



**WOODLAND BARD COURSE  
A DETAILED AND PRACTICAL EXPLORATION OF CELTIC TRADITIONS  
THROUGH THE STUDY OF NATURE**

**STAGE 1 - SETTING UP A DAILY PRACTICE**

*'The change we seek is bubbling up from the earth's core; a rejuvenation of a new world that calls us to the heart of things. A downward spiral into the web of life divorced not from the firmament yet reaching down to the dark places where new life begins.'*

*The joy of connecting to nature, to the eternal reality of the land beyond all human interference, a faith that all is unfolding according to the laws of the universe, a humility that the tiniest speck of dust beneath one's feet is of utmost importance. The love of a thousand blazing suns, the pain of a seething heat that invites a longing to the deepest depths where all life begins and returns. A surrender to whatever the moment brings then peace; untouched.'*

**J.Huet**

**DAILY MEDITATION**

## The Sacred Well

'By gazing into the well and entering a place where everything co-exists, where land and water (Boan and Dagdha) mingle, where the sun and the moon are one; we hear the still primal voice of our ancestry echoing in the chambers of the womb which is in the deep of the earth.'

Our meditation starts with honouring the land. The land is the mother, the provider of everything we need and it is she who is honoured first in Celtic lore. The land is often personified as a Mother Goddess and was seen in the landscape as the undulating hills or the life-giving waters. The three names below represent the three Queens of Ireland, the sovereignty of its land. However, these ancient Gaelic names can connect us to which ever land we live upon at this time, for they call to the deities of all Celtic lands which once stretched all across Europe and beyond. The words in the invocation below are from the text known as the Lebor Gabála Éirenn - the book of the takings of Ireland which we shall learn more about later in the course:

Chorus:

Eriu, Banba, Fodhla, I seek the land of Erin,  
Fruitful be her seas, perpetually green her forest,  
I feel her in my bones, I feel her in my blood.

I invoke the land of Ireland, surging is the mighty sea,  
Mighty is the upland full of meadows, full of meadows is the rainy wood,  
Rainy is the river full of waterfalls, full of waterfalls is the spreading lake,  
Spreading is the spring of multitudes, a multitude of people is the assembly,  
The assembly of the King of Tara, Tara is a tower of tribes,  
The tribes of the sun of Mil.  
Warriors of ships, of vessels, Ireland is a mighty vessel,  
Flourishing is Eber Donn, a very wise incantation, of the very wise wives of Bres,  
Outcry of the wives of Buaigne, Ireland is a vast woman,  
Eremon smote her, Ir and Eber entreated her.  
I invoke the land of Ireland.

After this blessing we can make an offering of hazelnuts, milk or something similar to the Sidhe , who are the ancestors of this land saying the words:

How beautiful they are, the lordly ones who dwell in the hills, in the hollow hills.  
They have faces like flowers and their breath is a wind that blows amid grasses filled with white clover.  
Their limbs are more white than shafts of moonshine, They are more fleet than the March wind, they  
laugh and are glad and are terrible when their lances shake and glitter every green reed quivers.

How beautiful they are, how beautiful, the lordly ones in the hollow hills.

## **Fiona Macleod**

As we make this offering we do not expect it to be accepted we offer it unconditionally with an open heart for when one connects with the spirit of the earth it is in humility and on its terms for it is they who are in harmony with the sacred earth and the sanctity of all life.

## **Definition of the Sidhe .**

The Sidhe were originally the Tuatha de Dannann, an ancient tribe of Ireland. They are a magical tribe of beings who once lived on the surface of the land and are said to have retreated into the hollow hills when the Milesians invaded, who in the Irish mythology represent the Celtic people. This lore is fundamental to the Celtic tradition.

Their retreat into the hollow hills and the untrammelled wild landscape of rivers, woods and lakes has captured the hearts of Celtic tales from ancient Irish and Welsh tales through to the development of the Arthurian and Grail tales. They are the ancient guardians of the land and in order to live in harmony with the land we are called to be in harmony with them.

In the stories we recognise that some of the Sidhe appear as dark, even terrifying and wish to enchant or trick us, we are warned of their animosity towards the human race.

*'Dalua then must sure have blown a sudden magic air,  
Or with mystic dew sealed my eyes from seeing fair,  
For the great Lords of Shadow who tread the deeps of night,  
Are no frail puny folk who move in dread of mortal sight.'*

## **Fiona Macleod**

These are the tales where people are taken into the Otherworld by the faerie folk or undergo tests of valour and honour in order to pass into their realms.

Throughout the tales they test us and sometimes mock us so why would we want to make the acquaintance?

This retreat into the the hills is symbolic of the loss of the old ways. Even the oldest stories explore a disconnection from the sacred landscape and this will be a recurring theme throughout the course.

Connecting to these beings is a way of reconnecting once more with the web of life and because we are the ones who broke this sacred contract we cannot expect to be welcomed with open arms.

There are two aspects to this, first the demonising of old ways thus in history the replaced religion makes the old Gods into unholy or evil beings and the other aspect is the fact these beings are angry at our terrible deeds which are not in harmony with the web of life.

In Celtic lore the concept of honour and integrity are paramount and one is expected to uphold their 'geasa' which is their sacred contract with life. It may be simply not to eat a certain animal because it has a deep connection with you as your guide or not to travel to certain places. This all relates to soul

protection explored under the section on everyday tradition. This seemingly unimportant contracts are our personal sacred connection to the web of life and when we break them it can mark a spiralling descent into disharmony.

## The Beetle Shrine

I recently was cutting and chopping wood and by accident killed a beetle in one of the logs. In response to this I made a shrine for the beetle and said a prayer. After this experience I felt a presence. A rustic country man appeared before me. I knew he wasn't a human ancestor because his face flickered and changed and he had a mood that wasn't human.

It is difficult to explain the feel of the man, I suppose his mood was more like an animal responding in the moment to what is happening. There was something detached about him, some may think of it as uncaring for it felt inhuman.

I felt that he was intrigued and pleased I was honouring the beetle in this way as it connected my being to the web of life and didn't put me in a role of feeling I was more important.

This detached persona of the being is explored in many tales and accounts, often in more rural areas of people who have contact with them. It is generally said they don't seem to have the same empathy or etiquette that we have, in short they are a different race with different customs.

However how can we judge what appears an uncaring attitude when we literally destroy whole habitats? We kill literally millions of souls just so we can live. These beings see everything as alive from the tiniest mineral and insect to the large boulders and trees through to the actual landscape and the earth itself.

They value all of life and feel it pulsing through themselves and all of creation. To rebuild a relationship with the Sidhe is to live in harmony with the sacred web of life and all its denizens. This is possibly one of most important achievements in a human existence and the main focus of the Celtic stories throughout all the tellings. Our broken contract with the Sidhe is the destruction of the natural world itself. The acceptance of other races who seem alien or even unnerving to our customs is an important aspect of living in harmony with the world.

In Celtic traditions they say there are two types of these beings known as the Seelie and the Unseelie especially developed in the Grail and Arthurian legends. It is thought the Seelie believe we can build that bridge once more and be in harmony with each other whereas the Unseelie believe it is not possible which is why they are constantly testing and disturbing our way of life.

Personally, I feel this lore is inviting us to hold our own integrity and sacred contract (geasa) at all times and achieve our highest aspirations.

It is an invitation to step out of our deep seated believe that we are greater than other species and to honour all of the natural world. If we know that digging the soil and removing minerals is a destructive

act and do not assume we have the right to destroy a habitat to feed our race we begin to live in more harmony.

These beings in mythology often start out as titanic Gods and Goddesses, then slowly over time became heroines and heroes, then they may end up as tiny twinkling beings or sad short messy trolls. This shows how the importance we give to these beings diminishes over time reflected in the breakdown of the natural world. The poem above concerning Dalua reminds us of their inconceivable power through their connection to the very essence of life.

In practical terms I don't believe we have to exalt other worldly beings as Gods but need to connect, honour and work with them in order to keep our souls whole as discussed under Everyday Tradition .

### **Enter the Well.**

After honouring the land and making offerings to its ancestors we then can look to entering her womb. In this course we seek to enter the earth first rather than looking to the skies. Our first place of spiritual nourishment is in the depths of the sacred earth where our roots and life force stem from. There is no need to fear the dark or the depths below for this is where all new life is incubated.

We enter the inner realms of our soul and the earth through our imaginations. The images we use on this course are empowered by tradition, this means the pathway has already been trodden and we have the support of those who have walked the path before. This creates an opportunity to truly understand the purpose of the sacred mythologies of the world , to experience the deep resonance of the power of story. This further enhances a natural understanding of our innate personal native tradition for even as a child these skills were known to us.

All you have to do is be comfortable, lay or sit down and allow the imagery to take you into your own soul awareness trusting this effortless technique which requires no set dogma or change in who you are right now.

Let us begin....

'Connla's well lies at the foot of a mountain ash, those who gaze within may if they can find a guide be lead to the fountain of perpetual youth. The ash berries fall into the waters and turn then to fire. Connla the druid is the guardian of the well. '

### **Fiona MacLeod**

William sharp writing as Fiona MacLeod is tapping into the essence of tradition. She writes in such a way that she bypasses the literal academic mind to enter the heart. Her writing at times can be stirring and sinister but this enables the dark and light to coexist in a continuum that brings soul awareness to the individual.

Let us just take the few lines written above for they not only contain the essence of the tradition but the means to access it.

## Meditation 1- Connecting to the Earth Mother.

Lay or sit down in a comfortable posture. Close your eyes and take a few deep breathes allow yourself to let go of anything other than being fully here and now in this meditation. In each meditation we will build up imagery that will take you deep within yourself.

We start with a well, this can be any well or pool of water ( see images above), notice the patterns of light upon its rippling surface, allowing the vision to take you within or if you cannot visualise just know it is happening. Let go to whatever images, feelings and thoughts stir in your imagination in response to this visualisation.

We repeat the words: *'Connla's well lies at the foot of a mountain ash, those who gaze within may if they can find a guide be lead to the fountain of perpetual youth. The ash berries fall into the waters and turn then to fire. Connla the druid is the guardian of the well. '*

Once you have imagined the well and made it as real as possible you can reach out with your senses and imagination to feel if there is a guide to help you to explore your inner journey, you may sense the presence of an animal or an ancestor. Allow this to happen organically without trying to force the imagery or experience. It may well be just a glimmer on the peripheral of your senses which you can build on each time you meditate. For now just know you are safe and being looked after.

When you are ready\*, enter the well or imagine a doorway in front of you.

\*take your time with each step as it doesn't matter if you only do part of the meditation as you can build on each component each time you meditate.

Enter the doorway and descend into your soul landscape.

As you descend get a sense of arriving in a stone circle, experience the moon rising and slowly a soul awakening that is connected to all the web of life. Take whatever images, thoughts and feelings that come to you. Before you is a stone bed and upon it a sleeping woman of power.

Meditate on the feel of the circle and the woman as she rises and fills the space with her presence, connect with her and the energies of the earth with the help of the following words:

Banba, the primordial mother living in the depths of the fires of change, renewing herself in the heat of passion as the devouring Goddess bubbling up from the terrifying waters of callous deeds. A coiling, spiraling energy imprinting herself onto cold stone in the light of the moon.

She is in the barrow mounds, the rising hills, the stone chambers and in the darkest woods, She is the circle of stone, the uneven path and the tormented chamber.

She knows of no heaven or hell, higher or lower, but has tasted the succulent fruit of honeyed bliss; in islands created by women who know the secrets of healing and of entombed kings waiting.

She is betwixt night and day, death and life. When you cross the bridge to meet her, fear can no longer exist. The cruel laughter and dark shapes of times before disappear into the abyss and the soul is freed forever.

Sit and be with the Earth Goddess in the stone circle which is in the womb of the earth and allow her to communicate with you. You may just sit and be in the darkness allowing a deep relaxation in the soul of your being or you may receive images or feelings to contemplate. The most simple experience can be deeply profound just allow it to happen or to not happen, it doesn't matter if this meditation takes days, weeks or even months or years to come to fruition.

This is your sanctuary deep in the earth and in your soul, you can top up here and deeply relax forgetting the woes of the world for a time in order to refresh and face them renewed and invigorated by the life force of the earth, in the soft brown earth.

When we meditate with the land and especially with its energies, we may find a deep pain and sorrow which William Butler Yeats says is the mood of all ancient peoples for we are all incomplete and out of harmony in our human lives. In the Celtic tradition we seek that completion through connecting with all of life and its web.

A sense of non-duality and acceptance of life creates a sublime feeling in the depths of our soul. However, it also carries a responsibility for this type of meditation isn't about creating a personal nirvana but more about a profound awakening to being in harmony with all of life. To understand these deep concepts, we meditate on the Earth Goddess.

## EVERYDAY TRADITION

In this section we will explore the themes of the Celtic tradition and how they relate to us in the modern world as we build a relationship to it. The importance of a living tradition which still addresses the issues of the day is essential. The core themes of Celtica which explore a deep connection to ourselves and our environment could not be more needed today.

To grow up exploring spirituality can be essential to enable a strong foundation in life, an unshakable relationship with our true nature. We naturally tell our children stories and encourage them to explore their connections to the world around them and it may well be that many of you teach your children to be safe and nurtured by calling upon their inner imaginations. It is important that we encourage individuals to find their own relationship with creation but equally important to introduce them to these ideas whilst still young.

### **The Imaginary friend.**

This usually happens quite naturally and can be actively encouraged. As children get older there is no need to replace this friend with a concept of God and prayer although if they are naturally drawn that way it does not need to be discouraged. I remember praying to Jesus at a very young age and remember the satisfaction from reciting the Lord's prayer, it made me feel safe. However, I also had an obsession with snakes and ghosts and unfortunately learnt to fear ghosts.

In Celtic lore, as probably in many indigenous cultures a child is protected with charms and prayer until they have the strength to repel the fear for themselves, there is no reason why the baby's mobile above the cot cannot be used in this way, for it is comforting and makes them smile and becomes a companion when no-one is there. Is this not protection from fear and loneliness and a means of exploration?

As the child gets older, they build a rapport with an otherworldly friend which is quite often an animal. Nurture this concept, teach them the qualities and stories of the animal that they are naturally drawn to, let them know that they can speak to them and let them know the otherworldly friend will protect them. This friend of course can be a person, place or thing such as a flower, favourite spot or toy which they can talk to and be supported by, this is the start of soul care.

This is also something we as adults can do, taking us back to the guide we started to get a sense of in the meditation above. This guide or friend knows the inner landscape more intimately than we do and as we build a rapport with them, we can also build a trust that they can guide us in otherworldly matters. Please note that this happens over time and to start with do not just accept any inner guidance, always challenge it with good common sense and your own intuition.

### **Soul- care**

What are we protecting our babies, young adults as well as ourselves from? The thought of children being whisked away to faerie realms or spirits causing them harm is probably considered to be a primal fear ungrounded in today's world but let us for a moment explore this idea.

As we all grow up parts of us die or are whisked away so we know longer feel or experience them anymore. The first time we drop a toy and break it, the first time we feel disappointment or anger from someone we love or in cases of neglect or abuse the absolute agony of that mistreatment.

When we are young, we feel deeply and in the modern world we are encouraged to bury or distract ourselves from these feelings, we are encouraged to be more mature so we can become rational and regulate our feelings better. However, that pain we feel has to go somewhere and if we learn to throw it away, we also learn to throw away a part of who we are.

As we accept our feelings and feel the roots of our pain these parts start to come back and by doing so, we empower ourselves to be more complete people. The more we except our pain and our feelings the more we can be rational and regulate our feelings. This in turn empowers and grounds us to become more complete human beings.

We have all seen children and adults who are not here, parts of their souls whisked away because it makes them feel too vulnerable or is simply unbearable to acknowledge them. When these parts come back it is what is known in indigenous culture as soul retrieval which could be termed as ancient psychotherapy or simply the care of the soul.

Connecting with the metaphor of story can therefore bring back our soul parts, a simple tale such as Snow White read with this awareness can help this process. The soul part is Snow White, the persecutor is the wicked stepmother, and the friends of the soul are her seven magical companions. The healing of the soul is the love that awakens her again, it might be we are all asleep at times and

the love of the prince is the acceptance and love of ourselves.

In future sections we will tell more stories for soul awareness but for now enable yourself and all your family to bond with an imaginary friend and welcome back all the aspects of themselves they may struggle with. The start of soul retrieval, the budding of a new empowered you!

Whenever you can continue to enter the well, visit the stone circle and meditate with the Earth Goddess. Be aware of your inner companion and nurture this inner connection.

In the next stage we will explore the Earth Father.