
Finding Oneself in the Mandala

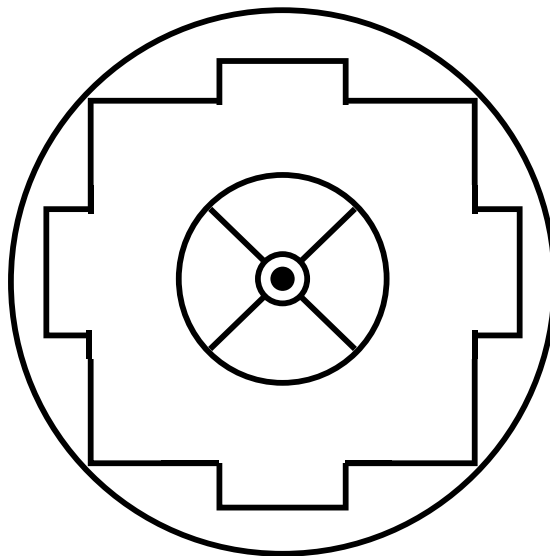
Includes a Tibetan Buddhist account of the origin of the first mandala of wrathful forms of the Buddha: the story of Matram Rudra

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Mandala is a term that Jung has done much to popularise in the West. However his view is in some ways at odds with the original Asian notion and I would like to explore these differences a little here.

Well then, what is a mandala? It can be an image, an experience, a process and a world apart. Let's explore it in that order.

Firstly as an image it is basically a circle which is squared without and/or within. [See the mandala on the cover page]. Jung has written in some detail about both traditional mandalas and those produced by his patients and had pointed to the many similarities that exist. He stated that the squaring of the circle *'could even be called the archetype of wholeness* and that *'As a rule a mandala occurs in conditions of psychic dissociation or disorganisation ... In such cases it is easy to see how the severe pattern imposed by a circular image of this kind compensates the disorder and confusion of the psychic state - namely through the construction of a central point to which everything is related, or by the concentric arrangements of the disordered multiplicity and of contradictory and irreconcilable elements'* [Jung, Mandala, 1972]. Thus it is seen as a response from the unconscious to deep need for containment and ordering. The image brings with it a balancing of centrifugal and centripetal forces.

I'd like to move on to looking at the mandala as an experience, for the focus of this week is **'Living the Symbolic Life'**. It seems to me that there are two basic ways that this can be done, both of which are described by their proponents as integration. The first way is to allow one's life to be informed by the symbolic, to be attentive to dreams, to be open to the numinous in its constant play around and through us, so that eventually we are in play with it. I think a previous speaker referring to this in her talk on Saturday where the stories she recounted indicated that by going out into a realm of symbols and coming back safely, there is the chance of having access to the other world while remaining grounded in our own. Very often it is presented in terms of a journey to bring back another, as in Sleeping Beauty, Orpheus, or the many shamanic stories of going to the lands of the dead. The person who makes the journey is changed by it and has to live with that difference, which as those who have experienced analysis or other avenues into the symbolic are aware, may be even more difficult for *others* to accept and live with.

The second way of experiencing the symbolic is to find the centre of one's life within it so that ego is called on to relinquish its hold on the world and to allow the numinous ever increasing authority. Life is thus given over to the symbolic rather than being informed by it. This seems to be a process that requires a strong cultural support if it is to be at all possible. The danger of becoming lost in a psychotic wasteland is obvious.

It is a journey without return rather like the evolution into a butterfly. It is linear and transcendent rather than cyclic and regenerative.

Merging into the symbolic holds, in many traditions, the hope of escaping duality, getting out of time, entering the unchanging whether it be called god, reality, buddha nature or whatever. When a culture takes this on board as a meaningful task—a collective experience of an archetype of liberation (as opposed to healing)—then the social support given to individuals who chose to follow extreme spiritual paths further lowers the possibility of

balancing or modification by the ego. However such cultural support provides a nurturing symbolic field within which great individual feats of transcendence can occur.

Jung was very wary of the total immersion in the symbolic, seeing it as essentially inappropriate and unhelpful for Western people. One of the reasons for this, I think, is contained in a statement he made in his brief article *Mandala* published in 1955. *“Nothing can be expected from an artificial repetition or a deliberate imitation of such images.”* As I understand it, his own favoured method of active imagination is a process of being actively available for the gifts of the unconscious without sending specific requests; the position of the neophyte at the door of the temple mysteries rather than that of the Magus exercising his will.

However, cultural continuity requires intentionality and repetition. Traditionally that has involved a repetition of detail as well as of general form. The precise image becomes invested not just with archetypal energy but with cultural energy. The image becomes icon, straddling the public and the private worlds of those who enter relationship with it.

Shared images help to generate a shared symbolic field which supports the heroes and heroines on their paths of integration delineated by the culturally defined images of transcendence, liberation, etc.

This raises an important question with regard to cultural symbols .how are they to remain fresh and alive while also being familiar and containing? My sense is that Jung felt that the investment of images is essentially an individual act of grace by both the personal and the collective unconscious, while I see culturally validated images as having associated ongoing rituals of regeneration and empowerment.

This is an important issue when we look at the culturally supported existence of specific mandalas, The ‘religious images are often known since received, but unattainable, as opposed to unconscious images which impinge but are difficult to know, needing to be experienced.

Mandalas seem to appear on both sides of the divide. Whether or not they should both be called mandalas is outside the topic of this paper but they do seem to correspond to the two identified modes of informing and merging.

There, is also the aspect of mandala as process, where the appearance of the mandala opens up the process of re-integration; the image aspect acting as trigger to the process aspect. In *Diagram 1* the descending and ascending movements on the upper left side show the common notion of a fall from grace due to sin, stupidity etc with the corresponding effortful rise to the lost state. On the upper right side is indicated the appearance of the divine form of the mandala in the world. The ground of its manifestation is compassion and it becomes a vehicle for rapid, direct reintegration as it expresses the unity of the divine and the mundane.

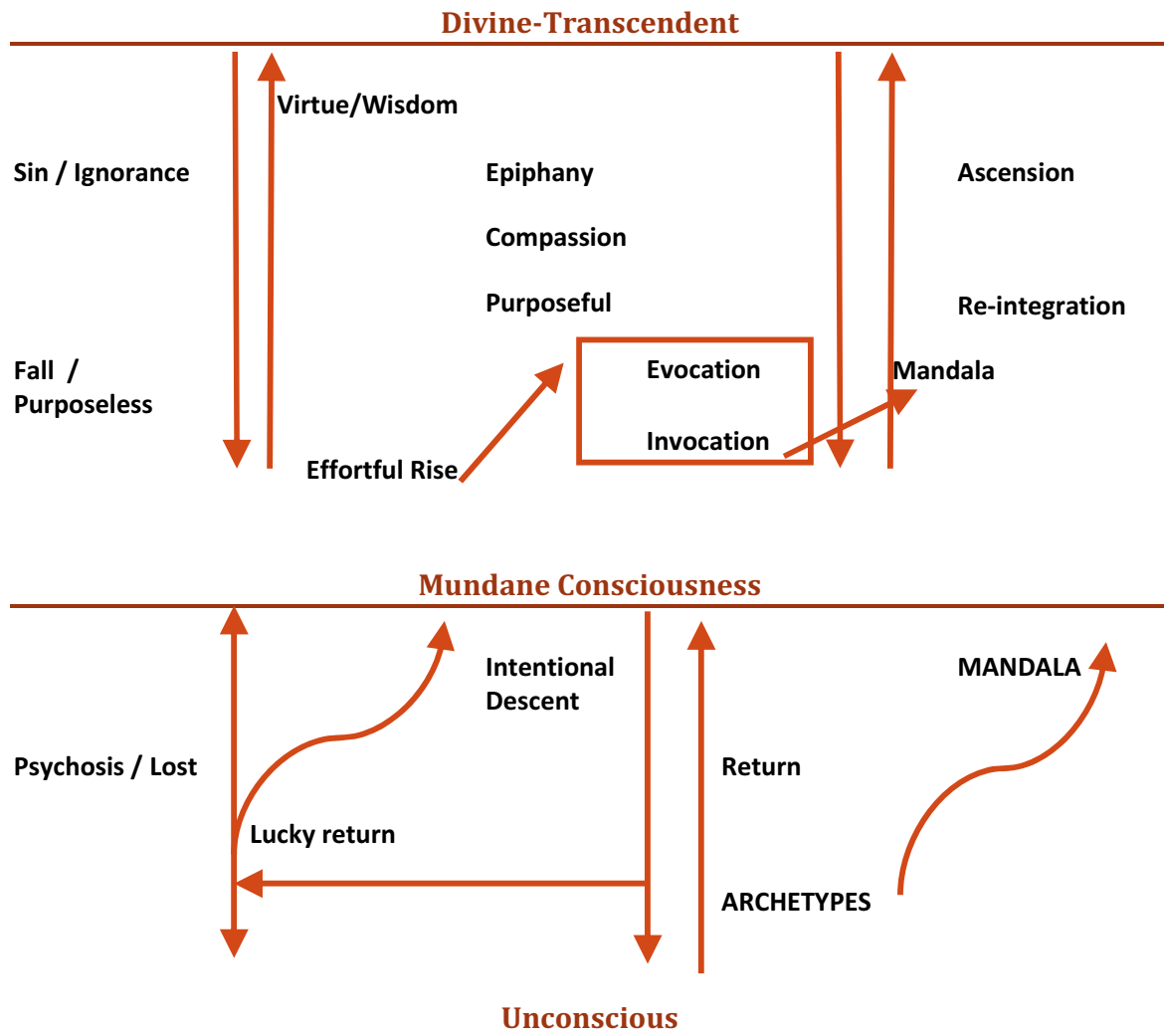


Diagram 1

The left side of the lower part of the diagram shows the descent into the underworld / unconscious / madness. This falling out of touch with ordinary reality may have a spontaneous remission but it may require the input of another person. The modern medical expert sits at the surface and throws chemical pebbles into the depth of Psyche's pool hoping to effect some transformation. While the psychotherapist may descend and help the lost one explore this new terrain so that they may find their own route to the surface. In doing this the therapist is equipped with theory in much the same way as earlier heroes relied on string in the maze, or white pebbles in the forest.

The right side of the lower part of the diagram indicates the way the mandala that arises from the unconscious can become the vehicle for surfacing and integration of the person who is experiencing “psychic dissociation or disorganisation”. In this case the Self is found spontaneously in/with the mandala which presents itself in dream, drawing and so on. The more formal, culturally established mandala can also be useful here. For just as we can draw on our financial investments in time of need, so the connection made by meditation on the various mandalas in times of peace and calm can be activated in times of need or distress so that the presence of the image inaugurates a process of psychic renewal by releasing the powerful investment of the individual, the culture, and the numinous.

Diagram 2 offers a simple framework for placing these various modalities. The Buddhist ideal would be to attain a unitary state which encompasses both unchanging wisdom and a fully responsive compassion. Arid symbolic entry into and meditation on a mandala would be one important way in which this can be achieved. Thus one can find oneself, one’s real nature, within the mandala, for it is a true mirror of the Self.

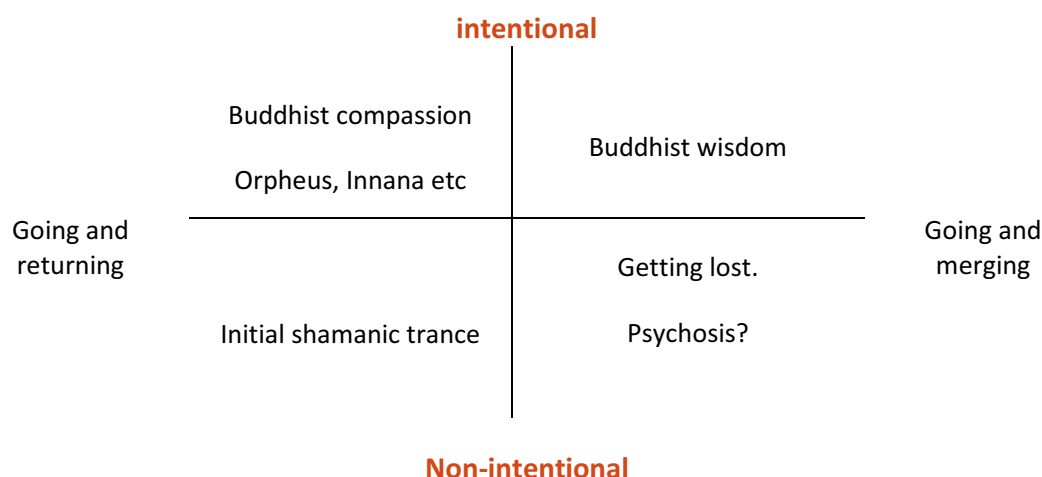


Diagram 2

Now I want to tell you a story. It is an old buddhist story that tells of the origin of the first mandala of the wrathful forms of the Buddha. You may have seen pictures of these forms; they are very wild and dangerous looking and not at all calm and contented like the usual images of the Buddha. From a critical point of view this story could be seen as a mythic justification for innovation of non-traditional elements into an established system of thought. But for us today I think it offers a chance to enter a view where the mundane and the symbolic are merged and where the symbols of the ego and of the self struggle for both dominance and acceptance.

I have translated the story from a popular Tibetan text (**Bibliography 3**) that is often recited on the long winter nights as part of the folk cultural tradition. This story is also told before tantric mandala initiations to set the scene and tell how the mandala entered the world. I have translated the characters’ names, as I feel they have functions as both signs and symbols. It is quite a long story and perhaps you’ll get more sense of its flavour if you allow yourself to make believe...

Once upon a time, when the teachings of the Primordial Buddha were vanishing from the world, there lived a rich merchant who had an only son. He gave his son a servant and sent him off to find his fortune.

In the course of their travels they heard of a great master called Indestructible Being, who taught liberation through just letting life happen, and the son, wanting to learn this went quickly with his servant to where the Master was staying. On requesting instruction he was told *"Reality is not a construct - so remain in your original nature. The clouds of confusion and suffering will dissolve back into the open sky of awareness. This is the highest teaching."*

The Master gave them new names, calling the son Black Liberation and the servant Noble Devotion and after making many offerings they returned home. They both practiced the teaching but Black Liberation understood them in his own way and felt free to do whatever he chose. Within him desire moved like a tidal wave while anger blazed like fire. Ignorance covered him like darkness and his pride was compacted like a rock as his jealousy swirled like the wind.

Not knowing how to use the teaching as an antidote to his afflictions he used it instead to increase their power and to develop his egotism.

The servant was also practicing the teaching but he had understood the meaning and by staying present in the moment became ever more free of pride and attachments. Their differences soon became clear and Black Liberation, safe in the conviction that he was right said they must consult the Master.

But when they asked him he said that it was Pure Devotion who had understood correctly. Black Liberation was most insulted by this and used his power to expel them both from the kingdom.

His behaviour became worse as his confidence in his own righteousness grew. He killed every man he saw and had sex with every woman he met, He took corpses from the charnel ground and ate them and for twenty years continued to live in a most outrageous fashion.

Then he died and took five hundred births as a black wolf, then five hundred as a forest rat and like numbers as a hyena, a maggot and a dung beetle. After that he had countless lives in the realms of torment and spent eighty thousand years in foulest hell. Then he had many thousands of lives as demons of different kinds, at the end of which he entered the womb of a prostitute called Always Copulating. At dusk she slept with ogres, at midnight with vicious demons, and at dawn with local spirits and so he was fathered by these three evil groups.

After eight months he was born and nine days later his mother died, He had three heads each with three eyes, six hands and two wings, and looked very frightening. The local people said that this inauspicious and horrible child must be taken to the cemetery and placed in his mother's lap for misfortune was rife and all happiness had left the land.

Mother and child were left in the cemetery which was inhabited by fierce animals, For seven days the child lived by sucking pus from the breasts of his mother's corpse, then for seven

more by sucking her blood. Then the following each provided a further seven days' sustenance; eating her breasts, her viscera, her flesh and her bone marrow and brains. After these forty-two days his body was fully developed and he was known as Matram Rudra, Mother Eater.

He looked around the cemetery and found more human flesh and blood to eat and drink, He wore human skin as a skirt and used a skull as a cup for the blood, He wore snakes as ornaments, and eating elephants and tigers wore their hides as robes. His mouths were shining with fat and blood and a fine patina of cemetery ash covered him. Rows of fresh, rotting and dried human skulls hung round his neck. His eyes stared wildly while his mouths gaped open, baring his fangs. His foul breath gave rise to many infectious diseases and other diseases spread froth all his orifices.

The ruling demons of all the countries of the world invited him to rule them in order to keep the peace and in that way the eight groups of evil spirits came under his power. He and his servants consumed the lives of all humans until they were exterminated and the entire world was destroyed.

His mind became full of pride and he announced with a huge and terrifying roar, *"I am the lord of all the world. Is there anyone greater than I? Should anyone appear, I will crush them."*

No one replied for all beings were overawed by him and paralysed in their understanding. However his wife, Time's Edge, said, *"In the land of Lanka there is a Demon King who is much more famous than you. He is a disciple of Buddha [Dipankara](#) and is always happy."*

Mother Eater became furious and assembling his army he flew off and descended upon Lanka like a storm of meteors. The people there were completely cowed and so the king offered his allegiance saying *"My defeat has been predicted in the scriptures and so I must accept it, but your defeat is also predicted when the indestructible mandala is opened."*

Again Mother Eater roared his challenge. *"Who could be greater than I?"* Only Time's Edge, his wife, replied *"The king of the demi-gods is greater than you. He has magical powers and supernatural strength."* Mother Eater was enraged and his body became a blazing conflagration like the fire at the end of the world. Flying off with his followers he sent a great poisonous rain of hot and cold diseases which killed the demi-gods who were then eaten. The king himself became infected with a terrible rotting disease. Mother Eater picked him up by his right leg and swung him thrice round his head and hurled him away. His body broke into eight pieces and the places where they landed became the eight great cemeteries.

The few remaining beings who were not under Mother Eater's power ran around desperately looking for a refuge but they could find no help and so they came back to this terrifying demon and took refuge in him.

Then all beings of the world, who were now as demons, installed the victorious Mother Eater and his retinue in the palace of Corpse Skull and surrounded it with a huge army. Roaring out his challenge he announced his domination of the universe, but his wife Times Edge said, *"In the divine realm of Tushita is the great monk White Pinnacle who is the*

master of all the holy assemblies.” On hearing this Mother Eater rose up in a fury and in one leap arrived where White Pinnacle was teaching. He lifted him off his throne and crushed him in his arms. The monks wailed in grief and misery, calling him a sinner, but Mother Eater rebuked them saying, “You are helpless cowards, why should I do what you want? I am the strongest and most terrifying of all.”

With his dying breath White Pinnacle told his disciples “Do not worry. Although Mother Eater cannot be destroyed by pacification or encouragement he will be overcome by the destructive activity of all the Buddhas, His poisonous body will be transformed into a source of liberation. The virtue of the master Indestructible Being and of Noble Devotion is almost ripe and they will overcome this evil.”

After this Mother Eater felt truly triumphant and settled in his mighty palace on Mount Malaya to enjoy the pleasures of the senses by day and by night.

News of these terrible events finally summoned all the Buddhas of the ten directions to a great assembly. They agreed that this demon must be confronted with the consequences of his evil deed otherwise false understanding would be victorious and the relation between cause and effect would be forgotten.

Because of their previous connection with the demon, the master Indestructible Being and Noble Devotion were chosen to act, They were blessed with the power and wisdom of all the Buddhas. Indestructible Being was transformed into the wrathful Heruka, the Horse Necked One, and Noble Devotion appeared as Ms consort, the vicious Sow’s Face.

They went to Mother Eater’s palace where each of the four doors had an animal guardianship; a mare, a sow, a lioness and a bitch. Horse Neck copulated with each of them and transformed them into the doorkeepers of the mandala.

Then he proceeded further into the palace and at each stage he copulated with the guards, transforming them by the heat of his desireless wisdom, so that they became the deities of the wrathful Buddha Mandala. Horse Neck met the demon’s wife and she conceived, quickly producing a son with the demonic form of her husband but with the enlightened nature of Horse Neck.

Then Horse Neck neighed three times and his consort Sow’s Face grunted five times. This alarmed the great demon and he rushed before them saying, *“What is this noise you tiny people? I am the ruler of all and my qualities are known everywhere. Be peaceful and have faith in me.”*

Horse Neck entered the anus of Mother Eater and rose up to poke through the crown of his head. He stretched out his arms and legs and his horse’s head turned green from the boiling of the demon’s fat.

Sow’s Face entered the vagina of the Demon’s wife and rose till her head emerged from the skull of Time’s Edge. Her sows head became black due to the boiling of the wife's fat. Then Horse Neck and Sow’s Face had sex and a son called Blazing Fire was born immediately.

Mother Eater wept and wailed in great agony, *“Mummy, Daddy. Oh, oh, I have been defeated by the horse and the pig. The demons have been defeated by the Buddhas. The eagles have defeated the snakes. The wind has scattered the clouds. Kill me quickly!”* A lump of excreta fell from him into the great ocean and became the Wish Fulfilling Tree which, with its roots in the underworld, grew up to bear fruit in the heavens, uniting the three worlds.

Like victorious heroes who carry the spoils of war, the ornaments of the demon were blessed and adopted as the dress of the wrathful enlightened ones.

Mother Eater became enraged to see this and he manifested a huge terrifying form which provoked a final battle. The wrathful Buddhas invaded his body and his cries of pain made his followers abandon him so that he was alone in defeat. The demon’s followers offered their bodies as cushions for the divine forms, and they made this request, *“We are not fortunate enough to stay at the centre, so place us at the edge of the mandala. We are not fortunate enough to receive the first offerings so please give us your leftovers.”*

Mother Eater was stabbed with a trident and his blood poured out, removing his sins and obscurations. He was given vows and initiations and blessed as the chief protector of the mandala with the name the Great Black One. His body was cast away and it fell in eight parts, creating **the eight special places of meditation.**

The mandala here created is one in which the divine appears in the form of the demonic. Is this a true integration, a dynamic mode of being which contains and resolves the opposites without creating either a bland homogenisation or a disguised annihilation?

If we think of Black Liberation and his progress through the apotheosis of the ego as Mother Eater and on to redemption as the Great Black One I think we would have to agree that there is not much sense of a person at the end of it. He may have been saved—but what is there of him in the salvation? He has a function, a role, a symbolic identity but in what sense does he exist? The personal has been ‘liberated’ into an impersonal archetypal level. Jung in his *A Study in the Process of Individuation* comments;

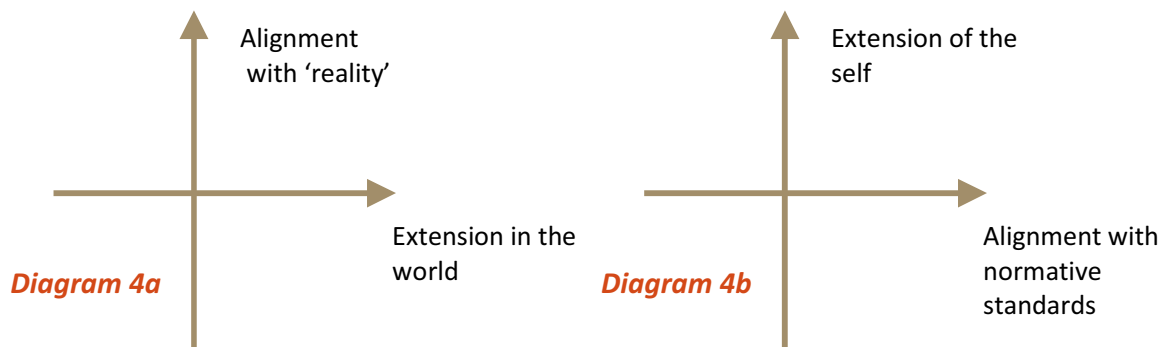
*It must constantly be borne in mind that the constellation of archetypal images and fantasies is not in itself pathological. The pathological element only reveals itself in the way the individual reacts to them and how he interprets them. The characteristic feature of a pathological reaction is, above all, **identification with the archetype.** This produces a sort of inflation and possession by the emergent contents, so that they pour out in a torrent which no therapy can stop. Identification can, in favourable cases, sometimes pass off as a more or less harmless inflation. But in all cases identification with the unconscious brings a weakening of consciousness, and herein lies the danger. You do not ‘make’ an identification; you do not identify yourself, but you experience your identity with the archetype in an unconscious way and so are possessed by it. Hence in more difficult cases it is far more necessary to strengthen and consolidate the ego than to understand and assimilate the products of the unconscious.*

In the above story we can see how Black Liberation takes an instruction on the openness of each moment as a validation for the indulgence of the ego. Falling under the sway of this

powerful archetypal force he surrenders to the grandiosity of omnipotence, ignoring the inevitable **enantiodromia**. Having sought to be the universal master he becomes the protecting servant. Through over-identification with the archetype all humanity is lost and the resolution in the story is within the realm of the symbolic, for there is no return to the mundane.

This is a finding oneself in the mandala with the surprise of sudden evolution / transformation. Just as for the become butterfly there is no way 'home', no return possible. Acceptance of the new identity and full presence within it is the means of resolution, memory of the former state requiring either abandonment or re-identification within the unitary vision of the mandala.

It seems to me that two principles are at work here, extension and alignment. In the Buddhist system there is a striving to align oneself with the prescribed notion of Buddhahood and this involves a drawing in from extension in the world. [Diagram 3a] Once the goal has been attained and there is a stability of realisation, an effortless state of integrating it becomes possible, for the play of compassion to extend out to encompass everything. Jung's view, and it is probably a general view in psychotherapy, seems to be that the thrust of individual evolution is by extension beyond what is known, and that this often requires a curtailing of alignment with that which is given. [Diagram 3b]



The paradox seems to be that by following the Buddhist alignment one arrives at a state that is quite 'other', the very known-ness of the goal supporting a movement towards a state beyond thoughts and knowability. The path of extension and self-discovery takes one deeper and deeper into the essence of the point of departure so that one becomes less other to oneself. As in the well known lines of T. S. Eliot:

*We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

This brings me back to the title of my paper, **Finding oneself in the mandala**, for it seems that a mandala is a place apart where one can both find and lose oneself.

I'd like to look a bit more at the buddhist theory of mandalas and then comment on my own experience of many years meditation with that system.

The Tantric view is that there are two modes of existence, actuality and delusion. Actuality is self-existing, without duality, effortlessly arising and free of volition. This is the experience of the great Master at the beginning of the story who *'taught liberation through just letting life happen'*. This state is known as the **Ground Original Nature**. Its quality is pure luminescence for, like a mirror, it displays everything clearly without itself becoming an object of perception.

Actuality is seen as having three modes. **The natural mode**, which is self-occurring. **Primordial awareness**, complete and perfect in itself. This mode has a natural radiance, an effortless display, an effulgence of clarity which gives rise to the third mode, **precise appropriate manifestation**, revealing whatever is necessary to harmonise and develop situations. This process is indicated on the right-hand side of **Diagram 4**. The diagram represents a sphere, a universal totality, incorporating all diversity and multiplicity in one simple point.

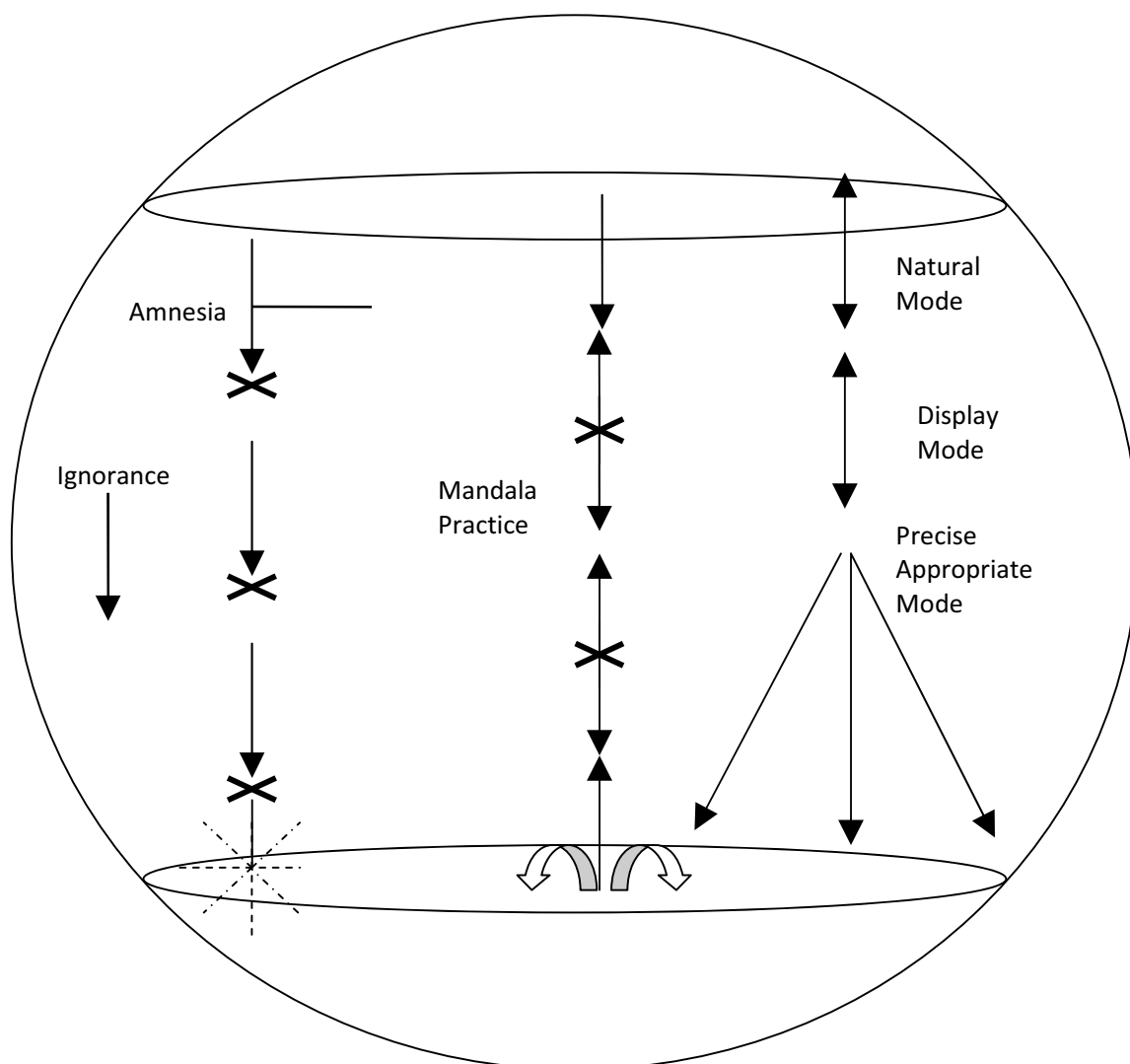


Diagram 4

The mode of delusion arises when this state is forgotten. How does this happen? Traditionally it is described as being like a person falling down stairs and knocking themselves out—when they come round they wonder *"What's happening, who am I?"* That first intimation of dualising

consciousness sets awareness in a subjective frame apart from the object field. This first stage is known as co-emergent ignorance since ignorance of actuality and actuality itself are simultaneously present.

The second stage is the ignorance of ascription in which the innate intelligence of this new amnesiac ego consciousness comes into play, ascribing names and functions and giving shape to both itself and its world.

The third stage is the ignorance of not understanding cause and effect, under the power of which the person seeks to develop her life but without knowing how it works, what the basic rules are and so more and more confusion and suffering develop. These three stages are indicated on the left side of *Diagram 4*.

Meditation on a mandala seeks to correct this errancy by replaying the process of manifestation within a non-reificatory awareness. Having gone through the preliminaries which create as much separation as possible from our ordinary patterns of thought, many prayers are said to the particular deities of the mandala one is using. With great devotion one imagines them dissolving into rainbow coloured lights and melting into oneself so that one also dissolves into light—and then that light vanishes leaving the presence of an objectless awareness—the experience of the mirror itself.

It is from this state that the mandala arises, in three stages which parallel and counter the three stages of ignorance. First is the contemplation of the absolute nature in which manifestation is experienced as not different from its ground, awareness. Then comes the contemplation of the display of compassion where, by reflecting on the suffering of beings, an impulse to help them manifests, as five coloured lights. Finally this light gathers as the causal seed syllable, a basic root sound out of which all the details and deities of the elaborated mandala arise.

This manifestation of precise objects is visualised and experienced as occurring as the spontaneous, effortless display of the non-dual nature.

The final stage of the mandala practice is to generalise this experience to include all that one experiences on leaving the controlled environment of the meditation. All that is seen is recognised as having the nature of the mandala palace and deities, all sound is the same as the mantra of the deities and all thoughts are the non-reificatory play of unborn awareness. This is indicated in the central line of *Diagram 4*.

From this very condensed summary it should be clear that what is being presented is a theory of perception, not a theory of personality. The focus of buddhist theory and practice is the understanding of the nature of the mind so that *'false'* ideas of self will cease to get in the way of the natural unfolding of reality. The more one looks for some personal gain in this the less likely one is to have any success at all. The symbolic here is the median level between vast open awareness and precise manifestation. The mandala is here like a trip to fairy land but texts, far from warning against too intimate a contact, encourage one towards total identification as a powerful remedy to the amnesia of ignorance that keeps one cut off from actuality—the desire to go home again is merely a failure to wake up and recognise that one *is* home.

The symbol works in this sense because of its twofold capacity. It can both dissolve into its fathomless timeless ground and it can evolve into the most precise seemingly concrete manifestation. It links the two worlds - but it does it by showing the mundane to be none other than a rather aberrant expression of the absolute. *It is not that one has been lost and found but rather that one was never really lost at all. However far you wander there is only ever the Garden of Eden!*

The buddhist mandala is part of a system of cognitive analysis. It is concerned with the disclosure of secrets rather than with the unveiling of mystery. The mandala is a method for achieving a clearly intended goal, albeit a goal which lies beyond ego consciousness. The symbolic is here a means to express the unsayable known rather than as the means of experiencing the unknowable. There are many parallels with the Alchemical Work--the need to become married to the task, to make a total commitment. For this is no one-night stand of spontaneous revelation!

Yet however we approach the symbolic and accept it as part of our lives we must lose in order to gain, and in gaining, accept that we lose. All the systems of interpretation and explanation can merely give us strength and hope to survive this paradox of integration.

References

- 1, C. C. Jung, Mandala', p3 in *Mandala Symbolism*, Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, 1972
2. ibid p. 5
3. *bKa - Thang Ser - Phreng*, block print from E. Tibet. The story occurs in the sixth chapter.
4. C G Jung, *A Study in the Process of Individuation*, p67 in *Mandala Symbolism*, Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, 1972