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# The chaos mandala in global relations

## **Abstract**

Extract:

Multinational companies are discovering that survival in the globalisation process requires mastering the art of expatriate living. As nations open their borders to economic and communications flows, as well as transnational socio-political outlooks, individuals of different cultures and ideas come together as a matter of routine. Turmoil exists for many reasons, yet one shines out: that of cultural miscommunication. The Eastern mandala of creative connections and the Western postmodern science of chaos theory offer some help to the expatriate practitioner.

## **Keywords**

globalisation, chaos theory, Buddhism, expatriate, mandala

# The Chaos Mandala in Global Relations

by Mark Kassab\*

Multinational companies are discovering that survival in the globalisation process requires mastering the art of expatriate living. As nations open their borders to economic and communications flows, as well as transnational socio-political outlooks, individuals of different cultures and ideas come together as a matter of routine. Turmoil exists for many reasons, yet one shines out: that of cultural miscommunication. The Eastern mandala of creative connections and the Western postmodern science of chaos theory offer some help to the expatriate practitioner.

## What is a mandala?

A mandala is a religious diagram. Its literal meaning derives from the Sanskrit word for circle. In Tibetan, mandala means a 'centre' or 'what surrounds'. The Chinese have multiple definitions for mandala, including 'terrace', 'platform', 'world' and 'arena'. In Japan, mandala means 'dojo' or 'place of the way'. This is a meaning also found in Chinese.<sup>1</sup> Hindus believe that the mandala was created by Brahma who, in turn, used it to create the universe and determine the patterns of our lives, our relations with all living things and the cosmos. According to Hinduism, we are all bound together through mandalas. Mandala is also the map that helps us along the path to enlightenment. So it has a sacred and personal side to it, even though it can be quite general as a 'world' or a cosmogram.

## What is chaos theory?

'Chaos' in the West has attracted speculation on how nature works. Chaos is a new science - indeed, a postmodern science - at a time when science was losing its appeal from over-specialisation. This was because many 'fields of science' stopped communicating with each other. Chaos is about re-learning to work with one another. In his popular book *Chaos*, James Gleick wrote:

Now that science is looking, chaos seems to be everywhere . . . Chaos appears in the behavior of the weather, the behavior of an aeroplane in flight, the behavior of cars clustering on an expressway, the behavior of oil flowing in underground pipes. No matter what the medium, the behavior obeys the same newly discovered laws. That realization has begun to change the way business executives make decisions about insurance, the way astronomers look at the solar system, the way political theorists talk about the stresses leading to armed conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Gleick cites research to support his claims. A notable example is cotton price data, whereby:

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<sup>1</sup> The above meanings are drawn from Adrian Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, NY, 1985, p. 104.

<sup>2</sup> James Gleick, *Chaos*, Abacus, London, 1994, p. 5.

The numbers that produced aberrations from the point of view of normal distribution produced symmetry from the point of view of scaling. Each particular price change was random and unpredictable. But the sequence of changes was independent of scale: curves for daily price changes and monthly price changes matched perfectly . . . the degree of variation had remained constant over a tumultuous sixty year period that saw two World Wars and a depression. Within the most disorderly reams of data lived an unexpected kind of order.<sup>3</sup>

It is this type of order that may be found in all aspects of life and this order, this chaotic order, that 'structures' international relations. According to Gleick, no person, company, government or science can escape from chaos for it is nature, existing all around us and affecting what we do. Therefore, all international relationists, whatever their cause, must take chaos into account as do Buddhists and Hindus.

#### How do Buddhists and Hindus explain chaos?

The mandala may be considered in terms of 'orderly' and 'disorderly' chaos. According to the Hindu and Buddhist perspective, chaos is universal and is part of the human condition or 'net' of being:

. . . the net, which has a beneficent aspect when viewed as the pattern of order, the trace of the dharma that regulates the world and "rules out" chaos and confusion and the net that binds together the world and the being is also the net of Death, a constraint and a constriction, that must be cut away if the transcendent realms of unrestricted Freedom are to be attained.<sup>4</sup>

This disorderly chaos is the ego which houses the demons of our desires; whereas orderly chaos is the understanding of, or coming to terms with, our disorderly chaos and its purpose in our life. Our ego is present with the gods in the mandala (see accompanying illustration). In one life we must deal with our ego while learning to deal with other people and their egos. There is an individual struggle with disorderly chaos in which we call upon the gods that reside in the mandala for help, which in turn allows us to fight our own demons. The individual's attachments, known as 'knots',<sup>5</sup> are thereby unravelled into orderly chaos. The journey to enlightenment is facilitated.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the creation of a sand mandala takes three to four days. It is a ritual of high concentration for the achievement of orderly chaos. When the mandala is finished it is destroyed, for the monks are taught to overcome the ego and live within orderly chaos. This whole subject of the mandala, chaos, and its orderly and disorderly manifestations is discussed by Chogyam Trungpa in *Orderly Chaos: The Mandala Principle*:

We have all kinds of orderly chaos. We have the domestic orderly chaos and we have the emotional orderly chaos of a love affair. We have spiritual orderly chaos, and even the attainment of enlightenment has an orderly chaos of its own . . . Before we realize something is orderly and before we realize that it is chaos,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

there is some basic ground on which that chaos is constantly happening in an orderly fashion, in accordance with its own pattern.<sup>6</sup>

### The chaos mandala as a cultural crossing

Much has been written on Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*,<sup>7</sup> as an Eastern manual for Western managers competing for 'market share' in Asia. However, as Rosita Dellios points out, at the closing of the 1990s it is time to move on from stratagems.<sup>8</sup> Through the Eastern mandala we appreciate connectivity; everything is connected and contextualised. Through Western chaos theory we can accept that a person does not always need to understand everything. Such hegemony of the ego can only tie us in the mandala's metaphorical knots. As we become more globalised, so each business executive, trade diplomat, international bureaucrat and NGO foot soldier, must particularise cultural relations. In other words, the global context is particularised through the expatriate. A successful expatriate is one skilled in living 'an unexpected kind of order'. You don't have to know everything or predict the unpredictable. But it is possible to mandalise the inevitable chaos.



The Wheel of Existence (Tibetan), depicts a wheel that is held by the demon Mara.

<sup>6</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Orderly Chaos: The Mandala Principle*, Shambhala, Boston, 1991, pp. 16-17.

<sup>7</sup> One of the numerous translations is Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (trans. Samuel B. Griffith), Oxford University Press, London, 1963.

<sup>8</sup> Private communication, Bond University, Gold Coast, October 1997.