

# The Journey of the Mandala

Mandalas are circular images that have developed as an aspect of Buddhism, a religion which originated in India and is now practiced in a variety of forms by many people in China, Japan and Tibet, as well as in Canada and throughout the world. The geometric forms and images within the mandala have sacred meanings, often used to assist in focusing the attention required to meditate. The round mandala can help Buddhists concentrate, it can remind them of the Enlightenment they are seeking and the deeds of Buddha, and it can aid them as they contemplate lessons and teachings. Sometimes compared to architectural blueprints or aerial views of celestial palaces, mandalas can represent the journey towards Enlightenment at the top or centre.

Mandalas are created by Buddhist monks from sand, paint, sculpted and coloured vegetable butter, flowers, fabric and even architecture; they represent the effort to unite with the cosmic nature of Buddha. Mandalas may be housed inside a temple, where they last for hundreds of years, or they may be created and cast into the sea upon completion, like the sand mandalas. For Jack Wise, these circular images were basic to all cultures, and in fact all forms of life. He saw these sacred circles in the stained glass of French Gothic Cathedrals, the beads of North American First Nations peoples and the drawings of Da Vinci. He utilized them as a link between East and West.

## The Mystic Circle: Jack Wise and the Mandala

In 1973, The Mystic Circle show was held at the Burnaby Art Gallery. Jack Wise wrote the forward for the exhibition catalogue. (The Mystic Circle, Burnaby Art Gallery with Talon Books, 1973) This excerpt embodies some of his concepts about the mandala:

*Since the most ancient times the circle has symbolized eternity and the divine. It is, to use Dr. C.G. Jung's phrase, a universal archetype, and its symbolism embraces all concentrically arranged figures, all circular or even square circumferences having a centre, all radial or spherical arrangements.*

*The circle or mandala, aside from its special importance to the way man sees himself in time and space, continues to intrigue the visual artist with its unique formalistic considerations and challenges. Within the last decade it has appeared in North American art with such frequency that, as stylistic phenomenon, it can no longer be considered insignificant.*

*Perhaps it is no coincidence that the last decade has also produced dramatic photographs taken from orbit around the earth - visual evidence of the form of our bio-sphere - and startling x-ray microphotography of the paracrystalline form of the DNA molecule on end, revealing its organization to be that of a quaternity within a circle: a perfect mandala.*

Find an example of a mandala in the natural world. Search scientific magazines, the internet or try sketching or photographing your own natural sacred circle.

Has the world of science changed how artists see and depict the world? How Jack Wise created his art?

## Examining the Mandala

Look in the database of images of mandalas created by Jack Wise. Choose one or two that interest you in some way, because of the way they make you feel, or because they inspire your curiosity.

What are they created from (what materials did he use)?

Are they from similar time periods or years apart?

Now visit one of these web sites, and choose a mandala in the traditional Buddhist form.

[www.tibetart.org](http://www.tibetart.org)

[www.asianart.com/mandalas/mandimge.html](http://www.asianart.com/mandalas/mandimge.html)

[www.artnetwork.com/Mandala/](http://www.artnetwork.com/Mandala/)

Can you see how Jack was inspired by Buddhist art?

What are the differences between Jack's mandalas and those done by monks? The similarities?

Visit the Karma of the Dragon conversation board now and post your comments about mandalas!

## Take the Journey of the Mandala

Mandala is a word from the language of Sanskrit, and means magic ring or sacred circle. They are also called Tankas in Tibet. To contemplate or meditate on a mandala requires focus and understanding.

Choose a mandala from the Jack Wise database, or one of the web sites in the Examining the Mandala section. Find a quiet space; you may wish to use some Tibetan chanting in the background, which can be found on CDs at the public library, or on the net, at sites such as:

[www.diamondway-buddhism.org/terms/music.htm](http://www.diamondway-buddhism.org/terms/music.htm)

Sit comfortably and let yourself follow the journey of the mandala. It is sometimes helpful to work with a partner, or as a group with your teacher, so that someone can help you focus your attention on the different areas of the mandala with their voice as you visually move around the circle.

The rings of the mandala are like the sections of a temple visited by a Buddhist pilgrim. You begin at the bottom level or the outermost ring. This is called the Ring of Fire and represents a desire for transformation. Move around this outer ring a few times, studying the designs and the colours. They may seem complicated, or merely attractive and pleasing to the eye, but everything has meaning. Move slowly to the next rings, until you reach what Jack incorporated as a narrative ring, a circle filled with images that tell a story or remind one of events or lessons. Progress towards the centre. It is said that Buddhists who meditate on certain mandalas can see the "face of Buddha" or Enlightenment when they reach the centre of the mandala. For you, perhaps it is simply a better understanding of the art of Jack Wise!

Now, step away, and see if you can visualize the mandala, its forms, colours, the various rings.

What is clearest?

Can you see it, or not?

Do you look at the mandala differently now than before this exercise?

Do you think it is important to meditate on a mandala to understand it, or can one simply look at it?

## Create a Mandala

Jack Wise only taught one class on how to create mandalas, and only took one private student, Madeleine Shields. She calls the mandala a "slow, sensitive process of discovery", a form of art that helped her open herself to the world within. Jack Wise explained the structure and process of painting the mandala, but the work of seeking the forms had to come from her.

*If I remember correctly, he told me very simply and very generally about the structure, how it was taken from the Tibetan approach and that it was modified, and that you worked from the outside ring towards the centre. He introduced the Ring of Fire then he gave the instruction about doing one step at a time. All I had to do was put down form - no colour.*

*The very first movement that you do is to put colour all the way around the ring, and then you start making the form, and when you make the form, you might just take some white paint and draw the form in all the way around. So, you go all the way around that ring quite a few times before you are finished. When I got to the narrative ring, which is where the pictures are, he showed me the method of splashing paint so that I could look into the splashes and see images that would come to me. That was totally new to me.*

*(M. Shields, interviewed by A. Andersen, 02/01)*

Personal obstacles met her at each new segment as she worked towards the sacred centre of the mandala. She has now created almost 20 mandalas, one each year for the past twenty years. They are vibrant and beautiful, but at the same time very expressive of her spiritual journey.

You too can create a mandala. It may not be infused with the same focused understanding of the journey of the mandala, but you will gain a sense of the creative process.

## The Mandala Process

Make a circle of paper by using a compass or tracing a large mixing bowl or pan. Cut out this circle, and work directly on the round form. Find the centre and use geometry tools to mark other reference points. Geometry has spiritual meaning in Tibetan Buddhism, too! Begin with the outer ring and let your mind and imagination determine the colours you choose and the shapes you depict. Don't plan it ahead of time!! Do not move to a new section or ring until the previous one is finished. Work in paint, pen and ink, pencil crayon, felt pens, even collage. Remember, also, that the Tibetan mandala inspired much of Jack Wise's work, but the mandala form can be depicted in many ways. If several of you undertake this project, have a show at the end. Display your work and an explanation of the mandala form together, and let others experience the journey of the mandala.