

Chapter Four

The Sacred Circle

Having described the history of modern Druidry and its diversity, now to offer an idea of what Druids do is thick with complications. How could I possibly within these few pages reveal the nature, the flavour the colour of every variation?

As a guide I can walk only one path at a time, though along the way I can point out other paths visible to me. The track I take is in the main that of my own Druidic practice and it is the widest track, along which the majority have made their way over the past 20 years. There will obviously be omissions, but those searching may encounter some of them, should they continue beyond these words.

Healing And Connectedness

Two clear motivations arise when looking at the reasons why people move into the Druid tradition. The first is healing, the second connectedness. Both must be taken in their broadest most holistic sense. Yet the second, the sense of separation – from family, the wider society, our heritage, the natural world – and the desire to relieve that by reconnecting emotionally and spiritually, could also be thought as an aspect of healing.

The potential for healing is deep and powerful within Druidry. The tradition offers an extraordinary level of inner certainty, easing any physical dis-ease or mental / emotional instability through finding a deeper sense of peace and self confidence.

Instead of focusing on the need for light and spiritual transcendence, the Druid perspective takes us in search of spirit, finding the essence of matter, the energy within the physical that shines with life, that exists within and yet also holds the Earth and all creation. The desire is to find the point of balanced perspective and the option of equilibrium, the ability to restabilize after an adventure off centre.

Out of that search for balance comes the term ‘endarkenment’, asserted with Druid humour, to steady the reaching for enlightenment. Though said with a smile, the view behind it is strong, expressing the importance within Druidry of the completeness of the natural world, of the indigo of night as well as the bright blue sky of day, the darkness of the earth and the verdancy of its growth, the inevitability and release of death that shadows regeneration, the decay in autumn and the growth in spring, the cycles of life and rebirth which make up the circle of being.

So our desire for understanding, for knowing, for the clarity of light, is equalled by our craving for rootedness, for achieving a deep connection and a sense of belonging in the darkness of the soil, in our land and history.

The darker, colder elements of our temperate year, the blunter aspects of nature, are reflected within our psyche, the paths that we take in the tradition lead us through

these too. As a journey of self discovery, Druidry offers us tools to understand not only the overt sides of our nature, but also the underlying beliefs which affect us so strongly and often detrimentally.

In the process of changing our attitude towards the world around us, learning to acknowledge its spiritual essence and beauty, we also discover the strength and beauty within ourselves.

Sacred Time, Sacred Space

Many begin their path by creating an altar. Determining a certain place within the house or room as sacred and committing to spend time there in lives which are too busy and distracted confirms our dedication to our path. We are giving not only to those whom we would honour at our altar, but also to ourselves. And in honouring ourselves and what nourishes us, we find ways to access more strength to interact and give out to the world.

The art of creating and tending an altar is an important part of Druidry. It need not be big, but big enough for a candle or two and the other bits and pieces that are to be placed there. It may even be in the garden or in a secluded spot in the wild beyond.

Place with the candles (of any colour you choose) offerings which represent for you the beauty and strength in your life, all you would give thanks for and to, the natural world and the ancestors. It isn't necessary to make it all at once; allow it to evolve, the space itself encouraging beautiful objects to present themselves. These may be stones, shells, feathers, seedpods, cones, dried leaves or the like. You may have photos of your parents, grandparents or your children, a chalice of water, a bowl of earth.

The altar should be tended daily. You may bring to the altar flowers, foliage or fresh fruit, the first cookies of the batch, a hunk of bread, a little of your meal. With the candles lit, spend a period of time quietly before it. You may like to meditate, but the important part is not to let go into selflessness but to stop running, to relax, to ponder on the beauty and simply to be, for a short while, every day.

Water should be refreshed daily and any fresh food and flowers replaced when necessary (composting what you remove or leaving in a secluded place for the wildlife outside).

Of the sea washed pebbles on the beach, the one we have chosen for our altar is no more blessed than the others, no more an expression of divine creation, yet picking one up, touching its smoothness, feeling its beauty, is an act of devotion, whether we understand it to have been created by a god, a natural force or a tangle of energy held within the hands of a thousand gods and spirits. Our gift to that creative force is the moment of awe which flows through us when we open our senses to the wonder of nature. It is not a feeling which can be forced, but when it fills us it makes anything but reverence for the natural world impossible. Our altar is an expression of that wonder.

So creating and working with an altar also begins the shift towards the key tenet within Druidry: that all is sacred.

The altar focuses our quest onto the natural world, but not without acknowledging the human element. As the Druid listens to rocks and trees, she is also listening to the hum in the air, the shimmer of light and breath that holds the stories and memories of those who have walked the land before.

On our altar the photographs of our ancestors can be substituted or complemented with other symbols of what these souls have given us. Knowing that the soul is conscious between lives and actively chooses the time, place and circumstances of birth into each new lifetime, the Druid honours her parents as souls she has chosen to work with, in order to learn and grow. And our parents more often than not present us with the hardest lessons. Our children in turn have chosen.

At difficult times in relationship the altar can be a reminder of the gifts we have been given, the opportunities for learning. Spending a quiet moment lighting a candle for our ancestors is a potent tool for healing.

The ancestors are not only those of our bloodline. Also honoured on the altar may be a teacher or a previous resident of the house. Old pottery and flint blades found nearby may serve as reminders of the older ancestors who lived on the land before us.

Some work with an altar specifically set up for the ancestors, but for others the altar is a mix of the natural world and its human element.

The animistic vision, which sees all aspects of the created world alive in spirit, does not mean for all Druids that each new stone has its gnome, each tree its dryad. Though many do interact with all creatures, rocks flora and fungi as individual beings, the important element is not necessarily the existence of the faery folk but the way in which, as spirit, all things are connected. Every thought and action sends shivers of energy into the world around us, vibrations which affect every spirit, not only the rest of human kind and the animal realms, but all creation.

Perceiving the world as a web of connectedness helps us to overcome the feelings of separation that hold us back and cloud our vision. We are offered the certainty that we need never be alone and a language with which to communicate, spirit to spirit.

This connection with all life increases our sense of responsibility for every move, every attitude, allowing us to see clearly that each soul does indeed make a difference to the whole. It guides our understanding of how we are affected by all that surrounds us. Just as we are communicating with the world around us, so in turn it is talking to us – and as long as we are interacting only on a subconscious level we can never fully grasp it. Becoming conscious of these flows of energy, starting to hear what is being said, we slip into a different level of creative control within our own reality.

Druid Ritual

The sacred space and the time we spend in tending it is further extended when we look at ritual.

Ritual, playing out a prayer with a physical action, is significant. Informal ritual is a part of everyday life, honouring with thanks and awe the beauty of nature, bowing

with reverence to the moon as it rises, saluting the sun and stars, greeting the trees, calling to a fire sprite before lighting a match, offering thanks for food and water, blessing a soul in distress. The moments are numerous, the actions a natural response, yet often performed in a certain way, according to how the individual was taught. Where others are present ritual shows what is being done, even if words are not spoken, but more importantly it moves the body through which the energy needs to flow and through movement the subconscious mind registers change.

The ability to perform ritual more formally is an important part of the Druid's training. Within the framework of ceremony, mind and energy are concentrated and therefore stronger. A dance of words and movements is crafted which enchants the gods, evoking curiosity within the worlds of spirit, and creating opportunities for whatever transformation and regeneration are required.

The Call For Peace

Before any formal ritual, a call is made for peace. Addressing the four compass directions, the Druid establishes that there is peace, and if she is not alone she will also address the gathering as a whole.

Why this is done has half a dozen answers, historical, traditional, romantic and psychological, as do most questions about modern Druidry.

When we call to the north, the south, east and west, 'Let there be peace!', it is a demand on our own both to perceive the world around us with fuller awareness and to pour into the world the beauty of peace. And, as around us, so within; the call for peace is a reminder to let go of the crises of conflict in our daily lives as we move into the sacred space of the circle.

The call for peace, then, is the first and encompassing intention of any Druid rite.

The Circle Cast

Most formal ritual is performed within a circle that is cast and consecrated. This is the temple of the Druid. The circle is drawn on the earth, or in the air, its ceiling the sky, the clouds, the trees' canopy. Many circles are cast in the same place again and again, the most established set with trees or stones. Neolithic stone circles are often used as modern Druid temples, while glades in the forest are considered natural sacred circles. The established circle becomes an altar in itself. Many Druids, though, will cast a circle and perform their rite, and when the circle is uncast, no trace will be left but the energy of the ceremony shimmering.

But the circle is more than simply an area marked out in which to work.

In a place where you will not be disturbed, stand with sufficient space around you to stretch. Breathe deeply a few times, relaxing, finding your natural balance. Then bring your focus gently to the centre of that balance. In your own time, start to sense with your breathing the extent of your own space, your private space, your energy body, a layer of the aura, the area around you in which you don't like strangers to

linger. It may reach 10 centimetres from your skin, it may reach out to 35. It is your safe space. Trace its edges with your mind then with your fingers outstretched.

With the rhythm of your breath now extend that circle, pushing it out in every direction. It may be easy to do, or it may take time to find the right 'muscle'. Don't go further than is comfortable, returning often to the centre point of your balance, affirming the circle as your space, safe and certain. When you are ready, breathe it back to its original size. This may be easier, or it may take more time than extending it.

This is a private circle and not one to share except with those we are intimate with, but understanding the circle through an exercise such as this allows us a clearer feel of what the point is, giving us a standard for what should be possible for others. A shared circle is still a place of absolute trust, though that trust is now based on the harmony between every soul present. Where there are people who don't know each other, it is the role of the Druid leading the rite to ensure that the sense of trust is shared. The act of casting the circle is an important part of this.

This is done in a number of different ways, depending on how the Druid perceives reality. By moving around the circle in a sunwise (clockwise) direction, using a pointed finger, a wand, sword or sacred knife, the Druid delineates its edge by projecting light or colour, usually of white, silver, gold, or blue. More shamanically, by seeing the threads of the web of connectedness, in casting the circle the Druid will sever those threads, to refasten them again when the rite is done.

Either way, the cast circle is cut off from the world, a bubble that exists outside time and space, a perfect sanctuary. Within the circle there is no distraction or threat from the world outside, but equally importantly, the world outside is not affected by events in process within it.

Consecration

The temple of the sacred circle is usually consecrated, using incense and water which together represent the four elements the Druid works with. Within the incense is *earth*, in the dried herbs and berries, resin, bark and oils that make up the mixture which is burnt, by itself or on a charcoal block, expressing the *fire*, sending the plumes of beautiful serpentine smoke into the *air*, to be breathed by the wind and the circle's participants. The *water* is often from a sacred spring, but it is always fresh, representing the waters of life. At times the chalice may have herbs or petals infusing their essence into the water.

When the circle is consecrated, the Druid calls to her gods, the elementals, the devas of the Earth, to bless the smoking censor and the chalice; then, as she moves slowly sunwise, letting the incense swirl, scattering water with fingertips, there is a shift in the energy and the vibration changes. The fifth element, *spirit*, comes into play. The circle, blessed, is ready for the rite.

Holding the Bubble

Working within a circle that is altogether detached from the Earth can be useful, at times, but is not the usual way within Druidry. The bubble freely floating is

transcendent of the manifest world and only with lifetimes of discipline is one able to perfect such a temple. More often than not it bursts with the slightest touch of consciousness.

In Druidry, we bring into our temple our memories and expectations, and the bubble is held by our reverence for the world in which we live.

The Druid begins by honouring the four directions. Merely by looking at the geographic quarters – north, south, east and west – our world is created in our minds. Cultures, climates, nations and races, heat and cold, serenity and pollution, animals, colours, deserts, seas, memories of love and pain and more, are all evoked at the mention of these words. Each image rests at the edge of our focus, ready to be used.

Take a piece of paper and a pen. Work out the directions using the sun, or a compass if necessary.

For a few minutes stand facing east, working out what of the earth lies before you, which countries, which bodies of water, mountain ranges, cultures. Let your mind wander there. What do you smell? What do you feel?

Write down what you perceive and move on the next quarter.

There are no defined correspondences here, for each individual has a unique perception of the world. The calls that are made to the quarters reflect that unique vision. They are not a demand for presence or protection, but a greeting, an invitation.

So, for example, a call to the north might be:

O Spirits of the North, of the deep snows and the long nights of the northern lands! O ancestors whose spirits shine bright in the starry skies! O creatures of the velvet darkness, ancient teachers of winter! Honour this our sacred rite, as we honour thee. May we feel your presence. Welcome!

Most in the tradition in Britain work with the four elements in the same places around the circle, with earth in the north, air in the east, fire in the south and water in the west. The calls often reflect these aspects of our worlds too, so a call to the east might be:

To the spirits of the wild wind and all those who fly free upon her breath, I call to you! Feathered ones, sacred hawk, flying high on mountain air! Honoured trees who offer us our every breath of life! We ask you that you do bless this rite, in the name of the Old Gods.

By watching the images that decorate our sacred circle, we realise how constantly we project our inner vision on all that we perceive around us. Using the compass directions and the elements, then gradually seeing what else we connect with, inviting into our sacred space, honouring the energy, we find we are offered ways to deepen our understanding of the mundane and the sacred. We find a greater clarity about what does inspire us and come closer to touch the creative force.

Once the directions have been honoured, in many Druid circles the spirits of nature are more specifically honoured, with offerings being given. The ancestors may be called, the teachers and guides who exist in spirit, with offerings of music, song, dance and drums, or a libation of wine or mead, the lighting of a candle.

Then into the temple the Druid will invoke their gods.

Druidry works as a profoundly grounded spirituality. Reverence for the natural world allows the mind and soul to venture into the worlds of spirit knowing where it is coming from. The circle, detached from the mundane yet honouring the Earth, allows those within it to discover and affirm their strength, establish their centre, deepen their awareness of themselves and their creativity, their blocks and vulnerabilities. Rooted and blessed, reaching into the essence of life from that sacred safe space on the quest for divine inspiration, the *awen* which will pour through our bodies and souls, the spirit can truly soar.

When ritual is completed, the devotions made and thanks given, any energy vibrant within the circle is directed according to the purpose of the rite (or some other cause) through the focus of a prayer. One often used is, 'May the world be filled with love, peace and harmony.' When the circle is uncast, the energy will flow according to the energy of that prayer.

The Inner And Outer Grove

As well as the sacred temple in the wildwood, the individual working within the Druid tradition will also discover another grove within the inner worlds of the mind. Some perceive this to be merely imagination, while others assert that it exists in its own right on a different layer of reality. Either way, the time spent in this grove is another important part of the Druid's work.

If we consider this to happen only in the psyche, by delving deep into the imagination to discover/create an inner temple grove we are developing the powers of our mind, expanding our ability to visualize. Both for creativity and healing, indeed any magical process, these are essential skills, and the more the student works within her inner grove, discovering its every detail, scent and colour, its patterns and sounds, moving slowly out to investigate the surrounding environment, the stronger and clearer her spiritual path becomes. The grove, like the sacred circle, is a perfect sanctuary, and finding the inner grove establishes a place which is always calm and nourishing, soul deep. Interaction with the gods and the faeryfolk, the ancestors and spirit teachers is for most people considerably easier on the inner level.

If we believe that the inner grove exists on another level of reality, every moment spent in this otherworld increases the student's knowledge and ability to function on different planes of consciousness, sliding in spirit between realities. What is gained from working on other levels differs according to the soul and intent, but the keys are finding a radical angle of perception and potential for change. The sensual experience of being in another state can be motivation enough.

Most who study Druidry find themselves a grove outside, too. Whether they drift out there every twilight, once a moontide or twice a year, simply being out in the arms of nature, amongst the trees and in a sacred circle, is a feast to the soul.

Trees have always been important in the Druid tradition. If we slip back to an age when there were vast and ancient trees, with nothing bigger but the hills, when wood was the only source of fuel and shelter, we start to understand the reverence our ancestors had for them. In the Irish Brehon Laws of the seventh century CE trees were either classified as chieftains, peasants, shrubs or brambles, it being a capital offence to fell a chieftain tree.

The energy of trees, their spirit presence, is not always comforting. The Druid priests of yore would perhaps interpret the wisdom of the trees, appease the spirits (before the Christian priests arrived to pronounce them inanimate), as some still do. Trees can be unsettling; the great ones exist within timescales than turn humanity into scurrying mice. Catching a glimpse of such a perspective can be invaluable.

Find a tree you feel comfortable to be with, ideally in quiet spot where you will not be distracted. Remember to take offerings with you.

As you approach the tree, stop at the edge of the canopy and find once again the circle of your aura, centred in your spirit. Ask permission of the dryad before you walk into the circle of the tree. When you feel your presence has been accepted, walk slowly, aware of your energy weaving with that of the tree, circling around the trunk, spiralling in, until you find a place by the trunk appropriate for you to stay. Relax. Listen.

Then ask the Dryad if it would be appropriate for you to raise your awareness of its being. If you feel the answer is yes, find your balance, affirm your own circle, now interwoven with the tree spirit, lean back against the tree and close your eyes. Allow your consciousness to slide down through your body into your feet. Feel the energy of the earth holding you as it does the tree. Slip further, into the earth, so that you might feel the root spreading out in the dark soil, drinking in moisture, holding stones, sheltering creatures. Feel the energy of the nourishment invigorating your spirit, and when you are filled let your consciousness rise up through your body, through the strength of your trunk and up into your arms, reaching out like branches into the air, up to the sky, towards the light, unfurling leaf buds. Feel the sun on your face, the wind in your leaves.

When you are ready, slip down with your mind into the centre of your body. There, feel the balance, between earth and sky, between sunlight and dark earth, affirming your roots, celebrating your branches, and give thanks.

Returning to your normal consciousness, give your offerings and thanks to the tree spirit. When you leave, detach consciously from its energy as you move out from its sacred circle of canopy and roots. Affirm your own sacred circle, your strength and connectedness.

Ogham

Ogham is a sacred alphabet used widely within modern Druidry, where each letter corresponds to a different tree or plant. Originating from southern Ireland, its dates, some claim, from 600 BCE, but there is no evidence to prove it is any older than second century CE, with the five diphthongs being added to the first 20 letters no earlier than the late eighth century. Some excellent books on its history and potential uses, both past and present, are detailed in Chapter Nine.

There is healthy debate as to what exactly the 25 trees and plants are, with particular uncertainty over the last five. What is agreed is that each letter represents not only a tree or plant, but also a whole store of other associations, allowing the alphabet to work as a series of mnemonics. Within it are allusions to season, colour, sound, landscape, herbs, birds, insects and other wildlife, healing and toxins. Through the natural history of the trees and ancient myths, the alphabet alludes to the history of the land and its people, to politics and emotion. Indeed, nowadays there can be found tables of correspondences linking Ogham to star lore, runes, other magical systems and almost anything else. Though it may have developed as a response to the Latin alphabet arriving in Britain, ogham doesn't appear to have been much used for writing, being rather cumbersome, and for the most part is found on stone in the form of memorial inscriptions dating between the fourth and eight centuries. The last five diphthongs aren't found on any of these inscriptions, but are present in twelfth-century texts which detail the ogham alphabet with its mythology.

Many Druids feel ogham existed as an initiatory mystery, giving their ancient counterparts a way of communicating without being understood by non-initiates. Messages could be sent by leaf or twig, or by many strung together. Letters could be signed with fingers. Complex and secret languages were developed, with ogham letter names inserted into words or syllables being replaced with ogham letter names, all in accordance with different sets of rules. Some within the Druid community use these techniques still.

With its many layers of meaning the ogham alphabet is used for the most part by modern Druids as a tool for divination, each letter opening doorways into other worlds. In the same way that runes work, their shapes can be found in landscapes, or the presence of a certain tree or plant can be understood as revealing messages and omens.

Some modern Druids who live in parts of the world where the Irish trees do not grow take the ogham and readjust it to their indigenous trees and plants. And so the tradition continues to evolve...

Druids who find their inspiration outside Ireland, meanwhile, often use the Nordic, Saxon or other rune alphabets instead. The ogham specialists tend to stand firm, however, declaring ogham is the script of this land, and unsurpassable in depth and richness of meaning.

Drugs And Medicine

The use of herbs and trees for healing, for shifting consciousness and changing the level of energy vibration is widespread within modern Druidry, with a significant number in the tradition qualified to work as practitioners of herbal medicine. Many more use herbs for their own health and well-being in preference to manufactured drugs and remedies. The hand-making of incense is also practised within Druidry.

With an attitude that honours each plant and tree as having its own deva or dryad, the soul seeking guidance, change or healing will primarily address the spirit, interacting on that level before any part of the plant or tree is physically taken or consumed. Many Druids work solely and very successfully on this level of relationship, spirit to spirit, sharing, releasing and shifting, believing that any other way is unnecessarily intrusive to both parties.

The use of illegal drugs is not encouraged in any part of modern Druidry, not even the shamanic. It might be acknowledged that hallucinogenic drugs were taken by our ancestors in the tradition in the same way that certain plants are still used today in tribal religions around the world. However, most teachers within Druidry now teach the abilities to break through levels of consciousness, reaching trance states and ecstasy, using just the powers of the mind.