

# Basic Concepts of Mandala

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## Introduction

Mandala is a Sanskrit term, which simply means circle. A Sanskrit thesaurus defines various meanings hiding behind the term Mandala. It defines that the term Mandala is synonym with the word "Chakravala"<sup>1</sup> meaning a cosmic disc or wheel. *Chakra* is manifested in Art, Yoga and Tantrik tradition as one of the central symbols of the oriental civilization.

Etymologically the term *Chakra* is derived from the root *Kra-*, meaning to create, which implies the idea of movement. Thus, it denotes to circular object potential of motion and velocity just like a disc or a wheel. *Chakra* literally means solar disc which is regarded as a symbol of Time scale since the ancient period. In the vedic mythology, the Sun is interpreted as a celestial wheel.<sup>2</sup>

## Mandala in different Belief

In the different contexts of the vedic literature the role of the cosmic wheel has been conceived in the form of a bird traversing space. The sun is highly regarded as a source of life and has been attributed with the epithet of all creating [*Visva karman*] to him. The whole Universe had been conceived as a cosmic wheel, [*Visva-Chakra*], or the wheel of Brahman [*Brahma Chakra*] since it is moved from the internal power of Brahman. In the sense of the wheel of existence (*Bhava Chakra*), it refers to the law of Nature as ever moving and rotating, implying a cyclical view of the course of history. The life cycle (*Samsara Chakra*) is the ever rotating wheel causing the beings to continuously pass through a cyclic change. In its micro-cosmic meaning it denotes the human body of the individual soul (i.e. *Chakra Purusa*).

The Buddha has explained the term *Chakra* is to mean the wheel of law i.e. *Dharma Chakra*, in contradiction to *Bhava Chakra*. The wheel has been represented as a significant symbol in the early Buddhism.

*Chakra* Plays an important role in the yogic and tantric disciplines as the source of divine energy. The *Chakra* is regarded as spiritual spots existing inside the human body. According to the yoga, there are six *Chakras* known as *Shadachakra*. The concept of *Chakra* has been taken as an instrument of meditation by the tantric practioners. Such instruments are known in the tantric texts, as *Shakti Chakra*, *Shri Chakra*, *Shri-yantra* or *Shri mandala*. Thus the term

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1. Kulchandra Gautam, *Amar Kosh*, Kathmandu : Royal Nepal Academy, 2026 B.S., p. 21.

2. A.A.Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, Delhi : Motilal Banarasi Das, 1981, p. 33.

mandala denotes both the divine lady and her abode i.e. the temple.<sup>3</sup> The word "Mandala" also refers to the innermost cycle or the deep penetration to the esoteric realm known as *Abyantara or Antarala*.

The most significant characteristic feature of mandala is defined as a circular diagram or complex design<sup>4</sup>. The mandala is also described as an instrument of meditation, which is capable of innumerable variations. Its meaning is elaborated as a forces of development from the focal points, centered on the diagram, towards the outer periphery<sup>5</sup>.

Hence it is conceived as the Complex integrated designs of geometrical shapes such as a point, circle, triangle, square, hexagonal form. The defined meaning becomes more divergent, depending on its applications of wider circular components. A mandala signifies as the cosmic elements of water *Dha mandala* in Newari, and cosmos. It is regarded as a device applied in most of esoteric culture of Nepal. Mandala is believed to be endowed with magic power.

Most of the Buddhist and Hindu temples of Nepal are planned according to the Mandalic diagram. Therefore when such temples are viewed from above, they manifest the construction of solid mandala in stone or bricks. The fine specimens of such architectonic "Mandala" can be cited from Nepalese Buddhist stupa of Baudhanath and Swoyambhunath of Kathmandu Valley. According to a Nepalese tradition such mandala is circumambulated by devotees as they ascend the successive terrace representing various stages of psychic level.

### **Significant Elements of Mandala**

The Mandala also refers to the space and time. Some foreign scholars had defined the Nepalese concept of space which can be divided indefinitely by straight lines without an organic whole. But as soon as a point is placed in the centre of a given space, the amorphous extension transforms into an organized structure. The centre is a point of reference towards which all parts cover and the whole structure becomes "concentrated"<sup>6</sup>. Hence the traditional Nepalese architecture reveals the form of Mandala conceived in an architectural planning.

Ancient Nepalese art and architectures are considered indigenous creations which are certainly rooted in oriental spiritual thought. All oriental religious theories regarding the development of the universe do indeed postulate a centre which emanates all manifestations. The centre is called *Bindu*, literally meaning a point.

The *Bindu* is also known in Sanskrit as '*dapsa*' and '*avayava*' which mean the corporal body. It is pre-eminently referred to the point which goes to form a

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3. Kapil Vatsyayana (ed), *Kalattattwa Kosa*, Dehli : Motial Banarasi Das and Indira Grandhi National Center for Arts, 1992, p. 47.

4. Margaret Stutley, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Hindu Iconography*, London : Reutledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, p. 87.

5. *Ibid.*

6. A.W. Macdonald, *Newar Art*, New Delhi : Vikas Publishing Co., 1979, p. 61.

material body of the universe, hence it also connotes the virile semen<sup>7</sup>. In the beginning *Bindu* or a point is taken as central point of a circle or a triangle which is thought to be the symbol of the universe representing the Supreme Reality. Therefore, *Bindu* is not only considered to be the source of creative energy but it also taken as to mean the vibratory sound. Such cosmic sound expressed itself in forms of the concepts (*pratyaya*) and objects (*bluta*), retaining with its pristine glory of condensed or unconditionally consciousness (*Bhana Pinda*)<sup>8</sup>.

The vedic concept of *Bindu* is related to *Indu* i.e. the moon. The tantric tradition has given much importance to the mystic element of *Bindu* as the moon. *Bindu* is believed to be existing in the summit of the body i.e. the head, in the form of the drops of dew. These drops are regarded as cool as the moon. The yogic practitioner aims to attaining liberation or salvation through the process of melting the due existing on the summit. When *Bindu* melts down on the head and flows through the entire body it is called the final step the supreme bliss. *Bindu* is taken as the vital instrument to denote the voidness (*Sunnya*) as well as the signification of the moon representing air element i.e. one of the most important components of the mandala.

Thus *Bindu* occupies a unique place as a minute unit of a space. When *Bindu* moves towards the prescribed direction a straight line is formed, this line is called the navel or *Nabhi*. The *Nabhi* is thus regarded as the second important component of the mandalic diagram. *Nabhi* or the navel is regarded as a stand for the centre or *Bindu* of the body or of the universe. It is also defined as the hub of a wheel i.e. *Nabhi Chakra*.

The hub of a wheel (*Chakra*) consists of three parts the first is the central point, which is called. *Bindu*, around which all else revolves, the second is the thick round part into which spokes are inserted, and the third are the spokes, known as *aras* in Sanskrit.

The symbolical representation of the navel is based on the Vaishnav mythology. In the Vaishnav mythology Vishnu is called "*Padmanabha*" which means - the base of the cosmos, and Brahma the god of creation, emerging from the navel of Vishnu, symbolizes the phenomenal universe.

The mandala is often symbolically represented as a lotus in the oriental culture. The lotus is called *Padma* in Sanskrit. The representation of the lotus as a central portion of the wheel or *Chakra* reveals three distinct divisions i.e. the pericarps known as the *Karnika*, the second is filament i.e. *Kesara* and the third is its petals.

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7. Vatsyayana, f.n. no. 3, p.1.

8. *Ibid.*

Manasara an architectural canon of the east describes a particular village plan formed as lotus known as *Padmaka*<sup>9</sup>. The shape of the lotus has always been regarded as a symbol of the throne and pedestal of divinities, especially that of the creator or the rising Sun. The tantric tradition of Nepal, also accepts *Nabhi* in the shape of a lotus with ten petals. The yogic tradition makes an effort with concentration to arrive at the central point of the navel from where one may be able to catch the direct path connected with higher plain of consciousness<sup>10</sup>. The general phenomenon of the navel (*Nabhi Chakra*) is considered as a central magnetic zone.

Consequently the *Chakra* is considered as a third major components of the Mandala diagram. The concept of Chakra, is essentially a rotating wheel with a centre and a circumference. The centre of the wheel is depicted as a hollow nave i.e.-*Kha* in Sanskrit, in the Mandala painting. The term *Kha* itself reveals the meaning of the absolute emptiness. It is explained as having dual characters of "*Duhkha*" and "*Sukha*" i.e. Pain and Pleasure. They are symbolized by black and white respectively. In the Buddhist Thangka Paintings of "*The Wheel of Life*" these feelings have been depicted as the symbol of the "*cause*" and "*effect*" in the Buddhist philosophy. It is considered that the central (*Chakra*) point being dynamic naturally gives birth to a second one and the second also by its innate dynamism gives birth to another. Therefore, a district line is manifested in the core of mandala to clarify the nature of life. The *Nabhi* or the hubs of a wheel does indeed have a centre where the *aras* or spokes remain fixed and go toward the circumference. The centre is illustrated equidistant from every point on the circumference. Therefore, the wheel itself symbolically regarded as the universe-i.e. *Visva Chakra*, in both of its aspects known to be Time and Space. It means the cosmic dual known as a *Kala Chakra*. It is explained as the central point (*Bindu*) being ever pulsating thought to be represented as the luminous self abiding in the centre of the physical Sun and esoterically abiding in the core of the heart<sup>11</sup>. While the wheel functions in the whole corporal human body it is called *deha chakra*.

### **The Subtle body**

The mandalic-disc or *deha chakras* taken as an individual *Chakras* functions as conscious centre in different locations of the body. This is conceived to reside in the subtle body which is regarded as the most important subject of tantra art. The *deha chakra* is conceived as a composition of six or seven *Chakras* which resides in the subtle from of mandala. It is called, *Adhar cakra*, *Swadhisthan Chakra*, *Manipuraka Chakra*, *Anahata Chakra*, *visddhi Chakra*, *Aagya Chakra* and *Sahabradal Chakra*.

It illustrates the structure of the inner human body used in yogic meditation, which governs the essential dual tantric value. From the aspect of Genesis it is meant by which one's world is made real around one for every

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<sup>9</sup>. E.B. Havell, *The Ancient and Medieval Architecture of India; A Study of Indo-Aryan Civilization*, New Delhi : S. Chand and Co., Reprint 1972, p.59.

<sup>10</sup>. Vatsyanana, f.n.no. 3, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup>. *Ibid*, p. 49.

individual. It is thus closely analogous to the cosmic body. From another aspect i.e. that of meditation, it is the fundamental mechanism by which the individual can work on the reconciliation between what he may think of as spirit and as a matter.<sup>12</sup> The purely philosophical diagram of the tantric *sankhya* system<sup>13</sup> bears a close resemblance to the patterns of the subtle body illustrated in the tantric diagrams.

The details of the subtle body mechanism are illustrated in the Nepalese manuscripts of circa 17<sup>th</sup> century. These paintings are called *Chakra purusa*, or the subtle body and auxiliary symbolism of the transcendent realm. In the paintings a series of mandala-disc are shown strung along the central yogic duct, i.e. *susumna nadi*. According to the tantric tradition, the act of awakening of the *Kundalini-Shakti* is explained as the divine sexual contact, i.e. *maithuna*. This spiritual aspect of *maithuna* is performed by the meditation on the conjunction of the *Kundalini-Sakti*, a supreme female inertia believed to have resided in the anal zone of human body, with the supreme Shiva or male, conceived in the thousand-petalled lotus in the cranium of the central yogic duct i.e. *susumna nadi*.<sup>14</sup> The *susumna nadi* is believed to be located on the spinal cords flanked by couple of *nadis* known as *Ida* (to the left *susumna*) and *pingala* (to the right). These mandalas are called as the *Chakras* and they are usually represented as fully blown lotuses with different numbers of petals. These *Chakras* are depicted as followings.

### **Muladhara**

The lowest *deha Chakra*, at the base of the spine in the anal region is called *Muladhara chakra* or a 'root-support'. It is usually painted as having four petals of lotus bearing an effigy of lord Ganesh (an elephant headed god). It is also called *adhar Chakra*. It is also accepted as a proper entrance of the *Kundalini Chakra* symbolically represented as coil of serpent when asleep. The yogic practitioner's aim is to awaken and vitalize this *Kundalini Chakra* compelling her to straighten out from original coil and enter the bottom end of his *Susumna Nadi*. This particular process of yogic practice is illustrated, as a muscular action and divine sexual intercourse in the traditional tantric paintings of the east.

### **Swadhisthana**

Just above the *muladhara* and few inches below the navel resides the second *Chakra* known as *Swadhisthana Chakra*. This *Chakra* consists of the four headed Hindu god of creation i.e. Brahma, inside the circle having six lotus Petals.

### **Manipura**

At the level of the navel is the ten-petalled *manipura Chakra* meaning "the city of Jewel. The *mani* is regarded as the synonym of the Jewel" and "phallic

<sup>12</sup>. Phillip Rawson, *The Art of Tantra*, New York Greenwich Connecticut : Graphic Society Ltd., 1973, p. 154.

<sup>13</sup>. Sankhya tattva. See appendix.

<sup>14</sup>. Rawson, f.n.no.12, p. 154.

principle" in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Mantra. i.e. *Om Mani Padme Hum*. According to the Buddhist tantra the location of manipura is at the heart. But to the Hindu tradition *Anahata Chakra* dwells at the level of the heart on the *susumna nadi*. An effigy of Vishnu is often depicted inside the circle of *manipura Chakra*.

### **Anahata Chakra**

*Anahata Chakra* is described to have twelve petals of lotus. The transformation of Hindu Goddess i.e. *devi* is visualized here.

### **Visuddhi Chakra**

*Visuddhi Chakra* is explained having sixteen petalled *Chakra* representing the Ether element and residing on the region of throat. It symbolizes the state of knowledge beyond all possible physical expression.

### **Aagya Chakra**

Most Hindu tantra envisage further two *Chakras* above the *Visuddhi Chakra*. One between the eyes, white coloured with two petals is called *Aagya Chakra*, the other in the crown of the head is called *sahasrara* or *sahasradala* meaning the thousand petalled lotus.

The above mentioned groups of the *Chakras* are visualized through intense meditational practice as conscious spots in different locations of the body.

### **Conclusion**

Some Traditional Newar priests and practitioners of Kathmandu Valley have been retaining the philosophical and practical yogic aspects of the mandalas or *Chakras*. They still regard a *Chakra* as an orbit of consciousness which is a vital source of inertia i.e. *Jeevan Chakra*. This microcosmic vital source of energy is symbolized as a cell of consciousness which is believed by the Newars of Nepal to be existing in the power zone of the corporal bodies (*Jeevatma*) Thus, they draw and worship a mandala as a personification of subtle body.

The new year, according to the Newar tradition is celebrated by making mandala. This cultural tradition is known as *Mhapuja* in Newari symbolically means the worship of subtle body, which is transformed into the mandalic diagram. In other word, this particular ceremony is also regarded as "*Atma Puja*" meaning the worship of the soul. To the Newars of Nepal, *Mhapuja* ceremony occupies a predominant role of omniscience and omnipotent condition of the existence of the soul, conceived in the form of *Chakra* or mandala. Therefore, this occasion is regarded as an auspicious moment of worshipping the corporal body and all those things and beings too in Newar tradition of Nepal.

This occasion is celebrated by drawing the colourful mandala on the surface of red ochre painted ground. This mandala is made with rice-powder or other materials like cinnabar or seasmum seeds, including an skilful arrangement of the grains like rice, black soyabean, paddy (uncut rice), rice-corn, and black pulse. An artistic circular arrangement of those food grains represents the five cosmic

elements i.e. Fire, Water, Air, Earth and Ether. The symbolic representation of five elements is created on the mandalic diagram by displaying the following items i.e. red-ochre circular paint is made on ground to denote the "Vastu" or sacred Earth, a circular water mark is created to specify the Water element, illumination of flame indicates the Fire element an aroma of incense stick is taken as presence of the Air Element and the worshipping of mandala with boiled egg and deep-fried fish is believed as a source of life denoting an Ether element. The four great cardinal "seats" (*pitha*) are invoked in the mandala with the mantras, a magical spell of "pum" adoration to the *burnasaila* seat to the east, "dim" referring to the *Uddiyana* seat at the south, "Jam" is spelled for the *Jalandhara* seat, to the west and "Kam" is addressed for the *Kamarupa* seat resided towards the north.

The tantric practitioners then worship the "six-limbed goddess" i.e. *sadangidevi*, a personification of the above mentioned six *Chakras* at each corner of the *Bhupura*, a square form of the mandala. The triangular components of the mandala is considered as a symbolic representation of divinities. i.e., the triangle with the tip upward is the male, the one with the downward tip is the female. The integrated form of two triangles symbolizes the cosmic union of the two primitives.

The Newari traditional celebration of worshipping mandala i.e. *kaya-mandala* or *dehamandala*, or *sariramandala* is said to be started on 20<sup>th</sup> October 879. A.D. This particular day is still being observed and regarded as the beginning of Newari New year i.e. Nepal Sambat or Newari Era by the Newars. The Newari new year is based on Lunar calendar which at present is 1121 N.S. year old.

Therefore, Mandala culture is regarded as living culture of Nepal in its micro and macro cosmic spiritual hemisphere. It is well conceived as an instrument of visualizing exoteric and esoteric phenomenal of the mystical world.

**Appendix**

Sankhya tattva Diagram

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