

Chapter Five

The Magical Cycle

When Druids gather together their group is called a Grove, whether they meet in the forest, on the moors or in an urban setting. The Grove is a circle of souls, each honoured as individual yet sharing a common source of nourishment in the rich and fertile earth, sharing aims of growth and fruition. The branches of each soul interweave with those on either side. Each stands facing the serenity and potential of the open space which is the centre and source.

Manifestation begins in the spirit centre of the sacred circle, moving out to the edge in the process of becoming. The flow of energy does not move in circles: it uses cycles and spirals.

Change

Change can be stressful, whether it is part of the natural process of growth and decay or something we have worked on through our creativity, our search for healing, knowing and letting go. With its focus on the natural world, its constant and inevitably changing tides, Druidry offers a tool not only for coping with change but also for thriving on it.

The Druid's sacred circle is, as we have seen, painted with the colours of his world, from his immediate environment to the global geography and the universe. Though these shift and change, they are relatively still for us: trees and mountains, oceans, nations, climates. These hold us, becoming part of our perception and understanding of our world, and how within that world we can create a sanctuary, dedicated to all that has made us who we are, all that nourishes and guides us to become all that we could be...

Into the circle are then added those elements of life which are constantly changing, all that provokes and guides us to change ourselves. The Druid temple becomes a sanctuary where change itself is blessed and contained within safe space.

Cycles Of Time

Our ancestors watched the skies with awe, tracking the path of the sun, seeing how it changed throughout the year, observing and learning to work with the effects it had on environment. Ancient standing stones are engraved with spirals, wheels, crescents, expressing the ancestors' fascination for the cycles of the sun, the moon, the seasons, as they lived their lives without such blinkers and blindfolds as central heating, double glazing, supermarkets and electric light. In honouring our ancestors, honouring the genetic and collective memory of lifetimes when nature was right up hard against us, day and night, winter and summer, we open ourselves to learn.

The Druid too watches the sun's path with awe. Our science may fractionally explain it, but we are still dependant on its continuity. So we watch, and learn, allowing its cycle to reflect for us the working of our soul.

The sense of the sun being the highest light, the Logos and essence, slips into Druidry from the eighteenth-century revival. At that time patriarchal Christians asserted that Druidry had existed to prepare for the coming of Christianity, with the sun holding the truth in a similar way to the Christ-light who was to come. Where the influence of the revival is still strong there are Druids for whom the faith remains essentially a solar path, with the sun being seen as the centre and source.

While the sun/Christ connection might be interpreted as mysticism that links into many ancient schools of wisdom, for the majority in Druidry no focus on the solar is perceived, balance and integration being key tenets. None the less, the sun is the source of change in our world. Its path creates day and night and, in our temperate land, the seasons of the year.

It is our perception of these cycles which we use within the sacred circle, painting their changing colours onto the landscapes that are already there as we honour the Earth and journey into the mysteries of change.

So in the north of our circle, which we have painted with all our associated images of north and where we find the element of earth, we also acknowledge the night and all that 'night' means to us. In the north, too, we find winter, its cold and darkness. And in the east is dawn, spring, with its new growth and waking tender light. In the south we honour the warmth of day, the heat of summer, and in the west we reach dusk, slipping into autumn.

In the same way that we worked with the directions and elements, by discovering the associations we hold about each season and time of day we increase our consciousness. We start to see what we hold within the subconscious in terms of memories, beliefs and expectations, all the strengths and blocks to our happiness and creativity.

The seasons not only find expression in the trees, the plants, the wild creatures of our land, the physicality of existence, but impact equally strongly upon our human psyche. In Druidry it is understood that the more closely we follow the prompts of nature, releasing into the changes within ourselves, the healthier we can be. Ignoring the flows of change builds up stress and retains blinkers which deny us clarity and strength. Beyond the desire for well being, it is in attuning with the cycles of each day and season that we discover doorways into deeper knowing, making connections with forces of nature and the gods.

So autumn draws in and a season of growth is over, the winds taking the leaves, frost killing back the plants, and at this time we feel the need to tie up loose ends, to let go of what is redundant, to withdraw. We share with nature a death process, releasing parts of ourselves into spirit, so ground may be prepared for new life to be sown. Like the trees and perennials our focus slips from a desire to grow, our energy moving down to our roots, our sources of nourishment. The hibernation instinct creeps in.

And when spring comes we reach up into the new light, craving its touch, tender and sleepy, until the earth is warm enough for daffodils and celandines, and we are buzzing with energy, cleaning out the house and rearing to go.

Yet even here we cannot make assumptions about common ground. Each of us is unique, with an individual experience of this life and many others. For some people spring may be a time of apprehension when too much is asked of them. Summer may be a time of quiet, of avoiding the limelight, or of gallivanting through extravagant growth. For some the heat is what encourages them to open petals and stretch, while others need more water or shade. Like a grove of trees, we respond to the changing tides of life each in our own way. It is the process of becoming more conscious of who we are, discovering which tree is 'me', that allows us to begin to express ourselves more truly, evergreen yew, pale silver birch, sturdy oak, spreading chestnut...

Where you will not be distracted, mark out a circle on the ground, physically or with your imagination. Standing in its centre, breathe gently, fully, until you are relaxed, then extend your aura until it fills the circle. Feeling its strength, the centredness of your spirit, walk around the circle's edge until you feel it is firm.

From the centre look around, aware of the north, south, east and west, connecting the directions and elements. When you are ready, add the seasons of the year and the cycle of the day. Then, going back to the circle's edge, walk along those cycles, noting the changes that occur with every step you take. Allow yourself to feel the shifts in temperature, the changing colours and light, as you unchain your imagination and let it flow.

When you feel sure that your circle is marked with these cycles, return to the centre and sit quietly for a while. When you are ready, think of an emotion or desire, such as being hungry, tired, sociable, withdrawn, creative, vulnerable, lustful, irritable, easygoing. Taking one at a time and without thinking, walk from the centre to the point on the circle's edge where you feel this state most strongly.

If you truly allow yourself to move without first working out where you 'should' go, the results can be surprising, revealing areas where you are sustaining stress because you are not working with your natural highs and lows. Are you forced to be in company when you would rather be withdrawn? Do you always call your mother at a time which is not comfortable? When would you naturally like to eat, or sleep? How do the cycles correlate, and how do these tie in to the directions and elements?

When you have finished the exercise, return to the centre and relax, centring yourself in your spirit energy, your strength. Then gently breathe in your aura circle until you are comfortable and give thanks to the spirits of place.

When the Druid works in his temple, creating his sacred circle, not only does he invite the elemental energies of earth, air, fire and water to witness and empower his rite, but when he calls out to honour the directions he also calls to the spirits that embody the forces of change, to the spirits of winter, spring, summer and autumn, spirits of the night, of dawn, noon and dusk.

So the circle is rich in imagery and energy, each spirit that comes giving life to the pictures in the Druid's mind, blessing the temple, offering its inspiration and power, witnessing the rite. Each spirit reveals a doorway to a different plane of consciousness through which the Druid can journey into the mists and mysteries of creation.

Moontides

To our ancestors' unaided perception both sun and moon appeared the same size in the skies. The path of the sun expanded and contracted, its power increasing and diminishing through the year, while the moon waxed to a perfect silver white circle, then waned until it disappeared into the darkness.

Little is known of how the ancient Druids worked with the moon's cycles, though there is evidence their calendars were moon oriented. Pliny tells of Druids cutting mistletoe on the sixth day of the waxing moon. There is mention, too, of other herbs, of moon phases and the moon being a source of healing. There is imagery of gods and priests with crescent shapes assumed to be lunar symbols.

For those practising Druidry today, the moon is equal in importance to the sun and as many rites are held at night, in the flickering light of the fire, as are held during the daytime. There is no emphasis on the full or dark (new) moon in the tradition and the majority of Druids tend only to gather together for the major festivals of the year, preferring to honour the lunar tides on their own. However there are Groves which meet at the full or dark moon, while some meet on the sixth day and the waning quarter.

Understanding the relationship between sun, moon and Earth is source for much spiritual adventure, intriguing modern Druids, who are less likely than those of other traditions to follow any specific convention. What is the relationship between light, dark and bright, between source, reflection and perception, between reason, emotion and actuality, body, soul and spirit?

Though for many the sun is perceived to be a male force and the moon female, this is not always the case, either in traditional mythology or in modern practice. It is up to each individual to create and nurture his own unique relationship with the spirit energy of sun and moon, as with all the world around him and the souls and deities that inspire that world.

In the same way that the sun's cycle was laid upon the edge of the sacred circle, so too the tides of the moon find their place. These vary according to how comfortable the Druid is with the various times of the lunar month. The most common form is where the phases are aligned with the cross quarter points, halfway between the cardinal directions.

This gives us the dark moon in the north-west, when the power of the sun and moon are aligned before us, intensifying our experience as we walk towards winter. The first quarter is placed in the north-east, where we find snowdrops and the first hints of dawn. The full moon is in the south east, when the moon is on one side and the sun lies directly opposite, pulling us this way and that in a frenzy of paradox and creativity. The waning quarter is in the south-west, as the harvest begins. Laying the

moon phases in this way emphasizes the language of change that the lunar cycle offers us.

Star Markers

By the time the Celts reached Britain in the first millennium BCE the climate was not conducive to starwatching, the religious focus having shifted from the skies to water as wet weather became the norm. None the less for many Druids there is a strong connection between their faith and the ancient tombs, standing stones and circles that align with the rising and setting of the sun, moon and various stars. In the medieval texts there are implications that the Druids still knew their star lore and the mysteries of the skies, and certainly many in the tradition today are accomplished students of astrology, astronomy and astro-alignment.

Few in Druidry, however, practice in a high ceremonial style where the exact positions of the stars are required in order to perform rites. For the modern Druid the science of nature is not used to strengthen the intellect in order to defend ourselves against it, the goal being rather to attune with nature, slide in and extend our experience of its reality. Stars are considered to be omens and guides rather than dictators of fate, our observation being an act of reverential awe and learning.

Aspects of astrology relate well onto modern Druidry, such as the use of the elements of earth, air, fire and water, each being further qualified by the term cardinal, fixed or mutable, bringing its qualities of change. The importance of balance is shared, with the focus on relationship, integration and healing through a strong vision of connection. The pathways of change are clearly mapped out, from the circle of the horizon to the elliptic voyages of the planets and stars.

The importance of 'now' is explored through star lore, that gap between time and space, between past and future, the intangibility of the present moment which is captured in the circle. The Druid strives to understand more fully all the energies – of the planets, stars, moons, gravity – which influence our journey. As through spirit every aspect of our world is connected, so the stars breathe their energy over our Earth through a cosmic web of connectedness.

Many Druids understand the skies sufficiently to work with the stars, constellations and planets as they change throughout the years, painting them into the changing colours of their temples and devotions.

There are Druids who create circles of standing stones, trilithons and labyrinths, aligning them with the rising and setting of celestial bodies, some building temples to predict eclipses in the way that the Neolithic architects perfected. So it is that new sacred places are emerging and the tradition continues to evolve.

Birth To Death

The cycle of life is also played out within the sacred circle, its shades and tones painted onto the circle's edge. So, as the sun begins its new journey in the depths of darkness at Midwinter, the new soul comes into life.

When the sun begins to rise higher, warming the earth, and shoots creep through the soil, sap moves back up from the roots, so the infant grows into the child and with spring he emerges from the enfolding arms of his mother, exploring further and further from her protective, nurturing space. Childhood adventures, growing consciousness and the development of independence are encompassed in the east. Adolescence takes us down towards the circle's south-east, where fertility and sexuality rise to a peak. In the south is the height of our physical expression, our asserted creativity, where fire brings us courage, power and energy. Here is our adult life, which after Midsummer shifts towards middle age, when the harvest is ripe and drying in the sun. As we move into the west, the emphasis on the physical is replaced by the importance of experience, wisdom and balance, the autumn leaves falling inevitably and with such exquisite beauty. As the trees stand bare and the darkness comes in, the last period of our lives takes us into winter where death awaits us. At Midwinter we are reborn.

Attuning to the cycles of the natural world mirrors for us the cycle of our own lifespan. It reveals for us our perceptions and expectations of life, offering doorways of healing and adventure.

Paths Of The Circle

It isn't only the path around the sacred circle which is used by the Druid. There are pathways that reach across the centre, taking us down lines of reflection and connection, and these paths too are ritually trodden. Walking the paths when wholly focused within the temple circle the seeker is guided to poignant opportunities for healing.

In the east, for example, the child looks over to the west, where the elder speaks his wisdom. In the west, as age creeps in, the soul looks to the child for a vision of freedom. In the south-east, where sexuality is humming, the couple looking for fertility see across the circle the end of life and they acknowledge their ancestors in the north-west as they strive to create a space for their descendants. The activity and physicality of the ever shifting, flickering fire of the south reflects the north, its solidity, physical being, root firm. The adult who stands taking on the responsibilities of the community, committing to his direction, bringing in the harvest in the south-west, is reflected by the young child of the north-east struggling to cope with his first steps out of dependence.

The southern half of the circle is warm, light, filled with action, growing outwards, while the northern half is dark, cold, deep, a time of integration, consolidation, nourishment. For some the energy of air and fire, wind and sun, are more masculine, whereas the water and earth, the tidal womb energy, are feminine. Another line can be drawn between the times of growing, from the midwinter birth of the new Sun Child in the north to the point in the south where the year turns at Midsummer, bringing us back through the season of release and decay.

Just as places around the edges of the circle act as gateways into the deeper mysteries of the human psyche, places where we can access our inspiration, marker points which take us through into different planes of reality, so the paths across the circle do the same. It is in the centre that we are balanced, but it is the journey we make

through life that takes us to the cutting edges of our soul, where we grow in knowledge, beauty and certainty, where we meet our gods and spirit guides and through communication reach ecstasy and freedom.

Animal Lore

The spirits of the trees, shrubs and herbs that encircle our grove hold our energy, teach and inspire us, but it is the animal spirits who move through our sacred places that lead us into different worlds and levels of consciousness.

Druidry is rich with teaching and guidance about the connections between the human soul and the animals around us. Many in the tradition work with animals, both in spirit and in flesh, fur, feather and fin. As the Druid watches and listens, relaxing, open to possibilities, an animal will often stride, creep, hop, skid or fly into to consecrated space, or appear upon the pathway of his life or inner journeys. Sometimes it is just one, but it can be a number or many different animals, each taking a different role, aiding the Druid on his way.

Some animals work simply as guides, enabling the Druid to expand his view of reality and travel further into other worlds. These guides might remain for a while then become elusive or disappear. Others connect more deeply with the soul of the Druid and are known as totems. The totem animal will be one which has worked with the individual over many lives, remaining as an integral part of her soul's experience. Some totems are linked with the bloodlines or soul families (groups of souls who repeatedly incarnate together), while a person who is born into a family group where his totem animal is not comfortable will always feel alienated until he finds others of his totem clan.

There are many Druids who work with a particular animal by caring for one as a companion, such as a cat. Many campaign for the protection of totem wolves, bats, bears, lynx, eagles and so on.

As the Druid calls to the directions, inviting spirits to guide, bless and inspire the rite, invoking spirits of the seasons, elements, night and day, so he calls to the animals with whom he works.

Many animals may (in body or spirit) already be present in the circle, settling where they wish, while others are invited to the grove, bringing with them their unique strengths and teachings.

So a call to the south might be:

In the name of the great stag in the heat of the rut, may this ceremony be blessed with the powers of the south!

Or a fuller call to the west might be:

Powers of the west, I call upon you, spirits of the ocean deep, of cleansing rain and healing tears! Ancient salmon who swims in the sacred pool of wisdom, I ask for your blessing of inspiration on this our rite! As we honour you, so may it be!

It is easy to lay down guidelines as to where the animals of our world might find themselves in the sacred circle, with the feathered folk in the east with air, the water folk in the west, with wild creatures of the greatest strength and ferocity in the south and those of the night in the north. Yet no set of correspondences can strictly apply. For some the fox is always a creature of the south, with flame coloured brush and sparkling eyes, while to others he is a night animal of the north. For some the eagle is a creature of the east, playing on the high winds, while for others he flies as a messenger of the sun and resides in the southern quarter. Other animals will not rest in any particular place within a circle, behaving indeed rather more like animals than figments of the imagination.

Some Druids only work with animals native to where they live, while others slip through soul memories to invoke spirits of other lands and times. The individual finds his own sources of spiritual and creative inspiration, his unique inner landscape. When Druids gather, the animals called into the circle tend to be those of a shared reality of myth and landscape, of the Earth beneath their feet.

But how *does* an animal guide?

Through relaxing, listening, the soul working in the tradition slowly forms a relationship with an animal, making offerings, learning the language of spirit which both share. The seeker begins to see the creature in a new way, its movements, reactions, noises, all suggesting answers to the questions which are the current focus. The Druid might hear the voice of the creature in spirit, communicating its perspective, and through learning to access a profound level of empathy he slips into that position to look at the world from the animal point of view.

One step further takes the Druid into shapeshifting. Beginning with the imagination, finding the freedom to join the hawk gliding over the tree, the further end of the spectrum can take the Druid to where his consciousness moves entirely into another state, believing his body to have changed. Not only is the human body replaced with that of the animal, but so is the mentality. Many Druids find this is possible to varying degrees with their totem animals, some find it immeasurably valuable for their spiritual development, inner freedom and ability to help and heal the worlds within which they live.

Each animal has its own strength, its own outlook, its own natural lore, offering us ways through the blocks in our human self-consciousness.

For example, dogs are known for their loyalty, their understanding of leadership and rightful place in the pack, the energy that they give to the hierarchy, all qualities which can be useful or self-negating. Through a relationship forged with a dog we find these aspects within ourselves, allowing a deeper healing, and offering healing to the dog through gratitude and respect. The horse teaches us of cooperation, speed, journeying, feeling the land. The swan shows us the balance between elegance and hard work, love, death and memory. The blackbird guides us through the changes of dawn and dusk, its enchanting call taking us into magical places of intangible beauty. Cats teach of independence, frogs of cleansing, otters of laughter, and so it goes on.

The most poignant and instructive way of discovering the qualities of any creature is to observe it in its natural environment – or as close to it as it is possible to get.

Studying books on its nature, diet, relationships and habitat are a beginning, followed by those where it is present in folk stories, history and mythology.

No animal is of a lesser or grander status than any other. The wren is as potent an ally as the eagle, the wood pigeon as deeply magical as the hawk, each giving a different vision, different doorways through which we might step.

Creatures which are feared or reviled in our culture or mythology are often very powerful allies, guiding us through the phobias and crises of our own strength and worth. The wolves, snakes, rats, bats and spiders who wander through our inner worlds trigger some of the most powerful imagery and journeys with so much emotion around them suppressed within our souls. These creatures are often associated with issues around death and sexuality.

If we request of the gods that an ally be sent us, one we might learn from and find healing, then whatever comes will in one way or another offer just that.

Finding an animal ally is a useful ability and a simple one to grasp. In your own sacred space, having cast the circle of your aura and let go of distractions, find that state of being relaxed, listening. Become aware of yourself, how your emotions have coloured your life recently, and consider what quality you would benefit from now. Strength, protection, calm, courage, playfulness ... Then invite that quality to enter your circle in the form of an animal and let it happen in its own time.

Welcoming the creature, give offerings of thanks. Feel its energy. It is now up to you to nurture your relationship and learn from it.