Trees and Spirituality: An Exploration

From a talk at the Olympia
Zen Temple March 3, 2002

By Nalini Nadkarni

Trees are Earth's endless effort to speak to
the listening heaven

- Rabindranath Tagore

I have been curious about trees my
entire life. Growing up on the East
Coast I spent many afternoons climbing
trees and seeing the world from that
vista. Trees were my refuge from a large
and sometimes chaotic family. They
held me in their arms and reassured me
that there are safe places in the world,
away from chaos and demands.

In college I studied biology and forestry,
getting a PhD in Forest Ecology. Now,
my profession is the study of trees and
forests. I carry out research on the upper
canopy of tropical and temperate
rainforests and teach forest ecology at
The Evergreen State College, using the
tools of science to understand trees.

As a scientist, I have focused on the
ecological values of trees. These are
substantial. For example, when I climb a
big leaf maple, I see 90 species of
mosses and lichens, each in its own
niche, providing surface area for water
and food for a particular insect or snail.

Knowing vs knowing trees

It turns out, however, that, for me,
scientific understanding of trees is not
enough. While I am a scientist, inter-
ested in understanding trees with my
intellect, I am also someone who cares
deeply and passionately about trees
with my heart. They require so little of
humans and give back so much.

One pathway for communicating
outside my scientific circle is to speak to
people in places of worship and medita-
tion. It seems to me that people who
come to a church, synagogue or temple
are in a receptive mode: they make time,
dress carefully, sit quietly, and have
open hearts and minds. Places of
worship seem likely venues for making
others aware of the connections be-
tween trees and what is spiritual. For

that reason, I'm excited to have this
opportunity to discuss trees and
spirituality at the Olympia Zen
Center.

What myths and holy
writings say about trees

In holy writings, plants, and
especially trees, are often seen as
symbols or manifestations of
divine knowledge. They have
the power to bestow eternal life
or renew the life force. One
obvious example is Buddha's
enlightenment under the Bodhi
tree.

In an attempt at more systematic
research, I downloaded the text
of the Bible and searched for all
references to trees and forests,
coding the 328 references into a
number of categories. More than
30 percent of the references were
to the use of trees for symbolic
and aesthetic purposes ("He
offered sacrifices and burned
incense ... under every spread-
ing tree."). Twenty-two percent of the
references used trees as an analogy to
life and God ("Like an apple tree among
the trees of the forest is my lover among
the young men."). Only three percent
describe aspects of tree biology or
physiology.

How trees serve man: the
practical and the spiritual

It seems apparent that trees are not only
inextricably tied into human needs in
this world—for food, shade, wood,
ornamentation—but are at the base of
what is most spiritual. As the Bible and
other holy writings amply demonstrate,
trees are symbols—analogy to god, to
the holy—used to help men understand
what is basic about life.

So, what about spirituality? Why is
there such a deep spiritual connection to
trees? Here are some ways that trees
link man to the spiritual:

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Enlightenment
Trees link us to enlightenment. Their ubiquitous shape and form, their persistence through time, and their ‘rootedness’ in the soil, remind us of the connection between the earth and heavens.

Buddha sat meditating under a Bodhi tree. When dawn came, the sun brought enlightenment to him.

As if to reinforce this universality, we see tree forms everywhere—in rivers, caves, blood vessels, lungs—and in the form of Zen Buddhism itself. Historically, temples follow lineages, like family trees. Each temple was brought into a hierarchy, with branch temples under the main temples and each level responsible for the one beneath.

Breathing
Like other living beings, trees “breathe”. Through photosynthesis, they help supply the most basic need of humans—giving us clean air to breathe. This connection to breathing links trees to meditation and reflection.

The Hebrew word for breath—nesheema—is the same as the word for soul—neshama. Our spiritual life force comes by way of air and respiration.

Silence
In the services I attended this fall, the most powerful moments are the moments of silence—the time between speaking and hymns. Buddhist silence, sannahtha—stopping, calming, concentrating—is very important. It is the same as the stillness I see when I look up at a tree on a windless summer day.

Trees are rooted in the ground and make no sounds; they epitomize sannahtha.

Emptiness
Zen arts address the relationship between form and emptiness.

If a Zen artist paints on a blank sheet of paper—say, a small bird on bamboo gazing over an infinite horizon—everything changes. Now there is form—the bird, the bamboo, the horizon. There is also emptiness, as the bird’s gaze draws your eye into an expanse beyond the horizon. It is through form that emptiness becomes possible. In Zen practice, you do not strive to delete all thoughts. Rather, you discover the emptiness that is present within the form of thoughts, experiences and realities.

Most researchers who study the forest focus on the trees and animals—the forms. In contrast, Dr. Roman Dial studies the emptiness within the forest. He uses a laser to get distances to branches and leaves, making images of the ‘negative space’. These are stunning in their beauty, and also in their significance. How does a bird negotiate through space? How does a pollen grain move?—or a termite queen, or a particle of pollutant?

This new look at the forest reveals how much empty space there is, and what shape it’s in. It gives me a new way of seeing the forest. When I walk through the forest and think about Dr. Dial’s diagrams, I am able to turn the forest inside out and see it with new eyes.

Oneness
According to Buddhist thinking, the idea of a separate ‘self’ is an illusion. There is no external individual being apart from interaction with the world. Although we each have a separate set of perceptions and sensations, the idea that there is a fixed ‘self’ is a false inference.

Trees remind us of this because a tree is a modular being. Most animals, including humans, develop and grow as a single genetic entity. In contrast, the seed of a tree germinates into a root and a shoot, which in turn differentiates into branches, with buds that become the next generation of leaves, flowers and fruits, and so on. Along the way, genetic material can undergo mutations and changes.

Thus, a mature tree contains thousands of separate branch systems, each a separate ‘lineage’, a separate genetic entity. Fruit growers know that certain branches produce much better fruit. They can graft the best branch and start another tree that will produce to that type. So a single tree is really a whole forest. There are many in one.
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Hidden worlds
Trees manifest hidden spheres. Their roots are underground and out of sight yet provide support for the tree and serve as the gathering apparatus for water and nutrients. The below-ground world sustains the above-ground parts. Tree roots can symbolize that which we hide from ourselves and others—our troubles, failings, ill-health. To be truthful—full of truth—like a tree, we must recognize that these hidden parts are an important part of us, not something to discount, just as the soil-covered roots of a tree are essential to its being.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Zen and Deep Ecology Retreat
Deep Ecology straddles the borders of philosophy, biology and the transforming experience of meditation. Using readings, discussion, and guided meditations, Dr. Michael Soulé will lead a weekend retreat to explore the fundamental principles of non-exclusionary compassion. The text will be chapters from his new book “The Tigress and the Little Girl.”

Dr. Soulé is a long-time Zen student. He is known as the ‘father of Conservation Biology,’ and is a co-founder of the Wildlands Project, an organization dedicated to protecting the wild in nature and ourselves. He has taught at the University of Malawi, UC San Diego, the University of Michigan, and was chair of Environmental Studies at UC Santa Cruz.

Details: Nov 22-24
Great Vow Zen Monastery,
Clatskanie, OR.
503-318-8243 or www.zendust.org

Retreat Room Available
Ryoko-an Olympia Zen Center has a retreat room available for personal retreats. Details at 360-357-2835 or olyzendo@aol.com.

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