



Labyrinth History



Throughout the world there exists a symbol - a series of concentric lines, carefully connected. This symbol and its family of derivatives has been traced back over 3500 years; it occurs in different cultures, at different points in time, in places as diverse as Peru, Arizona, Iceland, Scandinavia, Crete, Egypt, India and Sumatra. The lines of contact between these widely spaced bursts of labyrinth consciousness are difficult to trace, its origins remain mysterious.



This is the classical or seventh circuit labyrinth. Seven circuits refers the seven paths that lead to the center or goal. This is an ancient design and is found in most cultures. It is sometimes dated back more than 4000 years. Also known as the Cretan Labyrinth it is associated with the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. This design was found on Cretan coins.

Labyrinths have most likely always been used in a spiritual manner. They can create a heightened awareness of the human condition and aid psychological and spiritual growth. To build a labyrinth is to create a sacred space. To walk a labyrinth is to imbue it with power and meaning. The more a labyrinth is used the more powerful it becomes as a symbol of transformation.



The classical labyrinth has an association with Christianity. A cross is the starting point used to construct this labyrinth. The cross at the center can become the focus for meditation and the experience of the labyrinth. The classical labyrinth design is found in many churches in Europe.

The Middle Ages showed a renewed interest in labyrinths and a design more complex than the classical seven-circuit labyrinth became popular.

This was an eleven-circuit design divided into four quadrants. It was often found in Gothic Cathedrals but over time many of these eleven-circuit designs were destroyed or intentionally removed.

The most famous of these remaining labyrinths is at Chartres Cathedral near Paris, France. The labyrinth at Chartres was built around 1200 and is laid into the floor in a style sometimes referred to as a pavement maze. The original center piece has been removed and other areas of the labyrinth have been restored.



This labyrinth was meant to be walked but is reported to be infrequently used today. In the past it could be walked as a pilgrimage and/or for repentance. As a pilgrimage it was a questing, searching journey with the hope of becoming closer to God. When used for repentance the pilgrims would walk on their knees. Sometimes this eleven-circuit labyrinth would serve as a substitute for an actual pilgrimage to Jerusalem and as a result came to be called the "Chemin de Jerusalem" or Road of Jerusalem.

In walking the Chartres style labyrinth the walker meanders through each of the four quadrants several times before reaching the goal. An expectancy is created as to when the center will be reached. At the center is a rosette design which has a rich symbolic value including that of enlightenment. The four arms of the cross are readily visible and provide Christian symbolism.



Walking the Labyrinth

The labyrinth is a path of prayer for all people seeking the divine, regardless of the tradition in which one stands. The winding path leading to the center, based on a labyrinth laid in the floor of Chartes Cathedral around 1220, serves as a mirror to reflect the movement of the Spirit in our lives.

The labyrinth has only one path so there are no tricks to it and no dead ends. Walking the path with an open mind and an open heart touches our sorrows and releases our joys.

The Threefold Path

Walking in

RELEASING: allow for letting go, quieting the mind, surrender, opening. Be attentive to whatever may come up for you. (also called "purgation")

In center

ILLUMINATION: Stay in center until you are satisfied. You may stand, sit, kneel, lie down (as space permits.) Be open to receive what is there for you: peace, clarity, awakening, insight, guidance. (also called "receiving")

Walking out

UNION: A time for communion, reunion, remembering. Allow yourself to take back into the world whatever experience this labyrinth walk held for you. (also called "integrating")

Palms Up, Palms Down

These three stages can be symbolized with a "palms down, palms up" approach to walking the labyrinth.

"**Palms down**" symbolizes release or letting go while "**palms up**" indicates receiving. Enter the labyrinth and walk to the center with palms down and center your thoughts on releasing conflictual issues and concerns in your life.

When you reach the center turn your palms up to be receptive to insight. As you walk out of the labyrinth keep your palms up to receive strength and guidance to make your insight manifest.

As you leave the labyrinth turn to face the center and bring your palms together for a prayerful end to your walk.

Each person's walk is a personal experience. How one walks and what one receives differs with each walk. Some people use the walk for clearing the mind and centering. Others enter with a question or concern. The time in the center can be used for receiving, reflecting, meditating, or praying, as well as discovering our own sacred inner space. What each person receives can be integrated on the walk out. Your walk can be a healing and sometimes very profound experience or it can be just a pleasant walk. Each time is different.