

The Richness of Diversity

One of the most striking characteristics of Druidry is the degree to which it is free of dogma and any fixed set of beliefs or practices. In this way it manages to offer a spiritual path, and a way of being in the world that avoids many of the problems of intolerance and sectarianism that the established religions have encountered. There is no 'sacred text' or the equivalent of a bible in Druidry, and Druids are free to make their own minds up about what exactly they believe about the nature of Deity and the afterlife.

Since Druidry is a spiritual path – a religion to some, a way of life to others – Druids share a belief in the fundamentally spiritual nature of life. Some will favour a particular way of understanding the source of this spiritual nature, and may feel themselves to be animists, pantheists, polytheists, monotheists or duotheists. Others will avoid choosing any one conception of Deity, believing that by its very nature this is unknowable by the mind.

Whether they have chosen to adopt a particular viewpoint or not, the greatest characteristic of most modern-day Druids lies in their tolerance of diversity: a Druid gathering can bring together people who have widely varying views about deity, or none, and they will happily participate in ceremonies together, celebrate the seasons, and enjoy each others' company – realising that none of us has the monopoly on truth, and that diversity is both healthy and natural.

The Web of Life and the Illusion of Separateness

Woven into much of Druid thinking and all of its practice is the idea or belief that we are all connected in a universe that is essentially benign – that we do not exist as isolated beings who must fight to survive in a cruel world. Instead we are seen as part of a great web or fabric of life that includes every living creature and all of Creation. This is essentially a pantheistic view of life, which sees all of Nature as sacred and as interconnected.

Druids often experience this belief in their bodies and hearts rather than simply in their minds. They find themselves feeling increasingly at home in the world – and when they walk out on to the land and look up at the moon or stars, or smell the coming rain on the wind they feel in the fabric of their beings that they are a part of the family of life, that they are ‘home’, and that they are not alone.

Nature forms an important focus of a Druid’s reverence. Whatever beliefs they hold about Deity, all Druids sense Nature as divine or sacred. Every part of nature is sensed as part of the great web of life, with no one creature or aspect of it having supremacy over any other. Unlike religions that are anthropocentric, believing humanity occupies a central role in the scheme of life, this conception is systemic and holistic, and sees humankind as just one part of the wider family of life.

The Law of the Harvest

Related to the idea that we are all connected in one great web of life is the belief held by most Druids that whatever we do in the world creates an effect which will ultimately also affect us. A similar idea is found in many different traditions and cultures: folk wisdom in Britain says that 'what goes around comes around' and in ancient Egypt, the idea attributed to Jesus when he said 'As ye sow, so shall ye reap,' was spoken by the god Thoth several thousand years earlier in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, when he said 'Truth is the harvest scythe. What is sown - love or anger or bitterness - that shall be your bread. The corn is no better than its seed, then let what you plant be good.' In Hinduism and Buddhism the idea is expressed as the doctrine of cause and effect (karma).

The two beliefs - that all is connected and that we will harvest the consequences of our actions - come naturally to Druids because they represent ideas that evolve out of an observation of the natural world. Just as the feeling of our being part of the great web of life can come to us as we gaze in awe at the beauty of nature, so the awareness that we will reap the consequences of our actions also comes to us as we observe the processes of sowing and harvesting.

The Otherworld

Although Druids love Nature, and draw inspiration and spiritual nourishment from it, they also believe that the world we see is not the only one that exists. A cornerstone of Druid belief is in the existence of the Otherworld – a realm or realms which exist beyond the reach of the physical senses, but which are nevertheless real.

This Otherworld is seen as the place we travel to when we die. But we can also visit it during our lifetime in dreams, in meditation, under hypnosis, or in ‘journeying’, when in a shamanic trance.

Different Druids will have different views on the nature of this Otherworld, but it is a universally held belief for three reasons. Firstly, all religions or spiritualities hold the view that another reality exists beyond the physical world, rather than agreeing with Materialism, that holds that only matter exists and is real. Secondly, Celtic mythology, which inspires so much of Druidry, is replete with descriptions of this Otherworld. Thirdly, the existence of the Otherworld is implicit in ‘the greatest belief’ of the ancient Druids, since classical writers stated that the Druids believed in a process that has been described as reincarnation (in which a soul lives in a succession of forms, including both human and animal). In between each life in human or animal form the soul rests in the Otherworld.

Death and Rebirth

While a Christian Druid may believe that the soul is only born once on Earth, most Druids adopt the belief of their ancient forebears that the soul undergoes a process of successive reincarnations – either always in human form, or in a variety of forms that might include trees and even rocks as well as animals.

Many Druids share the view reported by Philostratus of Tyana in the second century that the Celts believed that to be born in this world, we have to die in the Otherworld, and conversely, that when we die here, we are born into the Otherworld. For this reason, Druid funerals try to focus on the idea that the soul is experiencing a time of birth, even though we are experiencing that as their death to us.

Although most Druids would agree that physical death does not end our existence, there is no set of universally recognised Druid teachings that offer details of how the process of reincarnation works, or of what happens to us when we travel to the Otherworld in the after-death state. Individual Druid teachers may offer their own understanding of the process, but generally those who are curious need to study the large body of literature that deals with this subject, which includes the classic works of the Tibetan and Egyptian Books of the Dead, the researches of Spiritualism, the more recent studies of Near-Death Experiences, and of hypnotically induced explorations of the between-lives state.

Bards, Ovates and Druids

When you become a member of the Order, you begin as a Bard. This teaches you to unleash your creativity and work with the elements. Historically, bards were the people who learned and shared the stories, legends, and songs of their people. As a Bard you learn the basics of ritual and some meditation and magical techniques that will underpin your development.

The next grade is that of Ovate. Historically, ovates were the prophets and seers, experts in tree-lore, herbalism and healing. In the Ovate grade you build upon the techniques you learned as a Bard and develop further – working with divination systems, perceptions of time and your link with your ancestors.

The final grade is that of Druid. Historically, the Druids were judges, teachers, advisors, scientists and inventors, metal workers, peacemakers and philosophers. In this grade you apply what you have learned previously and try to make a difference to the world in which you live. Your studies will have given you the insights of wisdom and balance.

Although the three grades are experienced sequentially, they are not intended to be a rigid hierarchy. Many people when they have reached the Druid grade choose to classify themselves as a Bard or an Ovate. Many people reach a certain grade and choose to go no further. You can still be a follower of Druidry without completing the Druid grade.