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PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

## Focus on Miniatures: Mandalas

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Mandalas originated in ancient Indian spiritual traditions. They became central to Buddhist ritual, especially Vajrayana and meditation practices. Vajrayana Buddhism is sometimes considered a subset of Mahāyāna. It encompasses several branches of Buddhism, including Tibetan Buddhism, Zen and Pure Land Buddhism. Approximately 50% of all Buddhists practice Mahāyāna Buddhism (EBSCO Knowledge Advantage, 2025).

Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition emphasizes tantric rituals aimed at rapid spiritual awakening. Buddhist missionaries brought Mandalas from India to other parts of Asia, including Tibet, China, and Japan, during the 4th to 7th centuries CE (Smith, 2020). The ancient classical language of India was Sanskrit, and the sacred language of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The word mandala in this language means 'circle' or 'disk'.

"In its simplest form, the mandala consists of a square with four doors containing a circle in the middle. Each of its doors takes the shape of a "T", and more generally, the pattern is symmetrical and balanced" (Le Gousse, 2017, paragraph 3). Psychologically, Carl Jung reinterpreted mandalas as tools for inner exploration and healing. In the modern world, mandalas are widely used beyond religious contexts: as art, meditation tools, and even symbols of balance.



The sand mandala is perhaps the most intriguing and attractive of the artistic traditions associated with Tibetan Buddhism. Great skill is required to create the intricate designs with coloured powder or sand. The process is painstakingly long, taking weeks to create. As part of the ritual, which also includes prayers and consecration, the completed sand mandala is then destroyed to represent the impermanence of things. (AGGV, 2017)

Jung wrote, "I sketched every morning in a notebook a small circular drawing, a mandala, which seemed to correspond to my inner situation at the time. With the help of these drawings, I could observe my psychic transformations from day to day" (Jung cited in Cornell, 2006, p. 142).

"Jung thought that the images in a mandala activate the archetypes, the wells of meaning in the collective unconscious" (Jung cited in C. Thomason, 2013, paragraph 15).

Two Play Therapists—one from Poland (a Psychologist) and the other from the USA (a Licensed Professional Clinical Counsellor)—shared that mandalas often appear in their sand therapy practice—one practices sand therapy from a Jungian perspective, and the other from a Gestalt perspective.

The therapist from Poland, Stankiewicz, indicated that the mandalas observed have shown up in living and organic forms. The creator uses flowers, leaves, or even tree parts to create these. She also shared that miniature solar systems are sometimes created, with planets orbiting their suns. There may even be an image of both beginnings and endings, as well as creation and return:

In Sandplay, I witness a similar process: the circular image emerges from within, as if the psyche itself were seeking to restore balance and unity after fragmentation. The mandala becomes a vessel in which the Self can constellate. I often observe in children's play the theme of making pizza, carefully arranging different ingredients on a round base. It becomes a living mandala, a nourishing symbol. The child turns into a cook, an alchemist who combines, transforms, and creates. Even the yeast dough carries symbolic meaning: fermentation, expansion, and the mysterious process of growth.

In the collection of Sandplay miniatures, there is a figure of a whirling dervish, evoking a spinning mandala. The dance of the dervishes is a moving prayer, a meditation in which the human becomes a channel for the Divine: one hand toward heaven, the other toward earth. The flowing robe spreads like a flower, like a mandala, like a field of energy. Children sometimes echo this image when they spin in play, full of laughter and dizziness. Their movement is not only joyful but instinctual, an expression of the life force that seeks to be seen and felt. Like the dervish, the child turns around its own axis, losing the sense of ego for a moment, finding the center through motion.



Keller, the therapist from the USA, shared that mandalas assist in "finding grounding, regulation, and order in the midst of chaos. It also offers a moment of reflection and centering/connection to self". Whether sand therapists observe mandala drawings made in the sand of the sandtray or observe the use of mandala-like miniatures placed in the sand, therapists suspect that these discs also instill feelings of grounding and regulation not only in the builder but also the witness.

Thank you to the contributing therapists:

Emily Keller, USA  
Paulina Stankiewicz, Poland

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