

Create together through the pandemic: Mandala-making with Japanese Pastel Nagomi Art for relaxation and emotional expression

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Abstract

The coronavirus has been a threat to our physical and mental wellness, but lockdown has allowed us an opportunity to explore different online platforms to share the joy of art-making and nurture positive energy during adversity. LoveHKLoveU is a social media platform set up by the University of Hong Kong to promote love and care during the pandemic, where, among other things, ideas on guided visualisation and mandala-making are shared. The mandala are made using Japanese Pastel Nagomi Art to encourage relaxation, express emotions, and promote well-being. The two online posts reached over 8,000 viewers within two months.

Keywords

Mandala, relaxation, emotional expression, Pastel Nagomi Art, social media.

Introduction

On 23 January 2020, the first coronavirus case was confirmed in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Government responded with public health measures ranging from suspending the operation of school and leisure facilities (including public sports facilities and libraries) to social distancing regulations that saw the prohibition of large groups gathering, as well as people working from home to prevent and control the disease.

On one hand, the above measures have mitigated the possibility of physical infection. On the other hand, the downside of the measures include, but are not limited to, physical distancing, social isolation, and disruption to normal routines and job security. Isolations are meant to protect, but “abrupt changes to daily life are risk factors that can substantially affect mental health” (Choi et al., 2020, p.1). The preventive measures taken during the pandemic have had an alarming impact on Hong Kong people’s mental well-being. Choi et al. (2020) evaluated the depression and anxiety of people in Hong Kong during the coronavirus pandemic. The population-based study indicated that of the 500 respondents, “19% had depression (PHQ-9 score \geq 10) and 14% had anxiety (GAD score \geq 10). In addition, 25.4%

reported that their mental health had deteriorated since the pandemic” (Choi et al., 2020, p.6).

I am a creative arts therapist with a specialisation in outreach programmes for high school students in Hong Kong. My colleagues and I are dealing with the suspension of all face-to-face sessions due to school closure until the new academic year. We feel the loneliness as we cannot meet our clients, friends, colleagues and family members in person due to lockdowns and social distancing rules.

In order to take care of my own mental well-being during the pandemic, I have been creating mandala for relaxation and emotional expression using Japanese Pastel Nagomi Art (PNA) techniques, which engage the use of chalk pastels and fingers. PNA is chosen with consideration to the shortage of living space in Hong Kong, and is assessed using the Expressive Arts Therapies Continuum (ETC), developed by Kagitcibaschi and Lusebrink for the use in art and expressive psychotherapies since 1978. The LoveHKLoveU social media platform was initiated by the University of Hong Kong to promote love and care during the coronavirus pandemic.¹ I am honoured to have the opportunity to share my knowledge of the mandala artform and PNA technique on this platform. Mandala-making offers

“a protected space where we can establish or regain our sense of balance” (Fincher, 2009, p.9). Guided visualisation is introduced prior to the mandala-making process to reconnect with body and mind. The theoretical background and main considerations for mandala-making with PNA, and the leverage of social media to share the joy of art-making are discussed in this paper.

Honouring the sacred cultural origins of the mandala

Mandala is a knowledge tradition of Southeast Asia, a sacred Hindu and Buddhist symbol and practice that is also the basis of an ancient political discourse and of some current understandings of regional political culture and power (Dellios, 2003). The making of mandala is a complex, ancient and living tradition with deep and abiding roots in specific religions and cultures. The ethics of taking up traditional spiritual and healing practices in cross-cultural contexts require careful consideration and warrant further research (Kaimal & Arslanbek, 2020). While the examination of cultural appropriation in the creative arts therapies is beyond the scope of this essay, I acknowledge that many practices have been secularised and simplified. I am treading on sacred and contested ground – grateful that the rich tradition of mandala-making has supported me personally and professionally through the challenges of this pandemic.

Mandala for relaxation and emotional expression

Mandala is a Sanskrit word that is often translated as ‘circle’. Noting its sacred origins and character, mandala has further been described as a “magic circle” (Fincher, 2009, p.1). Mandala can be found in religious and cultural practices such as Tibetan sand mandala. Their circular form is echoed in other cultural and religious traditions, for instance in Notre Dame’s Gothic rose window and in the Mayan calendar. It has been suggested by arts therapists who draw on the richness of their own diverse Asian backgrounds and contexts that “when [mandala are] used individually or therapeutically, individuals are free to spontaneously create their own forms” (Potash et al., 2015, p.17). In this most basic understanding, a mandala is simply a circle. Through the process of making, the circle becomes a symbol of one’s self,

allowing the artist to release his/her emotions and relax.

The healing power of creating mandala is supported by research studies. Henderson et al. (2007) found that creating mandala to express emotions related to trauma could reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress. According to DeLue (1999), a mandala drawing task given to children resulted in a relaxation response, which suggests that mandala creation may allow participants to better cope with stress and anxiety. Van Der Venet and Serice (2012) concluded that “colouring a pre-drawn mandala is an effective way to lower anxiety” (p.92). While people are experiencing depression and anxiety at different levels during the coronavirus pandemic, creating mandala provides a safe boundary to express emotions and enhance mental well-being.

Japanese Pastel Nagomi Art and ETC

Japanese Pastel Nagomi Art (PNA) combines the gentle and warm tone of pastels together with a simple technique of applying powdered pastel to paper and drawing with fingers. “Nagomi” means harmony (和) in Japanese. Hosoya Norikatsu, the founder of PNA and Japan Pastel Hope Art Association (JPHAA), described PNA during an advanced training course as “a healing art to cultivate harmony and awake hope in the community” (personal communication, 13 September, 2013). Norikatsu created a cherry blossom scene with PNA as a gift for his friend, who was diagnosed with chronic illness. The use of PNA to appreciate the beauty of nature ignited the hope of his friend in the process of his recovery. This form of art provides a source of comfort and cultivates inner peace. Thus, PNA is chosen to convey the key message of cultivating harmony and hope during the coronavirus pandemic.

The creative process of PNA engages participants in expressing emotions and cultivating inner peace through navigating at different levels of the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978), organising “media interactions into a development sequence of information processing and image formation from simple to complex” (Hinz, 2009, p.4). There are four levels in the ETC framework and the first three levels comprise of dual levels of information processing, including the kinesthetic/sensory level, the perceptual/affective

level and the cognitive/symbolic level of increasing complexity (Hinz, 2009). Lastly, the creative level can integrate the functioning at different levels or it can be a standalone level (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978).

Chalk pastels are fluid media which can induce affective experience and enhance the “expression of emotion and affective images at the affective level” (Lusebrink, 1992, p.299). On one hand, the use of fingers to draw with pastel powder doesn’t allow for much reflective distance. On the other hand, the PNA technique of applying a cutter as a mediator to grate pastel powder increases the reflective distance, allowing the time “to ponder the meaning of an expressive event as it is happening” (Hinz, 2009, p.33). Therefore, the PNA process facilitates emotional expressions while it reduces the risk of overwhelming emotions during the creative process.

The action of grating pastel powder (see Figure 1) engages movement and effort which in turn enhances the release of energy and establishes rhythm at the kinesthetic level (Lusebrink, 1992). The quantity of pastel powder will influence the release of energy during the next step when the pastel powder is applied with fingers directly on the paper. The interaction between fingers, pastel powder and paper facilitates sensory functioning. This allows participants to increase awareness and match their internal sensations (Hinz, 2009).



Figure 1. Pastel Nagomi Art method: grating chalk pastels into powder.

At the perceptual level, the drawing-paper size of 150 x 150mm and the mandala form set boundaries for image formation. The choice of a smaller paper means that it will contain fewer images, emotions and thoughts while it creates a boundary to contain the expressive experience (Hinz, 2009). Mandala,

in the form of a circle, “organizes and safely contains symbolic imagery” (Fincher, 2009, p.1). Using circular movement to put pastel powder on paper creates a flowing rhythm while helping the participant to slow down (See Figure 2). According to Lusebrink (1992), “the affective component is emphasized through the dynamic manner of application of the media” (p.399). The warm and harmonious colours of chalk pastels further enhance the expression of affects.

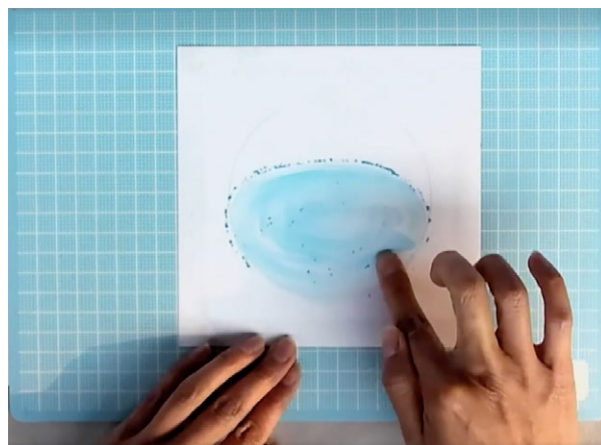


Figure 2. Pastel Nagomi Art method: paint with fingers in circular movement.

Cognitive functioning is required to further develop the image from the technical perspective. Drawing with fingers and pastel powder can only provide a rough image and it requires additional tools to create details; for example, the use of a cutter to cut different shapes on the paper, or an erasing shield to add more details, or an eraser to create the effect of light and shade. These tools require cognitive functioning and planning. The healing dimension at the symbolic level enhances self-discovery, unlocks meaning and guides personal growth (Hinz, 2009). The use of the mandala form facilitates the creation of meaning at the symbolic level and connects with the external reality. According to Fincher (2009), “Mandala offers us a profound way to examine our inner reality, to integrate that understanding with our physical selves, and to feel connected to the greater universe” (p.1).

“The healing dimension of the creative level of the ETC has been defined as inventive and resourceful interaction with the environment leading to creative self-actualizing experiences” (Hinz, 2009, p.171). Carl Jung’s concepts on creating mandala are “associated with an inborn urge to grow toward wholeness”

through the process of “individuation” (Fincher, 2009, p.21). At the creative level, drawing mandala can bridge inner experience and outer reality, provide space for reflection, and fulfil our potential. The simple technique of PNA is user-friendly with room for exploring the media. Thus, the process can encourage creativity.

Lastly, PNA is chosen based on the practical needs of Hong Kong people. Hong Kong is known to be one of the most densely populated places in the world with a population density of 6,880 people per square kilometre as at mid-2018 (Hong Kong Government, 2020). The requirement of space for creating PNA is minimal and viable for most families in Hong Kong despite living in ‘shoebox’ apartments. Thus, the creating of PNA allows locals to express their emotions without being limited by the physical constraints of their environment. The manageable paper size for creating PNA (150 x 150mm), and the handy art materials (chalk pastels, erasers, cutters) make the creative process manageable for children, adolescents, adults and elderly even when they are stuck in their tiny apartments during the pandemic.

Guided visualisation and the ETC

Guided visualisation prior to creating mandala with PNA aims to bring focus to the present moment, reconnect body and mind, allow feelings and thoughts to come and go with a non-judgemental attitude. Homann (2010) suggested that we can have “more access to our thoughts and more flexibility in our emotions when we are grounded in our bodies” (p.96). This can help us balance at the perceptual/affective level of the ETC. According to Hinz (2009), “persons who are overly emotional have been described as being caught up in emotion and unable to see clearly” (p.8). Functioning at the cognitive/symbolic level is necessary to regulate our wandering minds and free space for ourselves. The unattended feelings and thoughts can be externalised through the PNA creative process afterwards.

If our negative emotions are overwhelming, we can apply movement and work with the kinesthetic components to let the emotions vent prior to guided visualisation. Based on the Chance approach in dance and movement therapy, “safe and simple rhythmic sequences” can provide “a medium for the externalization of otherwise chaotic and confusing emotions” (Levy, 2005, p.22). We can leverage the movement “effort” elements, such as the use of

“weight”, which can be “strong” or “light”, or the use of “flow”, which can be “bound” or “free” according to the Laban Movement Analysis (Levy, 2005, p.110). The experience of the opposing movements allows us to feel the contrast and move towards a more balanced state of functioning at the kinesthetic/sensory level.

The application

The guided visualisation and mandala-making with PNA facilitate the participant to connect with their body and mind while providing a safe platform to express their inner feelings and thoughts. Guided visualisation begins with observing the rhythm of our breathing and enhancing awareness of body-mind connection. Body scanning will follow to help identify the most relaxed or the most tensed part of the body. The essence of guided visualisation provides input to the PNA creative process.

I created two video clips to share the mandala-making for relaxation and emotional expression on social media. Each clip is around 30 minutes, starting with a brief introduction, guided visualisation and using PNA techniques for mandala-making. Mandala for relaxation focuses on identifying colour, lines or imagery related to relaxation. In the video, a mandala with a water droplet creating a little ripple effect is demonstrated (see Figure 3). Participants are free to draw the same but they are encouraged to express what relaxation means to them. During the pandemic, people are trapped at home most of the time, and may feel frustrated or bored and notice increased conflicts with family members. Creating art is a way to free space for ourselves and experience relaxation through the creative process.

The second video clip focuses on mandala for emotional expression (see Figure 4). The pandemic has created negative emotions, such as anxiety, fear, frustration, uncertainty, and so on. The mandala-making with PNA is a safe platform for emotion venting. First, fill the mandala with different colours layer by layer. Second, apply fixative spray and put adhesive on the drawing randomly. Next, use a cutter to express emotions through dots and lines with light pressure on the adhesive. The movements facilitate the release of negative energy. Upon completion, remove the adhesive and appreciate the mandala.

Feelings and thoughts are externalised through the mandala-making with PNA and the process enhances self-reflection. It’s a good idea to give the

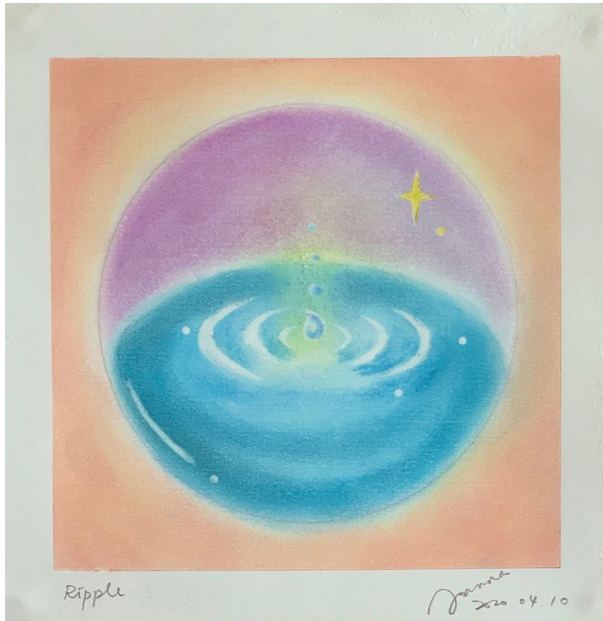


Figure 3. Joanna To, *Ripple – Mandala for relaxation*,² 2020, pastel, 150 x 150mm.

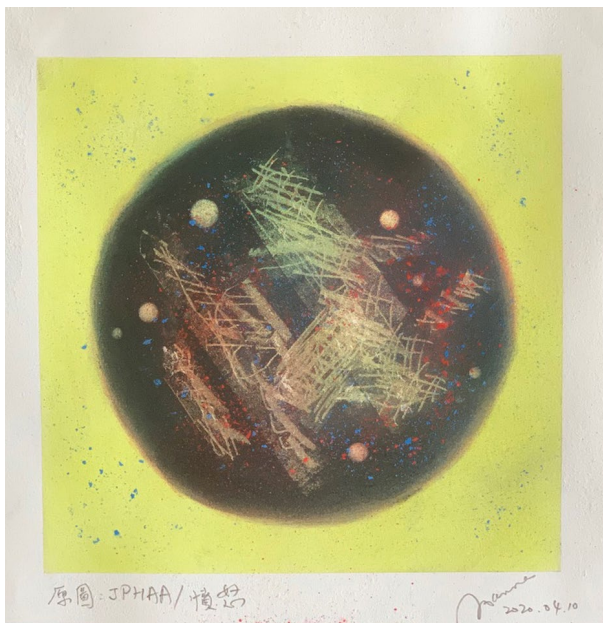


Figure 4. Joanna To, *Anger – Mandala for emotion expression*,³ 2020, pastel, 150 x 150mm.

mandala a title, jot down the creative experience and describe the artwork in a journal. The next step is to reflect on the process and relate it to relaxation or emotions. Finally, put both the mandala for relaxation, and the mandala for emotional expression side by side for appreciation. Next time, when we encounter emotions or want to relax, we can create a mandala with PNA. Alternatively, if there is no time to make a new one we can review the original mandala and remember the experience of creating them.

Leveraging online media

McNiff (1999) stated that “civilization does advance through new technologies and art therapy needs to move with it” (p.200). In fact, “artists, art therapists, and creators all around the world... are also exploring, using, or leveraging the internet for their creative efforts and artistic interests” (Miller, 2007, p.45).

The coronavirus pandemic has forced changes to the normal reality and we have no choice but to find ways to adapt. Online platforms have become a crucial element during the coronavirus crisis. According to a recent study by Ipsos (2020), people in Hong Kong are using more online shopping platforms for groceries and food in order to avoid unnecessary contact with other people or in high risk venues, such as wet markets and restaurants. In addition, e-learning or e-courses are becoming the contingency solution for learning while schools are closed. In view of the coronavirus pandemic, different governmental and non-profit organisations have been creating online platforms, such as websites, social media, and e-programmes for promoting well-being. In July 2020 in Hong Kong, the Advisory Committee on Mental Health launched the *Shall We Talk* online platform to promote mental health and public education initiatives. The University of Hong Kong has also launched the LoveHKLoveU campaign to promote the sharing of love and care during the coronavirus pandemic via digital channels such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. As an alumnus of the University of Hong Kong, I am honoured to have the opportunity to demonstrate art-making for relaxation and emotional expression.

“Social media has a valuable role in nurturing and inspiring creative possibilities and opportunities for activating this enhanced well-being, happiness, and enjoyment among our network of digital connections and beyond” (Miller, 2017, p.180, Location 3849). As discussed earlier in this paper, creating mandala with PNA requires minimum space to accommodate the 150 x 150mm paper and simple tools. Sharing the creative process online makes it viable for people to follow the steps and create mandala together at home. In addition, art-making is an alternative way of communicating with family members and friends to cultivate positive energy and support. Sharing the final artwork on social media further spreads the joy of art-making (see Figure 5). The premiere of each video connected with an audience of a few hundred

people but the views expanded to around 4,000 within two months. So (2009) suggests that positive posts shared online encourage feelings of happiness for the individual who sees the posts, as well as giving the positive influence an extended reach, both virtually and offline (Miller, 2017, p.24).

Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic has increased our social distance and created a sense of isolation. However, distance cannot keep us apart if we can make good use of the advancement of technology and get connected through the use of art. We can make art together and connect through online platforms. Families can create mandala together as a bonding

activity at home and explore the beauty of non-verbal means of communications. “Mandala is the human longing to know oneself, to experience harmony, and to grasp one’s place in the Cosmos” (Fincher, 2009, p.16). We can further share the joy of mandala-making and appreciate one another’s artwork through sharing them on social media. Through online platforms such as LoveHKLoveU we have been able to reach over 8,000 viewers within two months and cultivate the habit of making art. The uncertainty caused by the pandemic may continue, but this new means of collaboration can continue to help us heal. Let’s get connected and stay connected through making art together. Let’s nurture the power of positive energy to fight against the coronavirus.

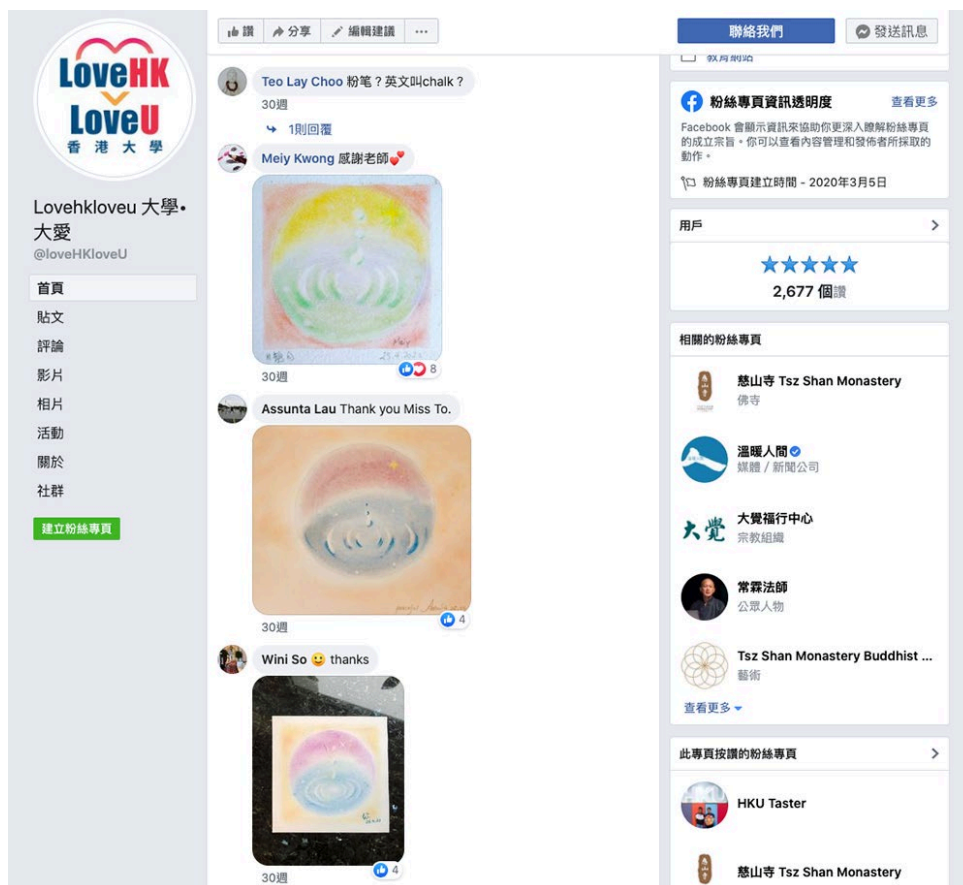


Figure 5. A screen shot of LoveHKLoveU Facebook page sharing the joy of mandala making.

Endnotes

1. The Love HK Love U social media platform can be accessed at <https://www.lovehklloveu.com/>
2. For the video demo, please refer to <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1942225569264754>
3. For the video demo, please refer to <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=682734069145379>

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