The Medicine Wheel as a Symbol of Native American Psychology

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Abstract

The Native American medicine wheel has been a rich source of ideas regarding human psychology and health. Although interpretations of the significance of the medicine wheel are diverse and speculative, they can nonetheless provide an interesting and personally meaningful template for thinking about how balance and harmony contribute to psychological health. This article describes the origins of the medicine wheel, related images with a similar function such as the mandala, and C. G. Jung's ideas on how such symbols can be used to promote psychological development.
The Medicine Wheel as a Symbol of Native American Psychology

The original medicine wheels were stone artifacts built by the aboriginal peoples who lived in what is now the northwestern United States and southwestern Canada. They were first called "medicine wheels" in the 1800s. In Native American usage, medicine means anything that promotes harmony, and an illness is seen as disharmony within a person or between a person and his or her relations (Cohen, 2003). Medicine wheels took several forms, but most had a central stone cairn, one or more concentric stone circles, and several stone lines radiating outward from the center. The Ellis medicine wheel, built by the aboriginal Blackfoot Indians, was radiocarbon dated to about 1400 A. D. (Barnett, 2000). The central ring covered a burial lodge where skeletal remains were found. Many medicine wheels had small stone circles (tipi rings) in the area of the wheel (Barnett, 2000).

Because the aboriginal Indians left no written records, little is known about the original purpose or meaning of the medicine wheels. The most common speculation is that they were used to commemorate sacred places, but they probably had multiple uses and meant different things to various peoples over the centuries (Cohen, 2003). Some may have been used for ceremonies such as the Sun Dance. The Bighorn and Moose Mountain medicine wheels had 28 spokes, the number of days in a lunar month, leading to speculation that they may have been used as a calendar or solar observatory. In each wheel, two of the stone cairns are positioned so they line up with sunrise and sunset on the summer solstice. Similar alignments can be found in the stone rings at Stonehenge (Barnett, 2000).
Modern Interpretations of the Medicine Wheel

The Oglala Sioux Holy Man Black Elk said "You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the power of the world always works in circles, and everything tries to be round" (quoted in Moodley & West, 2005, p. 298). Another Sioux elder, Lame Deer, said that the Indian's symbol is the circle, the sacred hoop; the circle is timeless and flowing and teaches the meaning of life, which is that new life emerges from death (Moodley & West, 2005). Thus, the medicine wheel can be seen as a model of aboriginal Native American cosmology. For many Native Americas, the medicine wheel is an ancient symbol that can help people understand how to live a healthy life, and see that they are related to all creation (Johnson, 2006).

Because of their remote locations, few Whites were aware of the medicine wheels until the 1970s. Hyemeyohsts Storm (1972) noticed the similarity of the stone circles of the medicine wheels to the wheel symbols used in Sun Dance ceremonies (which had four sections based on the compass points) and combined them to create a modern version of the wheel. Storm used his version of the medicine wheel as an organizing framework for his book *Seven Arrows*, which described the medicine wheel as "the Way of Life of the People" and as "an Understanding of the Universe" (Storm, 1972, p. 5). Storm, who described himself as a "mixed blood person" (Storm, 2005, n.p.), used the wheel as the basis for an extensive mythology, and the contemporary view of the medicine wheel as a philosophical framework originates with *Seven Arrows* (Jenkins, 2004).
Storm (1972) advised readers to think of the medicine wheel as a mirror in which everything is reflected. The stones of the wheel can represent people, animals, nations, or ideas, and the wheel as a whole is the universe, containing all things. The lesson of the wheel is harmony with all the elements of the universe.

Both Indian and non-Indian people took up the idea of the medicine wheel as a symbol and gave it their own elaborations and interpretations. Storm had used the wheel as a symbol for spiritual and psychological development, linking the compass points to colors, animals, and personality traits. Imitating this approach, Brooke Medicine Eagle and Jamie Sams developed their own versions of the wheel, mixed with occultism and psychotherapeutic ideas. Sun Bear used the wheel as the symbol for his system of earth astrology. New Age writers like Lynn Andrews and Wolf Moondance encouraged their readers to build their own medicine wheels outdoors and use them for meditation and personal development (Jenkins, 2004). Constructing medicine wheels has become a popular pseudo-Native religious practice, and medicine wheel tours are offered by tour companies in New Age enclaves like Sedona, Arizona.

Dividing the circle of the medicine wheel into four quadrants with three subunits in each quarter made the wheel usable as a device for divination and personality analysis. Enthusiasts label the four points of the wheel with a wide variety of labels, usually based on nothing more than personal preference. They relate the points of the wheel to seasons, colors, zodiac signs, personality types, totem animals, and even moral principles (Jenkins, 2004). In his books Kenneth Meadows says that readers can identify their personality style and determine their life destiny using the wheel. The design of the medicine wheel
can be interpreted to represent just about anything, and many modern versions of the wheel have little in them that is genuinely Native American (Jenkins, 2004).

Even though it is safe to assume that most modern interpretations of the medicine wheel are far removed from the original meaning of the wheel as used by the aboriginal Indians, these new interpretations can still have a useful function. Almost all contemporary versions of the medicine wheel emphasize the need for harmony and balance, both within oneself and with all creatures and groups on earth. The wheel also provides a graphic reminder that change is inevitable, that life is a development process, and that seeking wholeness is a worthy goal.

Mannion (2006) described the medicine wheel as a philosophical tradition or belief system; the wheel represents the cycle of life, and the four spokes of the wheel represent different aspects of nature and human nature. For example, in Storm's (1972) interpretation, the east point of the wheel represents sunrise, the beginning, and seeing the world without illusion, while the west represents sunset, introspection, and the unconscious. The south represents curiosity and exploration, and the north represents intelligence and insight. The center of the wheel represents the center of one's life, and the perfect balance of all the surrounding elements.

According to Johnson (2006), the four main quadrants of the wheel can represent the four directions, the four elements, and the four elements of the self (physical, mental, spiritual, and social), which need to be balanced within the person. Storm (1972) said that people begin life from the perspective of one of the compass points, and can only grow by seeking understanding in the three other parts of the wheel. For example, he said that a person who starts from the north will be wise but cold and unfeeling, and needs to seek
balance by developing empathy. This analysis could be seen as similar to C. G. Jung's typology of personality styles.

C. G. Jung on Symbols of Personal Development

The mandala (Sanskrit for "circle") is a Hindu and Buddhist design used as an instrument of contemplation. Mandalas can enhance meditation by illustrating the microcosm (the self) within the macrocosm (the universe). The circular mandala has obvious parallels with the modern medicine wheel, and has the same purpose of reminding the viewer of the balance, harmony, and integral nature of existence. C. G. Jung called the mandala a symbol of the soul (Owen, 2002).

Jung was interested in the psychological significance of symbols, and he called the circle the most powerful symbol. He began painting his personal mandalas and his fantasies around 1914, and collected them in what he called the Red Book. Jung's first mandala, Systema Munditototius, resembles a Medicine Wheel. The painting depicted the microcosm within the macrocosm, with personally significant figures at the four points of the compass. For example, at the north point of the wheel is the figure of a young boy in a winged egg, which is balanced at the south point of the wheel with Abraxas, representing the world of shadows. Jung described his mandalas as cryptograms concerning the state of the self; the mandala represents the self, the world, and the wholeness of the personality (Jung, 1959).

Jung asked many of his psychotherapy patients to draw and paint mandalas, and he examined them to discover their unconscious thoughts. By analyzing the pictures, Jung thought that patients could develop a new sense of self; once freed from unconscious feelings and complexes, the person could begin the path toward
individuation (Jung, 1973). Jung described individuation as the process of harmonizing the disparate elements of the self, and bringing them into balance (Elkins, 2000). Drawing a mandala can function as an attempt at self-healing, with the harmonious design counteracting the disorder and confusion of neurosis. Thus, for Jung, drawing mandalas served the same purpose as the modern versions of the medicine wheel.

When Jung gave a seminar on the mandala in 1930, he showed pictures of his own and his patients' mandalas, Tibetan mandalas, and a picture of a Navajo sand painting. He said that when an individual draws a mandala, it expresses the state of the psyche. Interpreting the images in a spontaneous mandala can provide clues to the psychological functioning of the person. Sometimes the mandala illustrates the development of the self, while other times it shows the struggle of the ego with opposing forces such as the ego's shadow, or the struggle between animus and anima. Jung thought that the images in a mandala activate the archetypes, the wells of meaning in the collective unconscious (Jung, 1959). Mandalas and, by extension, medicine wheels, can express the self, the personality, totality, completeness, and the unification of opposites.

The Medicine Wheel in Native American Healing Practices

C. G. Jung traveled in the American southwest and visited with representatives of Indian tribes (Jung, 1973). He noted the similarity of the Tibetan Buddhist mandala to the dry sand paintings that are a part of Navajo healing ceremonies. Kluckhohn and Leighton (1945) noted that over 500 different sand painting designs have been recorded, and each one is used in a particular ceremony. The colorful, highly stylized sand paintings are created to help restore health and harmony to the patient. The process of creating a sand
painting is thought to contribute to healing because the process of drawing the symmetrical, orderly images focuses the thoughts on balance and harmony. The Navajo believe that the healing power of the sand painting is due to the depiction of the Holy People, who are thought to be present in the images; when the patient comes in direct contact with the images of the Holy People by sitting on the sand painting, they enter the patient and promote healing (Reichard, 1977). Although sand paintings are not technically medicine wheels, they could be seen as similar in the harmony of their designs and in their healing potential as images of wholeness.

Another common usage of the circle motif in contemporary Native American healing is the talking circle, a form of group therapy in which participants sit in a circle. After smudging with sweet grass or sage, the group leader opens the meeting by sharing a personal experience, and then the group members talk about their own experiences and feelings. Only one person speaks at a time, and there is no cross-talk or questioning. A participant in a talking circle said "Talking circles helped me because I could talk and hear myself and decide whether this was a true thing or a passing state of being. . . . I could clarify this by hearing myself speaking about my feelings and by having other people witness it. . . . There were a lot of times when I crumbled and just let go of the pain" (quoted in Moodley & West, 2005, p. 299).

Circular medicine wheel-style designs are often used as the logo for Indian agencies and organizations. As an important and ubiquitous Native American symbol, the medicine wheel is a meaningful reminder of the need to strive for balance, wholeness, and harmony in all things.
Conclusion

Although the ancient stone medicine wheels of the aboriginal Indians are mute regarding their original purpose or meaning, modern people have been creative in applying their own interpretations to the wheels. At a minimum, the archetypal circular shape of the medicine wheel could be interpreted as a reminder that it is important to see life and all creation as a whole. The center of the wheel can be seen as representing the unitary self, while the spokes reach outward to other people and the rest of the world. The cardinal points on the perimeter of the wheel imply the great diversity of creation, and the opposition of the points implies the need to integrate the opposites to find harmony. In its evocation of balance the medicine wheel reminds us to focus on what is most important in life.
References


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