

# Triple Tomoe and Related Threefold Symbols

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## **Tao Te Ching**

### **Chapter 42 (Part)**

*The Tao begot one.*

*One begot two.*

*Two begot three.*

*And three begot the ten thousand things.*

*The ten thousand things carry yin and embrace yang.*

*They achieve harmony by combining these forces.*

This can be interpreted as the Tao giving birth to the Universe (the One) which gives rise to Yin and Yang (the Two), whose interaction creates Energy / Chi (the Three) from which comes Everything (the Ten Thousand Things).

## **I Ching**

A broken and a solid line signify yin and yang respectively and are combined in groups of three with the upper line representing Heaven, the lower line Earth and the middle line Humanity. These groups of three make the eight possible trigrams.

## **Two Through to Three**

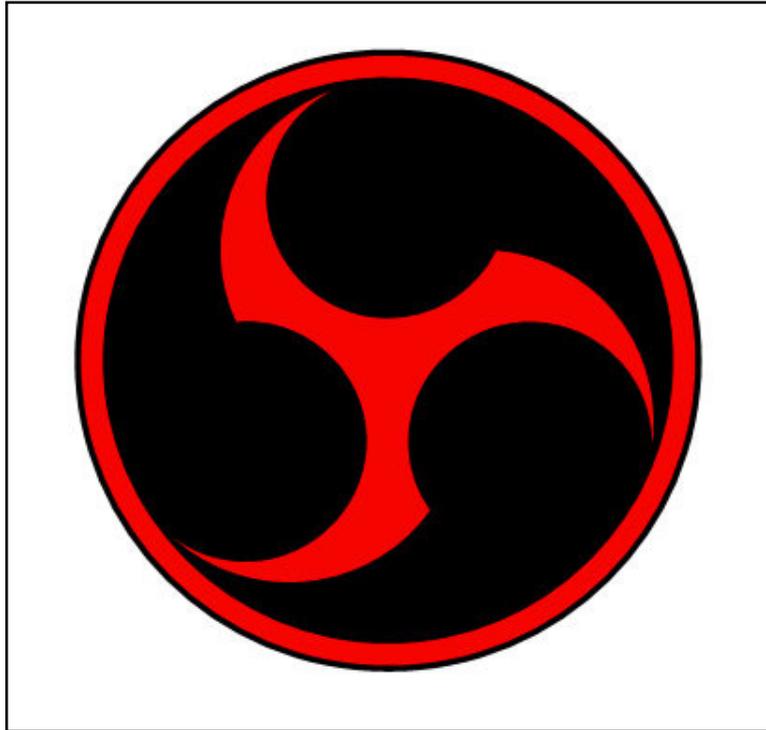
In this article, we will look at the birth of the 3 and consider some of the various symbolic depictions of this threefold harmony.

Threes abound in religion, myth and folklore. They occur again and again in sayings, proverbs and fables. Such things as: three wishes, three cheers, third time lucky.

Albert Einstein's famous equation  $E = mc^2$  describes the whole cosmos as aspects of

Energy – Mass – Light

## Triple Tomoe or Triple Apostrophe



Triple Tomoe Symbol

Visually, the appearance of the triple tomoe (mitsu tomoe) is closely related to the yin-yang 'double fish', both giving the impression of rotational movement. Like the yin-yang diagram, it can be drawn in either clockwise or counter-clockwise rotation.

It is usually associated with the symbolism of Shinto where it is seen as representing the *'World Triad'*.

It is also seen in Buddhist art, where some traditions refer to it as the *'Buddha's Navel'*. This distinctive design is often seen on Japanese temple drums and on taiko drums. The eye can be beguiled by the intriguing optical illusion that it creates, as it can be viewed as either three spokes / blades (the light part), or as three rotating apostrophes (the dark areas). Symbolically it can be seen as representing all trinities such as

Heaven – Earth – Humanity

also the life cycle of

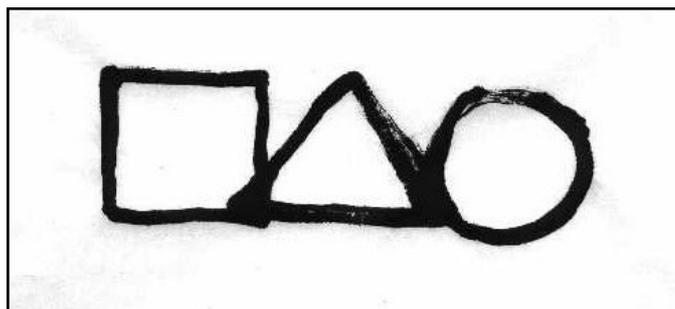
Birth – Life – Death.

The founder of aikido, Morihei Ueshiba used the three prime geometric shapes to show the integration of

heaven (circle), humankind (triangle) and earth (square).

Extrapolated into three dimensions these forms become

the sphere, the tetrahedron (pyramid) and the cube.



Similar analogies are seen within alchemic and western mystery tradition teachings and in the artwork of Leonardo Da Vinci's 'Vitruvian Man' standing within a square and a circle.

## Cosmic Mandala



Cosmic Mandala

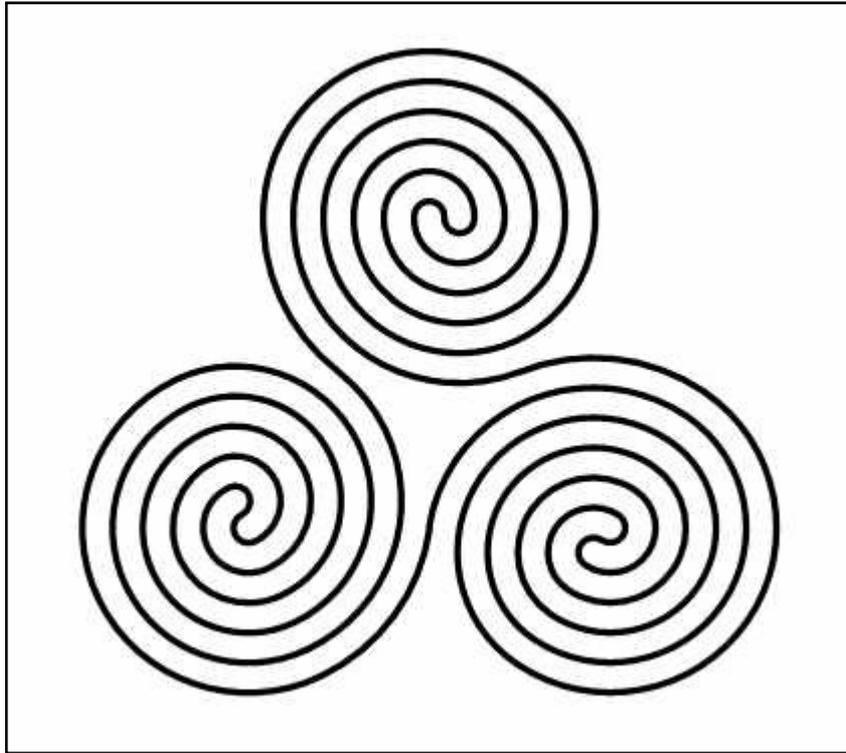
Tibetan Buddhist designs depict triple spirals often within eight spoke Dharma Wheels. Associations include the three aspects of time

Past – Present – Future

three stages of the sun

Dawn – Noon - Dusk.

## Triple Spiral or Spiral of Life



Triple Spiral

In the west, three part designs are seen in the swirling spirals of Celtic art as well as in Christian church and cathedral architecture.

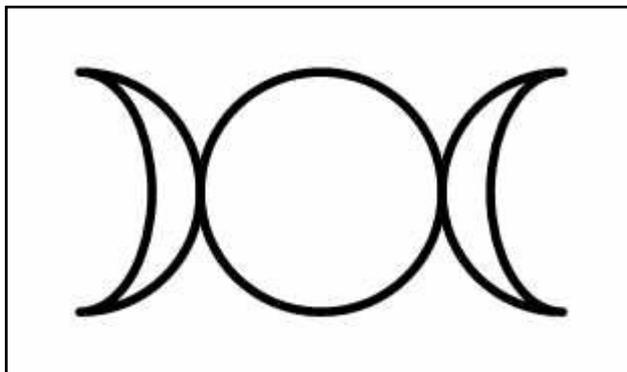
Possibly the most ancient variant of this symbol is the Bronze Age triple spiral that is carved in the rock at Newgrange in the Boyne valley of Ireland. This is thought to relate to the Triple Goddess with her aspects of

Maiden – Mother – Crone

three stages of the moon

Wax – Full - Wane.

It may also suggest the three times three month cycles that make up the nine months between conception and birth.



Goddess Symbol

## Flags



Flag of Sicily

The flags of the Isle of Man and Sicily both have triskelion (trinacria) designs in the form of three rotating legs. In the case of Sicily, the flag also has a depiction of the head of Medusa at its centre.

Correlations can be seen in the threefold division of the body

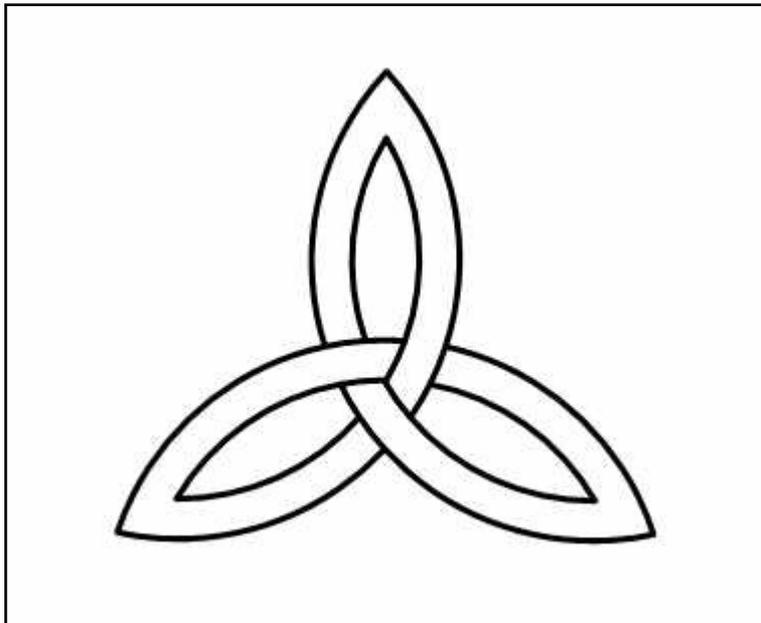
Head – Torso – Limbs

and also how each of the limbs has three parts

Upper – Lower – Hand/Foot

and similarly the fingers have three phalanges and knuckles.

## Trefoil Knot



Trefoil Knot

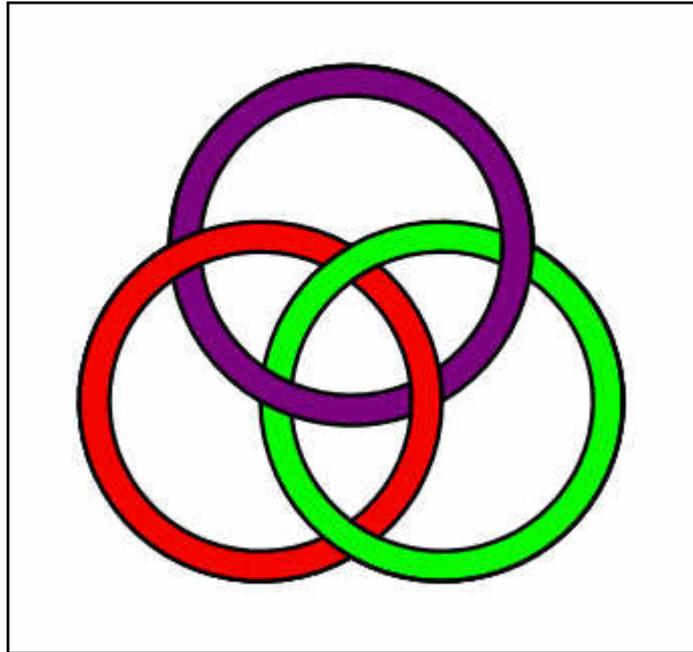
Celtic and Christian artworks often depict three arcs linked into a simple knot design. Observations of nature link this with three aspects of the plant

Root – Plant - Fruit.

From a Christian perspective this can be seen as representative of

Father – Son – Holy Spirit.

## Borromean Rings



Borromean Rings

Whereas these rings are linked as a threesome – no two rings are actually linked together. Careful observation will reveal that the red ring crosses over the purple ring, which crosses over the green ring, which crosses over the red ring. It is their very threeness that binds them together.

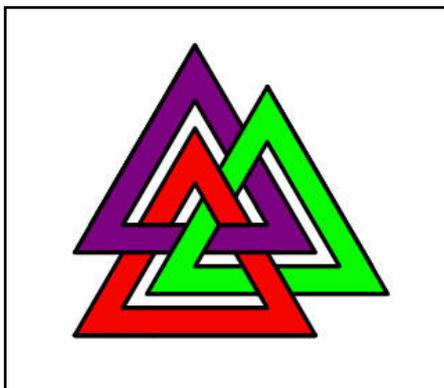
This design has been seen as representative of the alchemist's elements of

Sulphur – Salt – Quicksilver

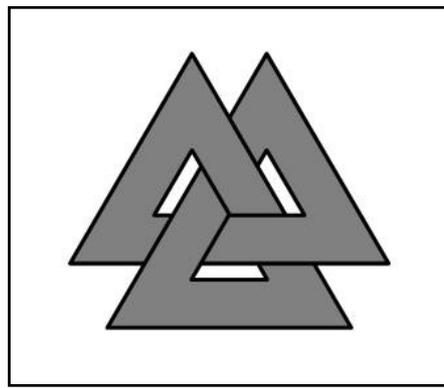
Further analogies have been made between this symbol and the relationships of

Electron – Proton – Neutron.

## Valknut or Odin's Knot



Three Triangle Valknut



Unicursal Valknut

The symbol has been found on Old Norse stone carvings and is sometimes referred to as *'the heart of the slain'*. It is made of three interlocking triangles that may be linked in a similar fashion to the Borromean rings or alternatively it can be drawn unicursally (in one stroke).

The interwoven shape suggests the belief of the inter-relatedness of the three realms of

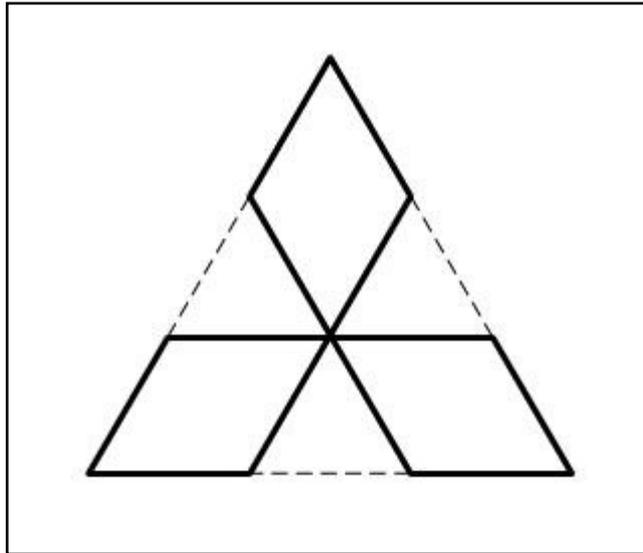
Earth – Heaven – Hell

also the relationship of

Father – Mother - Child.

Its nine points are seen as representative of the Nine Worlds and also the 9 days and 9 nights that Odin hung on the world tree. In this period he learnt 9 sacred songs and gained the wisdom of the runes to achieve power over death itself.

### Triceps or Mitsubishi



Triceps Design

Three diamonds drawn within the shape of a triangle was used as a magic sign of protection in the middle-ages. The Japanese car manufacturer Mitsubishi (three diamonds) uses it as their logo.

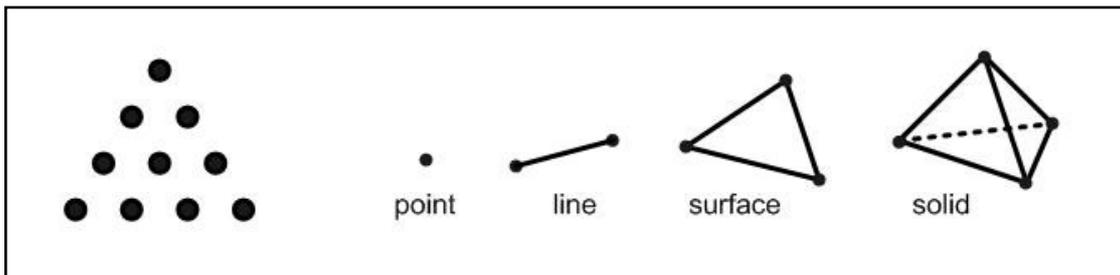
Further triad divisions include the three Olympic medals

Bronze – Silver – Gold

three shades of monochrome

Black – Grey – White.

### Pythagoras



Pythagorean Symbol

The symbol of the Pythagorean Gnostic School consists of nine circles in a triangular shape around a tenth in the middle. The single circle at the apex represents the point, the seed and unity. The next row is the two points that enable a line to be drawn, which represents separation and distance. The three points give rise to the surface, whilst the base row of four points gives rise to volume and the entirety of the universe.

This is closely linked with the concept of

Beginning – Middle - End

and the three dimensions of space

Length – Width - Depth

## **Greece**

Numerous threes are seen in Greek Mythology.

The three principle gods are

Zeus – Poseidon – Hades

they rule over

Sky - Seas – Underworld

respectively whilst all have a say in the running of the earth.

Zeus has a triple thunderbolt, Poseidon's power object is a trident whilst the three headed dog Cerberus guards the gates of Hades.

There are also 3 Fates, 3 Graces, 3 Furies, 3 Charities, 3 Gorgons, and 3 Cyclopes.

## **India**

The Hindu holy trinity is

Brahma – Vishnu – Shiva

they are

Creator – Sustainer – Destroyer.

Each is seen as a different aspect of the One, the word 'trinity' coming from 'tri-unity' or 'three as one'

There are three aspects of the cosmic mantra Om (AUM), the seed sound of creation.



Om

## China

There are three holy Buddhist scriptures – the Tripitaka. In the tale of A Journey to the West, the Monkey King undergoes 9 times 9 (81) tests and trials along with his comrades and companions Pigsy and Sandy to guard the monk Tang Seng on a journey to India to collect these scriptures.

The Tao Te Ching consists of 81 chapters.

## Triple Trinity

The qualities of 3 are amplified when tripled to 9, which is a number often associated with change and with magic. It is the thrice sacred triple trinity. In Macbeth, the three witches chant their charm with:

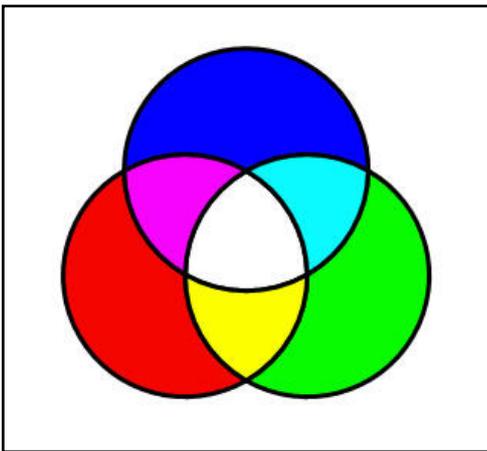
*'Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,*

*And thrice again to make up nine'.*

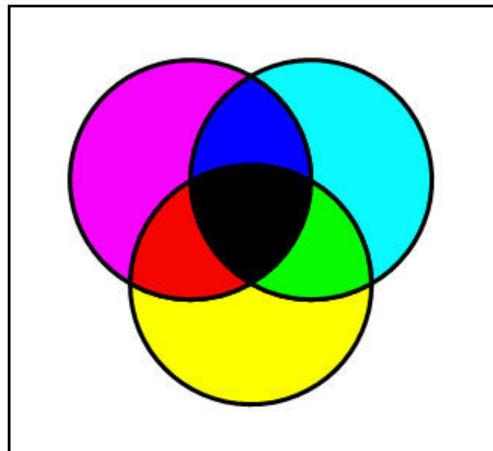
There is an etymological connection between the word 'nine' and the word 'new' in many languages (Sanskrit, Persian, Latin and hence, most European languages). This may have musical origins, in that much music is counted in eights, and nine starts a new phase / phrase. In a similar fashion, the nine can be amplified by itself to give the number 81 which is considered to be a significant number in both Indian and Chinese symbolism

## Colour

Light is made up of three primary colours, which when added together form white light. Pigment colours are made of three primaries, which when put together form black.



Light Colour Circles



Pigment Colour Circles



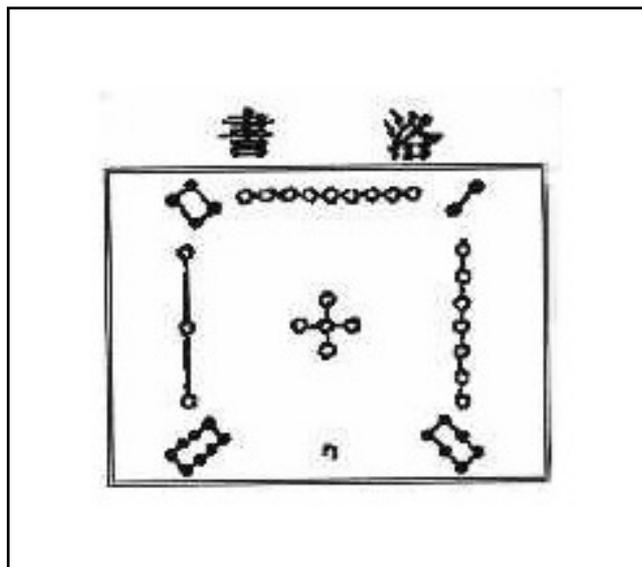
Cover art of Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon

## Magic Squares

The 3 by 3 magic square includes all the numbers from 1 to 9. Each row, column and diagonal adds up to the same. This square is considered to contain the 9 archetypal principles of number, mirroring the supreme order of the universe.

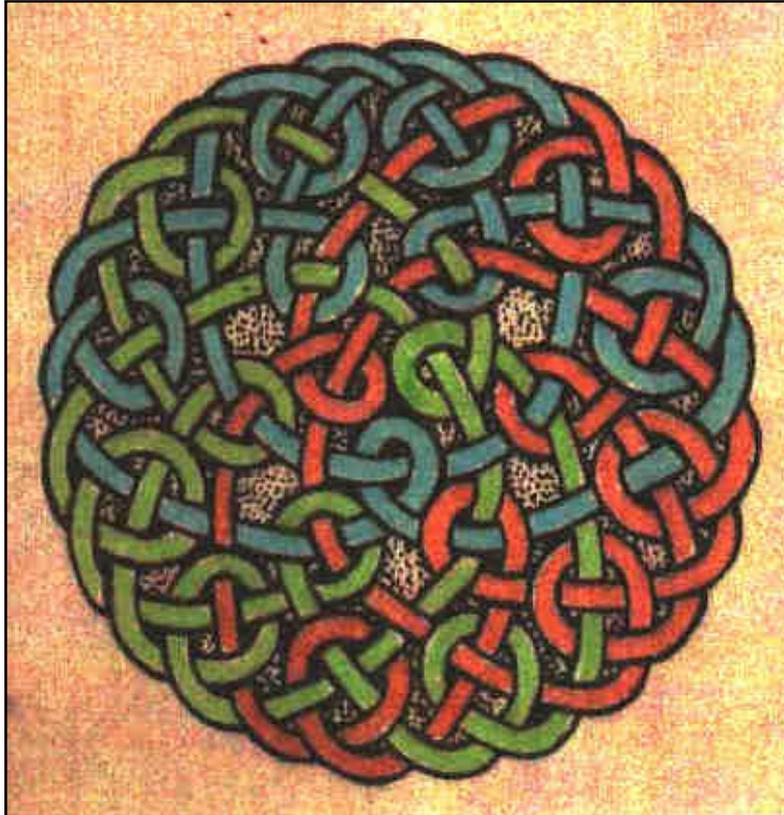
In China it is known as the Lo-Shu square and is linked with the trigrams of the I Ching. In the West it is known as the Square of Saturn, who being 'old father time', is linked with the threefold aspects of chronological time. It is also possible to construct three dimensional magic cubes. A 3 by 3 by 3 magic cube consists of the numbers from 1 through to 27.

For more on the Lo-Shu Square and the I Ching see article on the Tortoise.



Ancient Chinese Lo-Shu Square

Yin (even) numbers in black and yang (odd) numbers in white. Each row, column and diagonal adding to 15.



Celtic Knot—Three through to Twelve

Made of 3 interwoven strands which can be seen in the 3 inner loops, expanding to 6 loops in the second circle and 12 loops in the outer ring.

*Bibliography*

*Tao Te Ching Translation by Gia-Fu Feng*

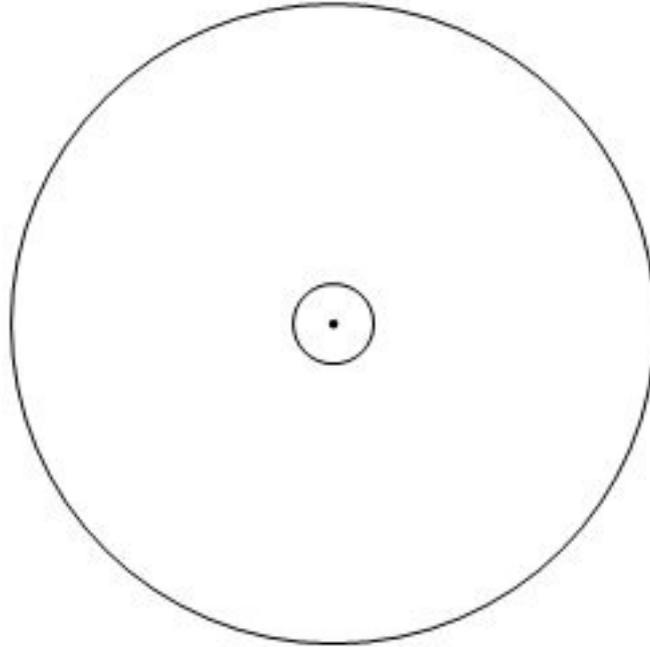
*The Secrets of Aikido by John Stevens*

*A Beginner's Guide to Constructing the Universe by Michael Schneider*

*Modern Numerology by John King*

## Suggested Method for Construction of a Triple Tomoe Symbol

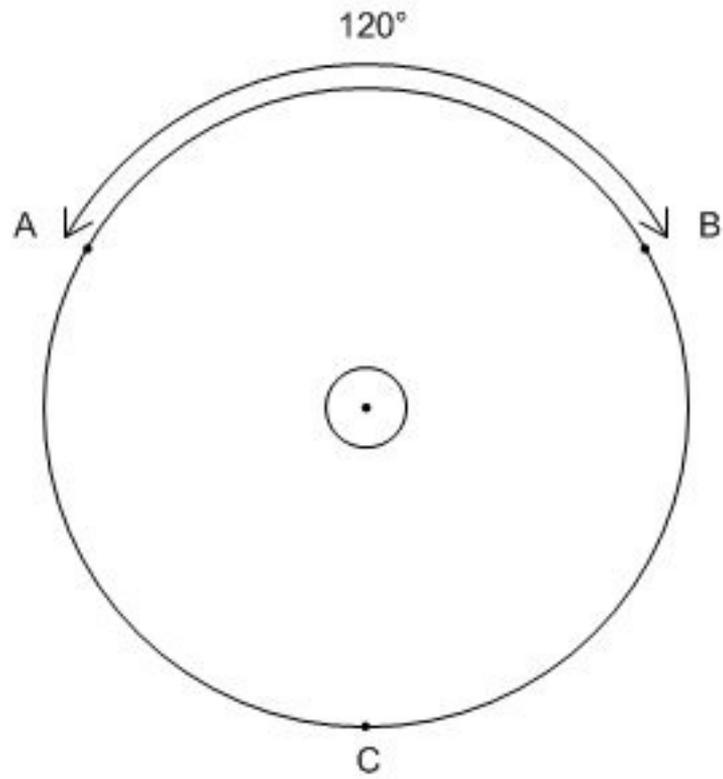
### Stage 1



Draw a smaller and larger circle with the same centre.

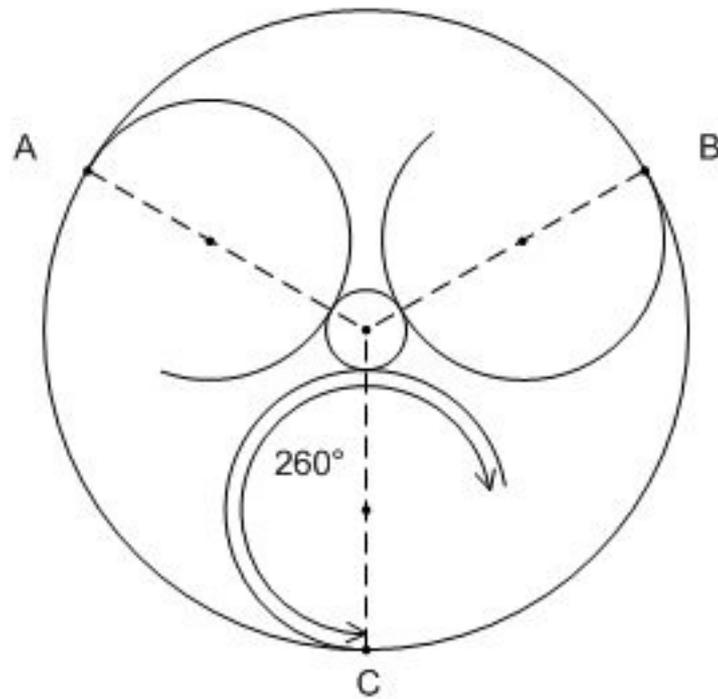
Note: The ratio of the outer to inner circles can vary depending on the comparative sizes that you would prefer for the triple 'spokes' and the triple 'apostrophes'.

## Stage 2



On the outer circle mark 3 equidistant points A, B and C (3 x 120 degrees).

### Stage 3



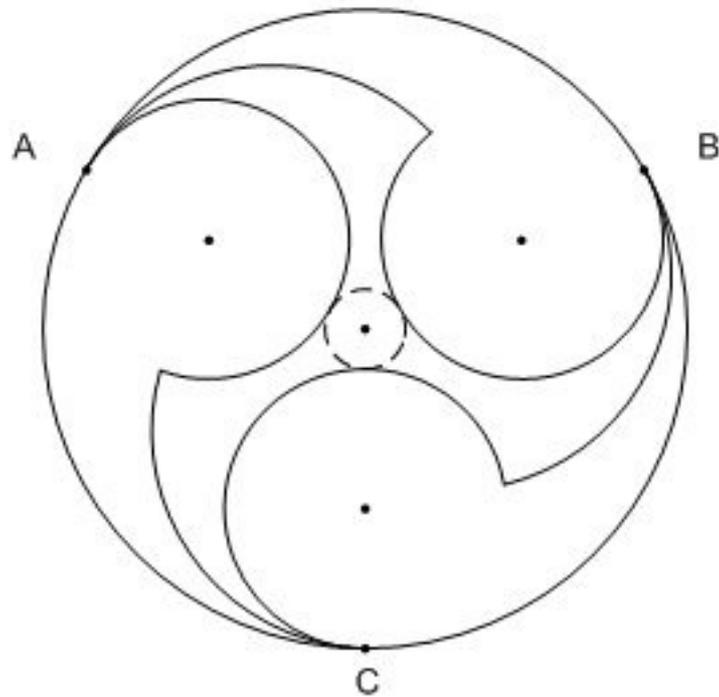
Place the compass point on a line between the centre of the circle and point A.

Now draw a part of a circle from Point A on the outer circle that touches the inner circle and continues for 240 to 260 degrees (Partial Circle A)

Note: The number of degrees can vary depending on the emphasis and shapes that you prefer for the 'spokes' and 'apostrophes'

Do the same twice more from points B & C (to make Partial Circles B & C).

## Stage 4

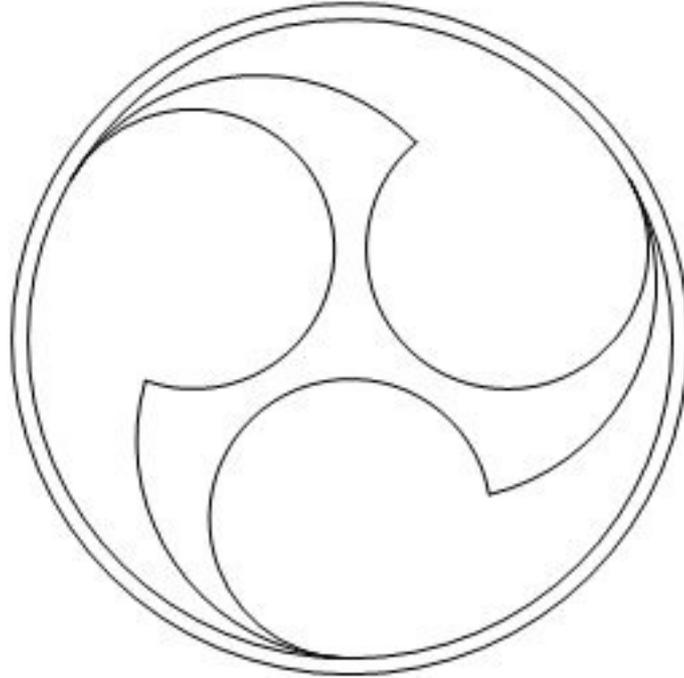


This stage I do by hand, but you could use a compass.

Draw an arc between Point A and the end of Partial Circle B.

Do the same to join Points B & C with Partial Circles C & A respectively.

## Stage 5



Remove the inner circle and other construction marks to leave yourself with the completed triple tomoe.

Colour as you wish.

An extra ring around the outer circle, coloured as the 'spokes' enhances the effect.