) and the trinity of life, death, and rebirth. In Christianity, it symbolizes the Holy Trinity, with the unbroken circle symbolizing eternity and the interwoven design signifying the indivisibility of God. It also closely resembles the Norse symbol of the Odin Knot or Val Knot.



**World Triad** The World Triad symbol is called a Cosmic Mandala in both Tibet and Bhutan. In Japan it is called *maqa-tama* or *mitsu tomoe*, which translates as the “world soul.” Sometimes it is considered a symbol of cosmic creativity and eternity.



**Wheel** The entire universe has been described as a rolling wheel. Wheels were used in many different religions, often as protective emblems on weapons, houses, altars, and graves. Native American medicine wheels are sometimes used to follow the seasons (see Chapter 1). In India, Mother Kali ruled the Wheel of Time (*Kala-chakra*), and the Buddhist Wheel of Life illustrates the constant cycle of change. In ancient Oriental symbolism, a double wheel represented infinity—a circle of earth enclosed in a circle of the universe. A wheel within a wheel was also Ezekiel’s vision in the Bible.