

The Tree in the Hoop: The Shape of All Shapes

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At the climax of his great healing vision, the nineteenth-century Lakota medicine man Black Elk glimpsed the breathtaking wholeness of the universe. As poetically summarized by Black Elk's interviewer (Neihardt 36; cf Holler xx–xxi, 1, 7, and DeMallie xxii, 129–30), Black Elk saw that he was "standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy."

The essential holiness or wholeness of the universe that brought healing to Black Elk, and to his people, appeared to him through the visual metaphor of the Hoop and the Tree. This image of the Hoop and the Tree is not accidental. It appears not only in Lakota mythology but also in various forms throughout the great wisdom traditions of the world—and indeed in modern psychology and systems science—as an image of the deep structure of wholeness and health both in the universe and in the human soul. It is an image of the beauty at the heart of everything.

The Hoop and the Tree represent two dimensions of the soul, which must be fully developed and in balance with each other for wholeness. Their combined image crystallizes the essence of our collective wisdom in a practical way that helps us to understand how we can grow toward psychological and spiritual wholeness. It also acts as a key to the great variety of spiritual and mythological ways within our human diversity. To understand the wholeness in the combined image, we must look at the separate meanings of each dimension.

The Hoop

The Hoop or circle has to do with all aspects of relationship. When people gather to eat together as a family, to sing songs, or to sit at the knee of a storyteller, they spontaneously form the shape of the Hoop. We speak of our inner or family "circle." Thus all mandalas ("magic circles") and other images of the Hoop are traditional symbols of relationship.

Native Americans honor all their relations through Hoop-shaped

medicine wheels and sweat lodges. Taoists use the well-known Hoop of the yin-yang to represent being and “flowing” in right relationship with the way of nature. Psychologists do their healing within the “sacred circle” of the therapeutic relationship. The Hindu Wheel of Rebirth is the Hoop of Relationship viewed through time: I am related to you not just because we are brothers or sisters in this life, but because you may have been my great-grandfather in a previous incarnation and you may be my great-granddaughter in a future incarnation. The Hopi people honor Spider Woman, the Earth Mother, whose web makes the shape of concentric linked Hoops. We are all part of her web--humans, animals, mountains, trees, rivers--and if you touch any part of the web, the whole web will quiver.

The Tree

The Tree has to do with what the poet Robert Bly calls “vertical longing.” The psychic dimension of individual growth, aspiration to a high place (something “to live up to,” a “higher calling”), and profundity (the “depths of the soul”) is a vertical dimension. Jung says that in order to develop one must forge a link between the upper and the lower, the conscious and the unconscious aspects of the psyche (Fordham 76–7). Traditional wisdom, as well as contemporary spiritual and psychological practice, associate this dimension with the imagery of trees, mountains, ladders, and pillars.

Traditional Tree imagery includes the Christian Tree of the Cross, the Scandinavian Yggdrasil or world ash, the Jewish Tree of the Menorah, shamanic ascent and descent via trees and roots, and the spiritual ascent of the Prophet which is the inner reality of Islamic prayer, one of the five Pillars of Islam. Development in the Tree dimension includes ascending for psychological “peak experiences” or contact with the Divine, and growing to become fruitful in our lives. It also includes descending to explore our cultural and psychological “roots.” A tree can grow tall only if it has sturdy and far-reaching roots.

Hoop and Tree Together

All the great wisdom traditions teach about the importance of right relationship (Hoop) and also about the importance of individual aspiration toward some state of enlightenment or connection with the Divine (Tree). Some traditions emphasize the Hoop and others emphasize the Tree, but most point to a model of psycho-spiritual wholeness that is Hoop and Tree together.

Christianity, for example, has as its central image the Tree of the Cross, which powerfully represents ascent to connection with the Divine. According to tradition, Christ also descended from this Tree into Hades “to the extreme of its depth” in order to bring healing. Tradition also says that Christ brought the Tree of the Cross to Hades and planted it there as a witness to truth. So the Christian Tree is the axis of the universe, which runs from Hades to Paradise.

Yet the principal sacrament of Christianity is a Hoop ritual. In Holy Communion, the consecrated bread and wine are shared among all. Although the Roman Catholic Church places some restrictions on participation in this

sacrament, the early Christian church and the non-Roman denominations all tend to emphasize inclusion and participation. Theologian Harvey Cox says, “Communion is like a family meal, the gathering of old and young, sick and well, around a common table and reminds all those who participate that the goods of the earth should be shared, not hoarded” (Cox 404). Holy Communion and the Cross form the Hoop and Tree of the Christian world.

Jesus Christ himself taught the Hoop-and-Tree way to wholeness. When asked about the best way to live, Jesus replied, “Love the Lord and love your neighbor” (Mark 12.30–1). That is a summary of the Tree and the Hoop teaching--the Tree aspiration to the Lord, and the Hoop relation to the community. Accept Divine love (ascent/descent along the Tree axis) and then give this love to the world (Hoop).

Each summer in the high plains of North America, hundreds of people gather in four-day ceremonies, to pray to a sacred Tree and dance around it in a sacred Hoop. As part of these Lakota sun dances, the dancers carry the spiritual renewal obtained from the Tree out to the wider Hoop of community.

People of European descent come to these dances from as far away as Australia and Germany. It is no wonder the dances resonate for them. For hundreds of years ancient Europeans danced this Hoop-and-Tree pattern in religious observations every spring. Maypole dances were performed not only in England, but also throughout Europe, from Spain to Scandinavia, though the timing of the festival varied, depending on the latitude. The Maypole itself was originally a Tree, freshly cut for each festival and paraded into town with great rejoicing. In a great Hoop round that Tree, the people danced merrily to music, celebrating a great healing--the renewal of life. In this way the Hoop and the Tree shaped one of the most important religious festivals of pre-Christian Europe.

The ancient Greeks centered their world on Mount Olympus (mountains being symbolically cognate with trees), with Zeus ruling from above and Hades from below, while the whole cosmos was bounded on the horizontal plane by the Hoop of Oceanos, who encircled the world at its outermost limits, continuously flowing back on himself in a circle.

The Tree in the Buddhist story is the bodhi tree, under which Buddha attained enlightenment, after which he carried the blessings of his achievement out into the community. His initial work of teaching is known as turning the Wheel of the Dharma, the Hoop. There is a form of shrine, widespread in the Buddhist world, called a stupa. The stupa acts as a reminder of the shape of wholeness. It is said to be “an abstract image of the state of enlightenment attainable by all beings” (Landaw and Weber 42). This shape of wholeness takes the form of a Hoop (mandala) extended upward along the Tree axis.

Judaism includes the Hoop and the Tree in the mystical practice of Kabbalah, which presents a route to the Divine called the Tree of Life, or Otz Chiim. One may follow this path to wholeness by meditating on the fruits of this Tree, called Sefiroth, literally “spheres,” depicted as circles (Hoops) on the Tree. In the Kabbalistic story, the primordial ideal human, Adam Kadmon, was

patterned on the Tree of Life with its Sefiroth. Thus the ideal image of wholeness has Hoops in balance on the Tree.

The Sufis of Islam actually move the shape of wholeness into the body through the celebrated dance of the “whirling dervishes” of the Mevlevi order. The dervishes start whirling slowly, spreading their arms like wings, the right palm turned upward toward the sky to gather divine grace, and the left palm turned downward to give it to the earth. The dancers whirl faster and faster to a supreme moment of union. Each dancer turns full 360-degree circles, experiencing the Koran’s teaching that “wheresoever you look, there is the face of God.” Here we have clearly the shape of the Hoop--the whirling--and the shape of the Tree--the upright bodies together with the hands passing grace from up to down.

The Tantric teachings of Hinduism describe the fully developed self with a Hoop-and-Tree model. According to Tantra, the human body has a set of energy centers distributed along the spine. These energy centers are called chakras, a Sanskrit word meaning “wheel.” Since Hindu symbolism depicts the spine as a Tree, Tantra represents wholeness with these wheels or Hoops in alignment on the Tree.

The San Bushmen of the Kalahari practice a remarkable technology for healing and spiritual growth, which exemplifies the Tree growing within the Hoop. This practice is the !kia-healing dance (the exclamation point representing one of the four clicking sounds in their language). Within a Hoop of singers and musicians, the practitioners of !kia experience a spiritual ascension along the Tree axis toward the divine. During !kia, a practitioner may perform cures, handle fire or walk on it, have x-ray vision, see over great distances, or converse with supernatural powers. Like the good shaman or Buddhist bodhisattva, the !kia master ascends the Tree for the benefit of the community. The point is not so much in experiencing transcendence as in bringing back its fruits. To experience !kia without doing any healing would be seen as a misuse of the !kia-related powers. Here the Tree grows within the Hoop for the benefit of the Hoop.

Someone once asked Sigmund Freud to say what a healthy person ought to be able to do and do well. Freud’s answer was pithy: “to love and to work” (lieben und arbeiten). Now if we understand “to work” in the sense of working toward something, then Freud’s definition of health was the Hoop and the Tree: the Hoop of relationship and the Tree of aspiration.

Carl Jung was even more explicit. He analyzed thousands of dreams in his lifetime and digested an almost unimaginable amount of the world’s literature on mysticism, religion, and philosophy. One of the fruits of this prodigious labor was Jung’s concept of the archetype of the Self, a model of psychological and spiritual wholeness.

Jung found that symbols of the Self appear universally in dreams, visions, active imagination, and works of art, particularly spiritual or religious art. What does this symbol of psycho-spiritual wholeness look like? The Hoop and the Tree. Jung said, “If a mandala [Hoop] may be described as a symbol of the

Self seen in cross section, then the tree would represent a profile view of it: the Self depicted as a process of growth” (Jung 253).

The world’s wisdom traditions offer countless other examples of the Hoop-and-Tree pattern of wholeness. Perhaps this is because even the helix of our DNA carries the shape of an extended Hoop spiraling around a Tree axis. The pattern is coded in the very basis of life.

Complementary Dimensions

The Hoop and the Tree are two dimensions of wholeness, neither of which is complete in itself, neither of which is “better” than the other. They are different and complementary. The Hoop has a female tone, the Tree a male tone. The meaning of the Hoop is relational; the meaning of the Tree is aspirational. Together the Hoop and the Tree offer a model of integrating community and individuality, a way to increased understanding between men and women, and an image of what is needed for a person, or a society, to come into balance and wholeness.

We can say that the Hoop is the image by which self talks to self about the Greater Self in which we all are connected. It is through the Hoop that we connect with other living beings, with the rocks, the soil, the air, the green and growing things, the dying and the dead that fertilize new life, the person we once were, and the person we will be. The Hoop has to do with hearing the beat, getting with the rhythm, feeling the music of what is, and skillfully entering in with just the right amount of effort. The Hoop is oneself as the process of relating.

This also means that from the Hoop perspective, psycho-spiritual wholeness consists of being in relationship appropriately, imbalance is incomplete or inappropriate relationship, and healing occurs when one is restored to appropriate relationship. The Hoop says that the heart of the universe cleaves fast to your own heart, as close as lovers’ hearts one to the other. We have only to stop, perceive, and be. Practice of the Hoop dimension begins the end of loneliness and alienation.

Whereas the Hoop is the affiliative aspect of wholeness, the Tree is the autonomous aspect. The Tree is a double metaphor. It stands for the great central axis of the entire cosmos, around which everything revolves, and it stands for the central axis of our own psychological and spiritual being, around which our individual experience of life revolves.

To the psyche, the Tree represents the growing core of the whole self; it is the emphasis on individual development. The Tree is the valiant sprouting of each individual life force, and each individual’s urge to bear fruit. The Tree is the image by which self talks to self about its interior growing core, the core that aspires to skill, wisdom, and contact with the Divine—the core that knows where it stands in the world and that is able to draw nourishment from its ancestry and from sleep, dreams, and unconscious processes. Practice of the Tree dimension roots us in the universe and gives us strength to reach our highest ideals.

An Image of Healing

Though we live in an era of shriveled Hoop and truncated Tree, the Hoop and the Tree together give us a robust model for healing ourselves and our society.

One example of a Hoop-and-Tree approach to healing is the twelve-step recovery program pioneered by Alcoholics Anonymous. In this program you ascend the Tree by turning your will and life over to the care of the Divine, and descend into the darkness of the Tree's roots through a searching and fearless moral inventory. Then you work on mending your Hoop through making amends to all. The twelfth step is a classic Hoop-and-Tree integration: "Having had a spiritual awakening [Tree] as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs [Hoop]."

As the wisdom traditions show, the Hoop-and-Tree model is yet more profound and robust than the powerful twelve-step model. As just one example, the Hoop dimension relates us to all the universe, not just to other human beings. From the Hoop perspective we cannot be fully whole unless we act in right relationship to the entire living planet and all of its peoples and creatures by reducing, reusing, and recycling. The Hoop-and-Tree image also teaches the good news that at our best we are all ecological beings. We all belong here, we are home.

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