

# 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, interested 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 meditation. 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 between 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 spreading 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—analogies 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, *samantha*—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 *samantha*.

### 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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### Time

Trees help humans tell time; they spell the seasons. Nothing tells us about the passing of time more clearly than autumn colors or the tender green of emerging buds.

Forests teach us about the dynamism of nature—the need to accept change even if it seems to be destructive. When I go out to my forest plots and see a fallen tree—a tree I have climbed a hundred times, taken data from, named—I have to remind myself that this is the nature of the forest. Seedlings will grow in the light created by the fallen giant.

### 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 aboveground parts. Tree roots can symbolize that which we hide from ourselves and others—our troubles, failings, ill-health. To be truthful—full of *troth*—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

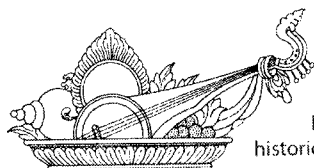
nature and ourselves. He has taught at the University of Malawi, UC San Diego, the University of Michigan, and was chair of Environmental Studies at UC Santa Cruz.

Details: Nov 22-24  
Great Vow Zen Monastery,  
Clatskanie, OR.  
503-318-8243 or [www.zendust.org](http://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](mailto:olyzendo@aol.com).

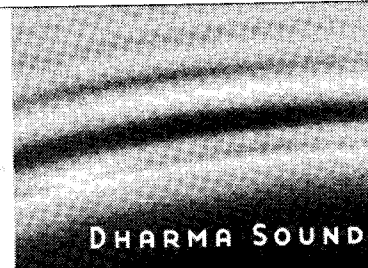
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