

## Mandala - Path of Integration: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Individuals Drawing Mandalas and their Ability to Induce an Altered State of Consciousness

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Personal mandalas are being increasingly used in therapeutic and clinical settings to enhance psychological well-being, integrate trauma, reduce negative mood states, and increase self-knowledge. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of five individuals creating three personal mandalas with the underlying goal to understand if they entered an altered state of consciousness. Data analysis revealed the following nine common themes amongst participants: time perception change, increase in positive feeling/decrease in negative feeling, self-agency/self-love, intuition and inner communication, mandala as meditation, transcendental quality, expression, connection, new insights/perspectives. Results indicated that all five participants experienced creating mandalas as a meditation, and four of five participants showed markers of an altered state of consciousness. Individuals may find mandalas a valuable, sustainable practice to mitigate discontented states and mental dis-ease.

**Keywords:** mandala, meditation, alternative meditation practices, altered state of consciousness

Mandalas are among a growing field of effective integrative practices available for individual and therapeutic work. Such practices are valuable because they bring us embodied knowledge, or a deeper *felt sense* of self-knowing (Schlitz et al., 2007) which can help one navigate the vicissitudes of life. Considering we are amid a global mental

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health crisis (DeVries & Wilkerson, 2003), having tools for such personal integrative work is vitally important.

Research shows mandalas reduce negativity of mood (Babouchkina & Robbins, 2015); increase self-awareness, authenticity, and psychological well-being (Pisarik & Larson, 2011); help with trauma integration (Kometiani & Farmer, 2020); and ameliorate symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Henderson et al., 2007). Mounting research is showing the efficacy of mandala work and is leading to their increased use in therapeutic settings.

Mandalas are circular figures with varying images, marks and symbols drawn in and/or around the circle. They can also be painted, sculpted, colored, or made with any variety of items, such as from nature or glass. Mandalas were born from Eastern religious cultures, most notably the Tibetan Buddhists, where certain symbols and structures are intentionally used to convey specific teachings (Brauen, 1997). They were later psychologized by Carl Jung and viewed as a sacred art that is both universal and unique. They are universal, in the sense that they are seen as an archetypal image of wholeness (Storr, 1983/1998) in many cultures around the world and throughout history; and unique, since each is specific to its creator and symbolic of their own personal internal world. In terms of art therapy, a mandala would be considered any artistic expression carried out in circular formation (Henderson et al., 2007). Examples of mandala images in various techniques (pebble mosaic, drawing, wood carving and pyrography) are presented in Figure 1.

Transpersonal psychology suggests that an individual has the capacity for self-transcendence (Clark, 1973). Jung (1961) felt self-transcendence came from working extensively with the concept of obtaining ‘Self’ through a process he called *individuation*. Individuation is a means by which one comes to understand their own unconscious stirrings that ultimately motivates their thoughts, behaviours and actions (Slegelis, 1987). Awareness and mastery of these inner urgings is paramount for individuals wishing to embody a healthier or higher self. Jung (1961) further espoused that drawing mandalas was a bridge to facilitate one’s attainment of this unconscious knowledge of self and to engage the individuation process.

Kellogg was pivotal in carrying Jung’s theories forward into the modern day. From a self-realization perspective, Kellogg (1978) felt working specifically with the circular shape was important, as it loosely represented the shape of the human head. When one draws a mandala, it is a “circumambulation of the self” (Storr, 1983/1998, p. 222) or a container of consciousness.

Both Jung (1961) and Kellogg (1978) observed their patients entering a hypnotic or trance-like state, but no formal studies have been carried out to explore this phenomenon.

## Figure 1

*Mandala images created by the author with different techniques*



*Note: A - 2006 Pebble mosaic, B - 2014 Pencil drawing, C - 2017 Pyrography, D - 2022 Power carving.*

As a researcher, it was my 8-year mandala practice and knowledge of their benefits that drove my interest in studying them formally. Reflecting on personal experiences, I was curious what might be happening internally in the mind to make them such a powerful tool of transformation. I was an experienced meditator and eventually it occurred to me that when immersing myself so intently in mandalas, I was likely entering an altered state of consciousness (ASC) similar to meditation.

ASC are available to us through a variety of experiences, which include sleep, hypnosis, meditation, mystical experiences, and those induced by psychoactive drugs such as lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), marijuana, and alcohol (Tart, 1969/1990). ASC involve

a complex neurocognitive process that brings about changes in the psychic, cortical and autonomic functions (Aftanas & Golosheikin, 2003). Tart (1969/1990) shared that an altered state brings about three categories of adaptive functioning: “(1) Promoting healing and feelings of well-being, (2) avenues to new knowledge or experience, and (3) social functions” (p. 203).

There are a variety of ways to classify ASC. Revonsuo et al. (2009) highlighted two ways to understand consciousness that ultimately, together, make up what is considered an ASC. The first is what Block (2001) and Farthing (1992) called *primary phenomenal consciousness*, referring to patterns of subjective experiences including, “sensations, percepts, emotions, body image, mental images and inner musings” (Revonsuo et al., 2009, p. 189). The second has been called *reflective consciousness* (Block, 2001; Farthing, 1992). Reflective consciousness is dependent upon the primary phenomenal consciousness, as the reflective requires us to further process the primary subjective experience. According to Revonsuo et al. (2019), “this can include naming, categorizing, judging, evaluation or choice of the next course of actions” (p. 189). Tart (1969/1990) more simply defined an ASC as: “a temporary change in the overall pattern of subjective experience, such that the individual believes that his or her mental functioning is distinctly different from certain general norms for his or her normal waking state of consciousness” (p. 205).

Given the limited scope of this study, the primary focus was to assess the altered states available to participants drawing mandalas and explore their possible similarities to meditation. Walsh (1983) defined meditation as a variety of practices that brings focused attention to amplify one’s awareness, which results in increased control of cognitive processing. With standard sitting meditation having a high attrition rate (Nam & Toneatto, 2016), it seemed valuable to explore the mandala as an alternative modality.

A gap in existing research and my continued internal urgings to understand mandalas led to the overall objective, to expand the field of knowledge around ASC and gain greater understanding of how others experience drawing mandalas. This led to the research question: *What is the experience of an individual drawing a personal mandala and does it induce an altered state of consciousness?* Participants’ personal experiences of creating mandalas were explored through the phenomenological qualitative method as described below.

## Method

This research project was designed as a phenomenological study including creative data shared by participants. This combination conveyed the deeper significance of individual creative expression alongside interview data. The focus was to capture the essence of the experience as Moustakas (1994) shared, to understand what participants experienced and how they experienced it. The goal was to provide participants the opportunity to encounter the phenomena of an ASC while drawing a mandala. Subjective experience



of the researcher, along with observations from Jung (1961) and Kellogg (1978), suggest this is not only possible but probable. This is, therefore, valuable research with the potential to further validate the efficacy of this tool.

Participants were asked to draw three mandalas over the course of three weeks. Instructions and support were provided via an introductory video, where a brief history of the mandala was shared along with several examples, to ensure participant understanding. In addition, they were asked to spend at least 30 minutes per mandala and to make all efforts possible to eliminate distractions, such as cell phone notifications. These parameters were attempts to create a quieter external and internal space desirable for meditative experiences, including an ASC.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, all participant experiences and interviews were conducted online. Ideally, an in-person workshop would have been held. Instead, three pre-recorded videos were created, and one sent out each week. These included soft background music and a brief grounding exercise to create a sacred space of calm stillness. Pre-recorded videos were offered over virtual live events because participants were spread across four continents. Time zone coordination within the overall project timeline was therefore a challenge.

The inclusion criteria were individuals 18 years of age or older of any race, ethnicity, gender or religious affiliation. Most relevant to the study, participants were required to have previous interest in mandalas and any level of meditation experience. The rationale behind the meditation criteria was that if participants were experienced meditators, they would likely be familiar with the experience of an ASC. Conversely, if participants were new to meditating, they may be able to share how the mandala process was more or less difficult than meditation.

To minimize selection bias, attempts were made to gather people who would be open to meditation and mandala-type experiences, but not so selective that they would be certain to confirm theories of the study. Given the limitation of the study, six participants were selected, however, one participant withdrew from the study before it began. All participants were female, ranging in age from 32 to 50. They were diverse in nationality, geographic location and meditation experience (see Table 1).

Data were collected through mandala drawings and individual interviews conducted after the third and final mandala. Capturing and synthesizing the phenomenon as soon as possible after the experience was crucial. Close coordination took place between the researcher and participants, and all interviews were conducted within three days of their final mandala. Interviews were then transcribed, themed, and coded.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Information*

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Geographic location	Meditation experience
Lilly	45	American	USA	Experienced
ET	32	British	Switzerland	Novice
Yellow	46	Brazilian	Brazil	Experienced
Jenna	50	Polish	USA	Experienced
JM	42	Brazilian	China	Experienced

Coding was carried out using phenomenological guidelines (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Printed transcripts were read, and notes were made in the margins indicating overall feelings and impressions of participant experiences. A second read-through led to underlining key phrases, words, and statements of meaning, followed by a third reading to ensure no important sentiments were missed. Finally, an analytical color-coding process was used where a narrowed set of themes emerged (Creswell & Poth, 2018) as most important from the collected data.

Since the objective was to study the phenomenon of mandala creation through experiencing an ASC, interview questions were designed to explore their known characteristics. These were formed based on relevant literature (Tart, 1969/1990) and my own experience. To eliminate the expectation of experiencing a particular phenomenon or a conditioned positive response, participants were not made aware of the goal of the ASC. They were simply informed of the investigation around the lived experience of creating a mandala.

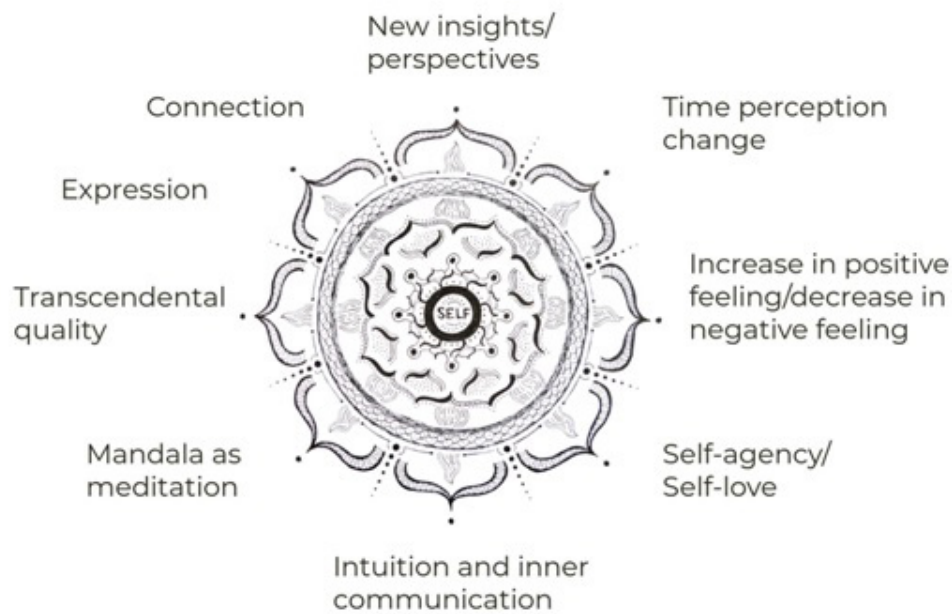
Interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom video conferencing. Audio files were saved in a password-protected data storage location accessible only to the researcher. Interviews consisted of seven carefully curated questions and lasted between 16 and 27 minutes. Audio files were then transcribed by the researcher without the use of software. Participants reported positive engagement during the interview process and no concerns or distress were reported.

Given the researcher's positive experiences and beliefs around mandala work, it was imperative to bring awareness to potential biases. This was important in all aspects of the study including recording the videos, designing the interview questions, carrying out the interviews, coding the data, formulating, and interpreting the results.

## Results

Thematic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of the interview transcripts identified key words, phrases and significant statements which revealed nine themes. These were: time perception change, increase in positive feeling/decrease in negative feeling, self-agency/self-love, intuition and inner communication, mandala as meditation, transcendental quality, expression, connection, new insights/perspectives (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
*Common Themes*



*Note:* The intuitive inclusion of ‘Self’ in the mandala drawn by the researcher can be explained through Jungian theory: “The self, I thought, was like the monad which I am, and which is my world. The mandala represents this monad, and corresponds to the microcosmic nature of the psyche” (Storr 1983/1998, p. 228).

### **Time perception change**

Four of five participants noticed an altered perception of time while working with mandalas. Two participants shared their experience of time speeding up, one felt it slowed down, and another experienced it as “no time”. JM shared, “You know, even noticing the time passing, it’s like wow, one hour passed or 30 minutes passed, just like that.” JM mentioned a change in time perception four times during our interview. Lilly said, “This also relates to time, kind of a sense of time slowing down...”

### **Increase in positive feeling/decrease in negative feeling**

Four of five participants experienced positive feelings while working with mandalas and one noticed that her negative feelings dissipated. Jenna conveyed, “I was very peaceful, very relaxed.” JM shared, “I didn’t focus anymore on that, what was upsetting me. Just putting it on the paper just helps me to get rid of the feeling [loneliness].”

### **Self-agency/self-love**

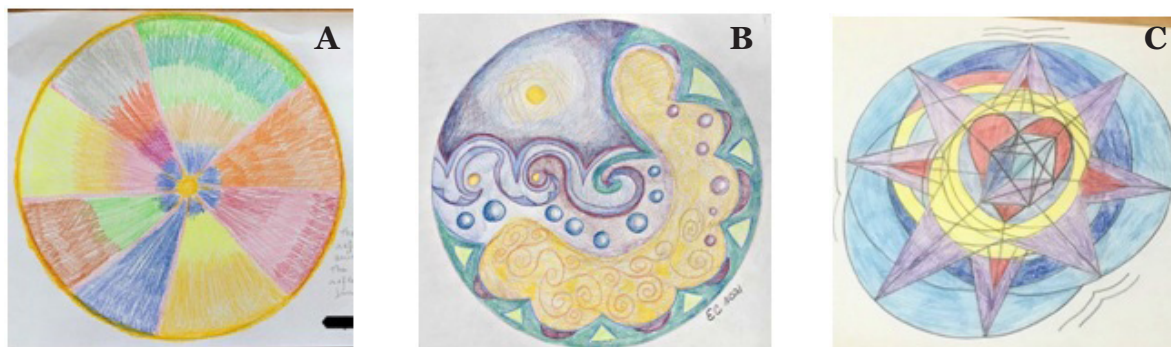
Four of five participants shared sentiments that the mandala-creation process brought self-agency or self-love as an effect. Yellow experienced self-agency through personal trust offering, “It’s the trust, better understanding of trust of who I am and not to worry about who I am. I am who I am.” JM speaks multiple times about how drawing mandalas helps her release the need to be perfect: “We are not perfect and it’s alright, the mandala is also not perfect... we are very hard on ourselves sometimes... just let go and do one later and just not so much judgment on the process.”

### **Intuition and inner communication**

All five participants experienced the mandala process as a tool for inner communication with the ‘self’ or ‘Self’, sometimes also referred to as intuition. Yellow (Figure 3A) described: “I said, no, I listen (to myself) ... I listen to what is coming... as the first mandala told me, as if mandala is a channel to reveal a message that wants to be brought.” The message she wrote to herself on the drawing was, “The inside reflects the outside. The outside reflects the inside.” Jenna shared, “If you let it [creation process] drive you, it will communicate what you need to know.”

### **Figure 3**

*Mandalas drawn by participants*



*Note: A - by Yellow, B - by Lilly, C - by JM.*

### **Mandala as meditation**

Four participants either expressed or alluded to being experienced meditators, while one participant shared that she struggled with standard sitting meditation. All participants experienced their creation process as a meditation and spoke positively about their experience in that context.

ET, who struggled with standard meditation commented, “I don’t think I can focus on meditation for more than 10 minutes really, whereas I can do the mandala for 30 minutes... if you can’t do meditation, it is a nice way of meditation.”

Lilly, a 25-year experienced meditator, shared that sitting meditation was her standard practice because it was the initial discipline she learned, but that “it can be harder to like”. She continued, “With mandala drawing, there’s an anchor...something for my



body to be doing so that my mind can settle, so there's a definite crossover." See Lilly's mandala in Figure 3B.

### **Transcendental quality**

Four of the five participants spoke of transcendent qualities that came through the mandala creation process. Jenna shared, "There is a sacred aspect of that, of this creation... and that's what was so profound for me." JM said:

When you start to draw you always connect with something from within. Yeah, it's connected with the divine, right, so it can be also something like, more higher, like we cannot even notice with the conscious mind, the universe, or it's just, I feel union so much.

### **Expression**

Jenna stated, "The process helped me to express myself for who I am... and it felt like it's in a form of expression of what's within you." Lilly spoke of the mandala like a container to receive her expression: "It all gets to show up there and be held in however it needs to come out."

### **Connection**

All participants experienced a deeper level of connection within themselves. ET offered, "I like the analysis of it, you can have a look at it and think, you can sort of see a part of the unconscious, maybe that you weren't aware of." Lilly shared, "It's another doorway, or access point into the self, big S Self and small s self."

### **New insights/perspectives**

All participants expressed, in one form or another, that this process led them to new perspectives or insights. Jenna shared:

You can always relate it to some part of your life... and try to form some kind of meaning from it, you can use that as a reflection to see what's going on in your life and what you need to improve on.

She also shared, "There is a creation wisdom that comes with it and wisdom brings peace. There is nothing wrong, there is nothing that's happening that's not meant to be."

In our interview JM reflected on her own drawing in Figure 3C, explaining how, in life, her heart had become hardened and cold, relating that sentiment in her drawing to ice picks. She said, "I was in a cold place". She explained further: "Like the heart was bleeding," but then she added the color yellow, "like warm, yellow is the sun, so it starts to warm." Notably, JM shared that she did not intend to draw any particular images, colors or symbols to convey the meaning she later realized. Rather, this is what naturally emerged when she surrendered to the process of internal expression through drawing.

## Discussion

All participants reported having positive experiences overall during the mandala-creation process. No negative feedback was received. Participants reported profound insights, elevated mood, and mandala creation as a tool for expression, bringing forth self-love and self-agency. There were also significant indicators that the mandala creation process allowed four of the five participants to enter an ASC. These indicators were present in five of the nine themes and are highlighted here.

### **New insights and perspectives**

Cornell (2006) felt the aim of the sacred art of creating mandalas was self-realization. By that, she was referring to reclaiming authenticity where one is not driven by ego-personality. When one is gaining new insights, they are ultimately coming to know oneself more deeply, which is a valuable outcome. Jung (1961), Kellogg (1978) and Donnalley (2017) all suggest that the mandala process allows for a deeper level of self-knowledge. As Cornell (2006) explained, individuals illuminate sacred images from deep within the unconscious, which are then projected into the mandala that brings physical healing, spiritual transformation and welds together fragments of personality. If, as Jung suggested, working with mandalas is about achieving wholeness (Storr, 1983/1998), new insights and perspectives could be seen as the missing puzzle pieces of the whole that have now found their way home.

### **Mandala as meditation**

Kellogg (1978) wrote, “It [mandalas] can be considered as a meditation in action (through doing it) and a meditation on an object (while viewing it)” (p. 22). Lilly, Yellow, Jenna and JM, the experienced meditators, felt drawing mandalas was a type of meditation that allowed for outward expression of what they would normally only be experiencing internally during sitting meditation.

I was particularly struck by comments from two different participants. Lilly, a 25-year old experienced meditator, spoke about the mandala drawing being an anchor to keep her body busy so her mind could settle. ET, the novice meditator who had struggled with sitting practice, mentioned her kinesthetic nature and expressed the value of having something to focus on besides the breath.

Notably, all participants indicated that creating mandalas was a type of meditation for them, and four of the five participants were experienced meditators. This brings credibility to their experiences of comparison as they were confident with their own inner knowledge on the subject.

### **Transcendental quality**

ASC often reveal a connection with something beyond, considered ineffable or of a transcendental quality (Tart, 1969/1990). This could be further defined as “being

beyond ordinary or common experience, thought, or belief, supernatural; abstract or metaphysical” (Dictionary.com, n.d.). Four of five participants experienced something arguably providential while working with mandalas.

Wahbeh et al. (2018) reviewed transcendental states across different meditation and contemplative traditions, and highlighted certain qualities. This was described by one participant in their study as dissolving boundaries between one’s inside and outside structure, leading to a dissolution of separateness. This is described by Taylor (2017) as connectedness or “the one-ness of everything” (p. 188). Yellow shared that after drawing one of her mandalas she had a sense of “no boundaries” and that there was “no difference” between what was inside and outside. She said that this was a vision or revelation that suddenly became clear in that moment. Taylor (2017) shares the benefit of this connectedness or union perspective, that one is shedding the “narrow personal self and becomes part of a wider and deeper expanse of being” (p. 38).

### **Time perception change**

Wittman (2018), a time perception researcher, noted that our experience of time is closely linked to one’s state of consciousness and sense of self. He posits that when we shift into different states of consciousness, we shift into another “timeworld”, as he calls it. Taylor (2022) researched time expansion experiences (TEE) and noted that meditative experiences can be the catalyst for dramatic TEEs that come because one has shifted into an ASC.

Four of the five participants experienced a change in the perception of time while working with mandalas. These are common indicators of an ASC and it suggests these four participants likely entered an altered state. The four participants who experienced a change in the perception of time were experienced meditators. This could indicate that these participants were more likely to experience an altered state because they were already familiar with the ‘dropping in’ aspect of a meditative practice. Or it could simply indicate that certain personalities are more or less inclined to quiet the mind. For example, one who identifies themselves with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may have a more difficult time stilling the mind and body.

### **Intuition and inner communication**

Clark (1973) states that we cannot force intuitive awareness, but we can create an environment or experience that may increase the chance of intuitive flashes or insights. Assagioli (1973), highlighted by (Clark, 1973), suggests one must quiet the mind to eliminate extraneous thoughts which lowers the threshold of consciousness and allows for the activation of intuition. This current study seems to indicate that creating a mandala is a valid tool for bringing forth intuition.

All five participants expressed, in a variety of ways, that the mandala creation process enabled them to see or know something without knowing exactly how they knew it.

This is a widely held definition of intuition. Deikman (1971) suggested this is a result of being in a mode of receptivity, which allows for spontaneous imagery and intuition to arise.

Working with mandalas provides the possibility of increasing the mode of receptivity by allowing the creator to capture spontaneous images from the unconscious in symbol, color, line and form within the mandala. The creation process itself has the potential to allow the intuitive insight to crystallize. Then, as Kellogg (1978) suggested, the mandala can be used in a viewing capacity as a reminder of what emerged during the creative process.

### **Limitations and future research**

This phenomenological study investigated the lived experiences of five participants drawing mandalas with the specific aim to find if this process allowed them to enter an ASC. Considering the limited sample size and study parameters, the results are promising. Four of the five participants showed significant indicators of entering an ASC. Substantiating the efficacy of the method further would be highly valuable. Researchers could deploy future studies which engage bioelectromagnetic imaging during the mandala-drawing process and compare with the imaging of other practice-inducing methods, for example, meditation.

Participants shared they spent more than the minimum required 30 minutes on at least one of the three mandalas. This may indicate it was an enjoyable experience and less of an obligation which could increase the probability of repeated use.

### **Conclusion**

Mandala creation is a contemplative practice which can be a simple, free, practical, and worthwhile tool for integration and personal well-being. Participants in this study experienced positive results while working with mandalas and reported these through nine themes: new insights or perspectives, time perception change, transcendental quality, connection, intuition and inner communication, increase in positive feeling or decrease in negative feeling, mandala as meditation, expression and self-agency or self-love.

This phenomenological study was guided by theories of Jung (1961) and Kellogg (1978), who both expressed their observations that working with mandalas seemed to induce an altered state in their patients. This study brings data that supports their theories, which may prove to be a significant step forward in validating an ASC through mandalas. It indicates that the mandala is a powerful tool, available at any time, which can bring physiological and psychological benefit in moving us towards a more integrated self.



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