



My Secret, watercolor dyes, black felt pen

SACRED CIRCLES

WHEN I FIRST STARTED writing this book I thought it would simply be a “how to” book on painting watercolor mandalas. Mandalas, or sacred circles, have been used for centuries to assist meditation. I had been encouraged by my students to write a book based on the teaching technique I had developed from years of painting mandalas myself. But I had not included in the original text what a tremendous impact painting these little circle paintings (mandala in Sanskrit means circle, or center) had on my heart and my life. The whole story was really the personal transformation which had occurred for me through mandala painting. I knew I had to go deeper into the details of that transformation. Opening myself up felt good on the one hand, but the vulnerability of it really scared me.

Because of the amazing experiences I had with mandalas, the only choice seemed to be to jump in. As I wrote in my journal, “It’s a story. Let the story unfold. It’s a story about your heart. Let it be told.” So, I have jumped into the telling.

The mandala became a symbol for the calm, quiet place within myself. In painting mandalas I centered, healed, made peace with myself and re-emerged more alive and whole. I found the well of my creativity and spirit. I found my heart. It was truly magical.

WHY MANDALAS?

Several years ago I was experiencing terrible chronic fatigue and I didn’t know what the cause was, nor did the numerous doctors and health practitioners I consulted. My husband and I had moved back to Santa Cruz County which was considered a very nurturing place to heal. I needed peace, wanted health, and was searching for answers. I began seeing a body worker to deal with the anger, frustration, hopelessness and depression that resulted from having what I was told was an “incurable” condition. With her encouragement I began to paint the “colorful and very visual” images I got during our intense sessions.



Exploding Heart, watercolor

I painted this in the first few months of painting mandalas. I do consider it a mandala; symmetrical and circular (within the square) with an implied center. I continued to paint hearts for many years. Here I felt my heart was so full of withheld emotions it was exploding.

Weekly I brought in paintings full of hearts and tears to show her. My actual inner artwork, however, had started years before with very personal drawings and paintings of my heart. They were expressions of my emotions, and I loved doing them. With them I felt I had found a place within myself where I *was* truly capable of being creative and expressive. That discovery brought me incredible joy. One such painting, *My Secret*, was of a vision I had of the dawning of that creative place inside myself. I hid my work then, thinking it was childish and not really “art.”

In the bodywork sessions I felt safe again to express my heart, as in *Exploding Heart*. It was during that time that I felt a very strong desire to paint mandalas. A friend was drawing mandalas and I was fascinated and attracted to them. I wanted to try making them as well and began to

search for a way I could learn. Later I realized that those in the process of going through a healing or life transition, as I was, gravitate to mandalas.

And so, with mandalas, I began a spiritual journey to the center of myself, to my heart, and this is the story of that journey. I share the process with the hope that the healing it has brought me will continue, and will also, be of benefit to others.

AN EXCITING JOURNEY

This is a “how to” guide for journeying to your own heart by painting watercolor mandalas. There are many reasons people are attracted to watercolor mandalas. You may just want to play, or to try watercolor for the first time, or to express yourself. You may want to relax and have fun exploring your inner world and let go of the need to paint or draw perfectly. You may want to paint as a meditation. You can do any or all of these. Everyone, yes everyone, can do mandalas. With mandalas I have learned to play more, to judge

myself less, to let go, to heal, to know myself, to express myself, to surprise myself, to nurture myself, and to love myself. I have begun to learn what the “self” is, which, according to Carl Jung, is the archetype of wholeness. And in addition to all of that, my painting skills have improved and my creativity and imagination have really come alive. It has been an exciting journey!

CREATE YOUR SACRED SPACE

Imagine now inscribing a circle around yourself, and putting your own heart at the center, in the place of honor. You have now created a space, a sacred circle, in which to begin your sacred work. Let’s turn inward and start to explore what treasures you will find there.

“When we attune ourselves to a mandala, with the right kind of concentration, we experience a change in consciousness. Meditating on a mandala takes us on a journey into our wise centre which is in harmony with the cosmos.”²

We dance round in a ring and suppose, but the secret sits in the middle and knows. —Robert Frost



INTRODUCTION

MAKING MANDALAS EASY AND FUN

HOW DO I BEGIN?

Until you actually have the experience of doing a mandala, it can be difficult to understand what they really are. In teaching others how to do personal mandalas, and then subsequently putting it all down in this book, I have concentrated on how to get started quickly and easily, while having fun with the process. This is the way I learned and it unfolded for me in a very natural and easy way. Basically, the process taught me, and I will show you how it did and how you can make it work for you. It has a wonderful mystery-like quality as it reveals itself. The beauty of this is that your own process will be leading and teaching you. Once I show you a few guidelines at the beginning, you can continue following them or create your own path for teaching yourself. You are your own best teacher, so trust that. So now you are at the point of wanting to do a mandala, or at least you are very curious about them. You wouldn't have picked up this book if you weren't

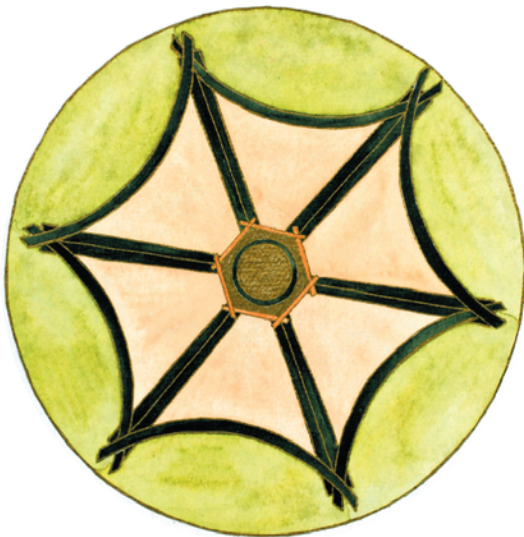
interested, and something, you may not know what, has drawn you to them. I shall assume you are ready and willing just like I was. "Now what?" I had asked, with both apprehension and curiosity. "How do I begin?"

The initial inspiration for doing mandalas came from my garden when I noticed that most blooming flowers were mandalas. And, it was from an actual physical experience of feeling like a flower during a bodywork session, that I began to understand the concept. I tried painting my first circle painting, *Myself As A Flower*, and called it a "flower mandala." This experience helped me to know how to proceed. With it I discovered the joy, surprise and empowerment of going to the center of myself and representing what I saw and felt, from within. All this was aided, in ways I did not initially understand, by working within the circular format. What I believe occurred was that the circling, inward focus opened my heart. A friend suggested that this painting was a depiction of my heart chakra. Chakras are energy centers in the



Flower of Myself, watercolor, silver pen

I wondered if I could create a mandala by following the design of a flower. I gave it a try. First I drew, then painted, imagining what my inner flower would look like from above if it were fully opened and blooming. This process is a very good way to begin doing mandalas.



Sacred Space: A Place To Rest, watercolor, gold pen

I consider this to be my first true mandala. It came from a vision I had of a place I wanted to go and rest. I tried to approximate what I had seen, drawing it first but feeling awkward and unsure of what I was doing. I felt better and better as I focused on expressing my feelings of peace, serenity and sacredness. When I finished painting I felt fulfilled, centered and whole. I knew I was beginning to learn the power of the mandala.

subtle body seen in Eastern art as spinning and unfolding flowers. I think my friend was right, it was my heart energy. This was such a wonderful experience for me, I have since used the flower mandala as one of the first processes we do in class. See Chapter Five, "The Flower of Myself."

FROM MANDALA MAKING TO MANDALA TEACHING

Defined, a mandala is "a spiritual tool which is used to assist concentration and meditation. It is usually a symmetrical and circular image which can be either a purely geometrical composition or a figurative one, and is said to be a spiritual diagram of the universe showing the process by which an individual can return to their original source."³ So in my process of trying to learn about what a mandala was, I had opened my heart energy with the "flower mandala." I was now ready "to go beyond the antipasto," as one friend joked. Not sure that I had really done a true mandala in *Myself As a Flower*, I was still looking for a more complete experience of the process.

The inspiration for that process came again from a bodywork session in which I saw an Asian-like circular, sacred space surrounded by green, peaceful grass. This seemed to be good material for a mandala. I drew an outline approximating the design I had seen, and then painted it, holding to the circle motif as in *Sacred Space: A Place to Rest*. A strange thing then happened. A place of total clarity seemed to open up within my head, a great calm came over me, and I heard: "You know what to do, you know how to do it. Go teach." I was not a trained watercolor teacher, art history yes, but not watercolor. And although this was my first mandala, I knew with complete certainty this was what I was to do.

I must say something about this mandala. Years later I came across a Shinto shrine which stirred in me the feelings I'd experienced while painting this mandala. The shrine represented the crossing of a threshold which separated the secular world

from the sacred world of the gods. In other words, a sort of gateway to sacred space—just what my mandala was about. This has always been an exciting and fascinating part of doing mandalas, discovering that they have a much deeper meaning than what I originally thought.

This first mandala was an unparalleled inner experience for me and it was the beginning, the gateway to my sacred space. I wanted to know more about them and so I began a search, finding mandalas in Carl Jung's writings and in only one book in the public library. What I remember from the book, *Mandala* by Jose and Miriam Argueles, was that mandalas had three basic properties: "a center, symmetry, cardinal points."⁴ After that, however, I just wasn't sure about them, so I made the decision to let go and let the process teach me by experience. This was new for me. I had always thought I preferred to learn "by-the-book."

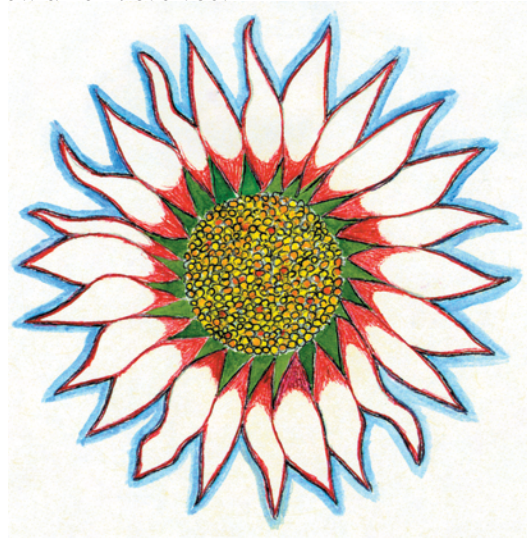
After a few weeks of painting and learning from mandalas, I proposed a class to the local Community Education Office and began to teach a beginning watercolor mandala class that summer. The class evolved, some students stayed for years and others became mandala teachers themselves. One English woman, who became a very special friend, began teaching mandalas at 83 and taught until she was 89! See Lane Cara Shaw's *My First Mandala*.

Having been ill for several years and unable to work full-time, I watched myself slowly become stronger as I continued to paint mandalas. My students as well made many personal changes and we all had fun making "art," most for the first time since childhood. We made art not as is found in galleries and museums, but in the way we did as a child, from our own rich imaginations. We expressed from our inner selves because, like a child, it simply was so natural, felt so good, was so freeing, and seemed so necessary. We discovered our hearts had a lot to say.

Three years after I started the first class, during Thanksgiving break, a student said she "saw"

me writing a book about the watercolor mandala classes. She said it would include both my mandalas and student's mandalas. "I can see it," she said. "It's a very simple, beautiful book." She looked at me suspecting I might not believe her and said, "I don't know what you think you ought to be doing, but I think you're supposed to be doing a book. Now!"

The truth was I had gotten the same inspiration. And so, the following year, I began to compile my mandalas and the mandalas from class participants for the book. I chose examples of work which I felt would demonstrate how the class was taught, how the process worked and how all of it evolved.



Lane Cara Shaw, *My First Mandala*,
watercolor, colored pencil

"My life took on a new dimension when I went to Michele's 'Painting From the Heart' class, and began to draw my first mandala. I was well into my 'eighties' yet I sensed adventure! Our assignment was to think of ourselves as looking down on a flower, and to write what our intention was. Without hesitation I wrote, 'I want to know myself.' We were instructed to draw what we 'saw,' 'felt' or 'knew.' I knew I was to draw a bunch of seeds! That was within my range of capabilities, but my unexpected joy was my hand seemed to know where to go—it had a life of its own! I simply did my best to make all those seeds a little different. That was all I accomplished that night. In the days that followed, I propped up my drawing and each day until it was finished I was guided what to do. First there were the petals, all different sizes, then the various colors followed until the mandala was finished. Only much later I realized my drawing represented not only me, but everyone of us—we all come from the same Source, yet we each have our own individuality. We are so much more than most of us can imagine!"

—Lane Cara Shaw

HOW THE BOOK IS LAID OUT

THE BOOK IS LAID OUT as I taught the 6-8 week class. A section is devoted to each 2-hour class. There is an additional section called “Express Your Feelings,” which is primarily devoted to homework and work outside of class. I encourage this because I believe the more you practice, the quicker you will catch on to the process and have it work for you. Also within the second chapter is a meditation to help with letting go to the divine spirit within and allowing it to help with the co-creative process.

The inspiration for each chapter came to me initially as I taught myself, or should I say, was guided, as to how to proceed with creating mandalas. In my own process I learned ways to create mandalas simply, with ease and without struggle. I focused on the process rather than the end result and that helped me let go of my own self-judgment. The chapters are presented in the way I learned, so that the process itself teaches you and leads you to an inner knowledge of yourself and the mandala. Each chapter contains a how-to guide for creating that mandala. Examples of mandalas done from the classes are included in each section.

This book was written with the idea that anyone who participates chapter by chapter with the assignments and suggestions, can do mandalas on their own and begin a most wonderful journey of self-expression and self-discovery. No previous experience of art or painting is necessary at all. Really! Follow the suggestions. It is not a hard process, and it is enormously satisfying. All you need is the willingness to try, a few art materials, some time to yourself, and, most importantly, the suspension of self-judgment.

This is meaningful and fun inner work and is not intended to be done as “art work” to hang on your wall. Some of the work may, in fact, find its way to your walls, but the intention from the beginning is not that. It is for you to go inside yourself, and to see what comes out. To journey to and explore your inner world, the kingdom within, which is full of so many treasures. Remember, especially if you are new to any part of this process, you are a beginner. Honor that as you would if you were watching a child learn to walk or learn to paint. Give yourself space and time. Be gentle. No judgements. And, if you can do that, you’re on your way. Your way, not anyone else’s. Good luck and happy painting. Remember, have fun, what’s the point otherwise? Entertain yourself, know yourself. You are the adventure. Enjoy the journey.