

# The Great Mandala

Takao, 1986

“Outwardly, the equivalent of the unconscious is the wilderness.”

—Gary Snyder

## I. THE HOURS

1

*Morning*

The light  
of dawn  
is already  
inside me.

2

*Noon*

Eyes ablaze,  
breathing fire,  
I have swallowed  
the midday sun.

3

*Evening*

The sun is dying,  
its light fading,  
its warmth failing,  
leaving me in shadows.

4

*Midnight*

No vision,  
no word,  
not even a shadow  
on this moonless night.

## II. THE SEASONS

1

*Spring*

Melting snow  
swells the rivers.  
Clouds vaporize  
in the sun.

2

*Summer*

Green leaves  
sway in the breeze.  
Mists obscure  
the view.

3

*Autumn*

Raking the leaves  
of our lives  
into piles  
for the burning.

4

*Winter*

Withered branches  
reach up  
to a sky  
they cannot touch.

## III. THE DIRECTIONS

1

*East*

Walking  
towards dawn,  
the sun  
in my eyes.

2

*South*

Follow  
the austral clouds  
wherever  
they lead.

3

*West*

Twilight  
weaves a tapestry  
on the distant  
horizon.

4

*North*

The journey's end—  
waiting  
for snow  
to cover me.

## IV. THE SPHERES

1

*Sun*

Dazzling light—  
rays  
streaming down  
leave no shadows.

2

*Earth*

Our home is not  
in heaven  
but here  
on this very earth.

3

*Sky*

Shattered azure  
falls back  
to earth  
in pieces.

4

*Heavens*

The moon disappears.  
Stars fade.  
Planets stray  
from their orbits.

## V. THE ELEMENTS

1

*Water*

Springs flow  
from an unknown source.  
Rivers  
gush to the sea.

2

*Dirt*

Fecundity—  
the loam  
out of which  
everything grows.

3

*Air*

The wind  
blows where it will.  
I cannot hold it  
in my hand.

4

*Fire*

Fan the spark  
inside you.  
Rise with the flames  
to the sun.

## VI. THE COSMOS

1

*Matter*

Water flows.  
Gasses swirl.  
Dust congeals.  
Stones sing.

2

*Life*

A green sprig  
shoots up  
from a crack  
in the rock.

3

*Mind*

How exactly  
does a thought  
emerge  
from a brain?

4

*Relations*

It is not  
I alone  
who creates  
our togetherness.

## VII. THE PANORAMAS

1

*Sea*

Scooping up water  
in my hands,  
I drink  
the entire ocean.

2

*Plains*

Wide-open prairie—  
straining to see  
what's beyond  
the horizon.

3

*Mountains*

Peaks  
undulate  
towards  
an infinite skyline.

4

*Desert*

Sand burns my feet—  
not one drop of water  
to cool  
my parched tongue.



## VIII. THE SOIL

1

*Planting*

Sown seeds  
sprout  
entirely  
on their own.

2

*Flourishing*

Rain falling down  
on green fields,  
hands lifted  
upward.

3

*Harvesting*

Wheat to be  
ground into bread,  
grapes to be  
crushed into wine.

4

*Dormancy*

Lying fallow—  
croplands  
white  
with winter snow.

## IX. THE CYCLES

1

*Birth*

Every night  
I reenter the womb.  
Every morning  
I rise again from the dead.

2

*Growth*

The sapling  
struggles  
to become  
what it already is.

3

*Decay*

Rotting grapes  
fall  
from withered  
vines.

4

*Death*

I return  
to what I was  
before  
I was born.

## X. THE SELF

1

*Identity*

No one  
recognizes me,  
not even  
myself.

2

*Unity*

No difference between  
matter / mind  
body / spirit  
human / divine.

3

*Dissolution*

When I gaze  
into the pool,  
I cannot see  
my own face.

4

*Emptiness*

Nothing  
to reach out for,  
no chasm  
to be bridged.

## XI. THE STAGES

1

*Innocence*

Out of nothing—  
no image  
for the mirror  
to reflect.

2

*Experience*

In the blinding  
light  
the eye  
sees itself.

3

*Suffering*

Descent  
into hell,  
refined  
in its flames.

4

*Redemption*

The stone  
guarding  
my tomb  
rolls away.

## XII. THE SACRED

1

*Diety*

God  
beyond being—  
no ground  
to stand on.

2

*Incarnation*

I too am the word  
become flesh.  
I have neither  
mother nor father.

3

*Spirit*

Wind  
moves over  
the face of a world  
not yet imagined.

4

*The Void*

Arms  
reach up  
to the empty  
vault of heaven.

### Annotations

The title is derived from Peter, Paul, and Mary's song, "The Great Mandella [sic] (The Wheel of Life)," written by Peter Yarrow and included on *Album 1700* (Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 1977). The epigraph is from Gary Snyder, "Poetry and the Primitive" in *Earth House Hold* (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 122. The poems form a mandala in the shape of a cross, an archetypal symbol found in many religious traditions, consisting of four outer points and a point at the center, which in this rendering is left void (i.e., the fifth poem remains unwritten). Cf. the following quote from Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux, in James Epes Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill, 1964), pp. 13–14: "In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop, and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The east gave peace and light, the south gave warmth, the west gave rain, and the north with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance." The poems in "The Great Mandala" can be read either sequentially (1, 2, 3, 4 / 1, 2, 3, 4...etc.) or numerically (1, 1, 1, 1...etc. / 2, 2, 2, 2...etc.).