You must learn one thing.
The world was made to be free in.

Give up all the other worlds
except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet
confinement of your aloneness
to learn

anything or anyone
that does not bring you alive

is too small for you.

-David Whyte, from the poem
Sweet Darkness
The Well of Segais:
And Introduction to the Ovate Course

In native Irish sources there is a story revolving around the Otherworldly ordeals of perhaps the most famous king in Irish literature, Cormac Mac Art. During these ordeals he finds himself in the Otherworldly Land of Truth, the realm of Manannan MacLir, a god of the sea, and thus keeper of the veils between this world and the Otherworld.

Here, Cormac sees the Well of Segais. There are five streams flowing forth from the well, and around the well are nine hazel trees. Within the water are five purple-bellied salmon. Every so often a hazel nut drops from the tree only to be eaten by one of the salmon in the well.

Manannan explains to Cormac that this is the Well of Wisdom (hazels and salmons both being symbolic of wisdom in the Irish tradition), and that each stream issuing forth from it is one of the five physical senses. All people drink from the five streams, but only poets, seers, druids; the aos dana, the gifted or skilled ones, drink from both the streams and the well itself.

This is a potent symbol and one which I feel encapsulates, to some extent, the journey of the Ovate course. One of the goals of this course is to facilitate an opening of the senses; both the physical senses, and the non-ordinary senses. The story of the Well of Segais is essentially about this task. It is important to note that the streams of the five senses come directly from the well itself, and that everyone must drink from these. The physical senses are a viable pathway to wisdom, and to the awakening of the non-ordinary senses of the aos dana, who drink from both the streams and the well itself. We might envision the streams as roads, taking us to the well, or from our world to the Otherworld.

The modern world has largely dulled our senses, ordinary and non-ordinary. When we stop using our senses they atrophy, and this is exactly what has happened. Industrial society creates the illusion that we no longer need our senses, but because we no longer depend on them in the same way to survive. The slow crunch of leaves, or the scent on the breeze, no longer signals that our prey or predator is nearby. Even our understanding of the sensuous has been distorted.

The body is where we perceive from, and it is the direct physical experience of nature that lies at the heart of nature mysticism and druidism. It is not just about speaking with the spirits of nature. Sometimes the simple act of listening to the physical sound of a flowing stream is the mysticism, without projecting our own ego’s need of the mysterious and spiritual into the experience. Being present is often enough, and by attempting to over-spiritualize the world we end up simply blocking our own direct experience.

This is not to say that there are not real spiritual presences inhabiting the
landscape with us; it does not mean that the world is not vibrant and dripping with the
dew of a conscious, living, and enlivening presence. It is. But this enlivening, this
presence of mystery and beauty is far more likely to appear to us in the slow falling of
leaves in autumn, the gracious warmth of the sun on a cold day, the touch of water to
dry lips, and the soil that yearns for our bare feet – than it is to come to us as an
unignorable booming voice from the heavens. Soul and nature are more often than not
subtle, and it is the soft gaze of the awakened senses that reveal the invisible presence
of the Otherworld.

This course is about walking the pathway of the senses, the *sacred senses*, back to
the well of wisdom. The wisdom that we gain from the well is not just the wisdom of
the Otherworld, it is the wisdom of the self. It is the *aos dana* who drink from the well;
the gifted ones. Within the word dana, we have the word *dán*, a word which we will
discuss more throughout this course. It means art, gift, poetry, and destiny. Our *dán*
is the soul-gift that we were born to bring into the world, it is our wisdom-art that is
recovered during the initiatory process, is kindled within us, to be birthed into the
waiting world. As poet David Whyte so aptly shows us:

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To be human
is to become visible
while carrying
what is hidden
as a gift to others.
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This then is the journey you are about to embark upon. There is no distance to
the journey however, only the plunging in to your own depths to recover the gift you
were born to be living.
Awareness Practice 1: The Physical Senses

Throughout this course you will find a series of “stopping-places”, which I have called Awareness Practices. These are practices of becoming mindful of our relationship with nature, with our senses, and the non-ordinary Otherworld. The focus of this course is on the practice, rather than the accompanying readings and writing assignments.

This practice is quite simple, but the experience can be quite profound. How often do we attend to the physical presence of nature? Even when out on the land, many of us have a tendency to become distracted. We find our minds wandering from us, and suddenly we aren’t in nature at all! We are back at the office, class, old arguments, or thinking ahead to what we will have for dinner.

The practice, then, is this: spend some time out in nature; as much time as you can give. It doesn’t matter particularly how. Go for a hike, sit under a tree, wander aimlessly through a park, or go wading in a stream. Attend to the physical presence of nature. You might find it helpful to spend time with each of your physical senses individually.

What do you hear? Spend time just listening to nature, both its sounds and silence. What do you see? Spend time focusing on color, light, shadow, movement, and stillness. What do you smell? Spend time with the smells of nature; smell the flowers, the grass, and soil. What do you taste? Don’t be afraid to get in there! What does the air taste like? If you know of the edible plants in the area, taste them (warning: do not do this unless you are absolutely certain of the plant).

Now bring your awareness back to the whole picture, and just spend some time being mindful and aware of it all, whatever information registers to your senses.

You might also try the following when you have finished: repeat this sensory exercise in a town or city. What do you notice about the way your senses react in both areas. Where do they open up the most? Where do they shut down? Spend as much time with this exercise as you’d like. I invite you to come back to it often, as the course proceeds, and beyond. Spending time with and attuning to the physical presence of nature can reveal just as many treasures to us as speaking with the spirits and attending to the non-ordinary layers of reality.
I have been told that life is a pilgrimage. We walk this ancient soil where our ancestors have also stepped, and we are confronted with the chance to listen deeply to the wisdom in our blood and in the bones of the earth. This wisdom speaks of our ancient bonds and connections. It tells us that although we often feel utterly lost and alone, we truly are not. We are all part of something that lies just below the surface of the waters of appearance.

In the primal traditions of Ireland, there exists a custom of having an anam cara, or “soul friend”. In Celtic Christianity, this is the person who will be there to comfort a dying person and guide the passage of their soul. It is often used in a much more general sense however, as simply a co-walker in our spiritual life who’s soul touches our own. In the pain of our spiritual journeys, our pilgrimage through life, the anam cara is the one who we can unburden ourselves to. It is a relationship with a person that allows an opening and dynamic exchange of soul between friends.

The anam cara is not exclusive to human beings however. Celtic consciousness is one of animistic perception, and so all the world is imbued with a luminous divine energy, sometimes spoken of as Dana. Each tree, river, stone, and mountain has its own in-dwelling spirit and its own stories to tell. The spirit of these things can also act as anam cara. There are traditions of cranncainte and tonncainte, literally meaning, “speaking with the trees” and “speaking with the waves”, where a person is able to make contact with nature to heal wounds and gain wisdom. Whether tree, ocean, or simply the soil beneath our feet, the Earth takes our spiritual and emotional waste and transforms it, just as animal waste becomes fertilizer for new vegetation.

Beneath all of this though, is perhaps an even more important anam cara: Dana, or divinity itself. This energy is the essence of our great belonging. The Celtic view of the cosmos is highly inclusive and within it all things are perceived as sacred, just as all things are held within the sheltering spirit of divinity. There are no boundaries that state that supposed dualities are in contradiction, or that one aspect of life is more important than another. Farming, spirituality, politics, and family life are all woven into one, because fundamentally they all deal with the same underlying reality.

As a society we have largely forgotten this reality. We have forgotten our luminous bonds with one another and to the universe. With the loss of these bonds, we have experienced the loss of our ability to perceive the world as sacred. We have drawn lines between what is sacred and what is mundane, where the boundaries occur between heaven and earth, and we have placed these things in opposition to one
another. These boundaries no longer meet, and are no longer as permeable as they once were.

I call this the wounded soul. It is noted in some way or another in many of the world’s wisdom traditions, as well as in our evolving understanding of the ecopsychological relationship between human and nature. The wound is characterized through many of the ailments we find in the modern world; a feeling of alienation, despair, being spiritually and culturally disenfranchised, and bereft of any sense of belonging or home. There is a deep yearning within our hearts to reclaim some lost portion of ourselves, which often is played out in those movements that urge us to return to some primal state of well being. However, healing does not lay in the past, but rather here in our daily lives, our relationship to the universe, and to each other. It is up to us to initiate this process of healing and the befriending of the universe.

Longing, an important and powerful force in the Celtic traditions, is also a practice that we can cultivate to help facilitate this healing. Longing is what sent Celtic Christian seekers out into nature to search alone for God in what is called the Green Martyrdom. Longing and belonging are profoundly linked, and it is the belonging of God that these mystics were looking for. By allowing themselves to be absorbed into nature, they were giving themselves to the untamed wilderness of the soul, and thus transcending ego. They were accepting the universe as friend, as anam cara. The bridge between our alienation from, and friendship to the universe, is longing. Longing bridges the gap between the darkness of our suffering and loneliness with the intimacy of friendship and community. When we can befriend our world we are taking a step back into a relationship with the reality of the spirit, rather than the reality of the ego. This is a way of softening the edges of ourselves, making us vulnerable and open to the shaping powers of the universe.

In this sense friendship is perhaps one of the most important things that could be cultivated in one’s life. Finding an anam cara is a practice of healing the wounded soul. Whether this means finding a person to whom you can share your soul, engaging with nature and the spirit of place, or rekindling our ancient bonds with the Spirit of Life, it is a way of orienting ourselves to a life of sacred perception and aligning to the holy reality of the universe. By practicing the ancient tradition of befriending the universe, we can begin to heal many of the wounds that our souls have incurred. In the words of John O’Donohue, author of Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom, “When you are blessed with an anam cara, the Irish believe, you have arrived at that most sacred place: home.” The Celts have always been a wandering people, and home is not any physical location but rather the Otherworld that exists between the mists. And so the tradition of the anam cara is a doorway or threshold that helps to orient us to the Otherworld, where the boundaries between apparent opposites are dissolved. We are then plunged into the healing springs where spirit and nature meet, and we regain our sacred senses.
It is popular today to talk of being a “spiritual warrior”. What I am about to describe has little, if anything, to do with many of the romantic “New Age” notions of warriorship (which are often, or it seems to me, simply a stroking of the ego). It also has nothing to do with the cultivation of anger, brute strength, and unbalanced masculine archetypes of aggression. That said, it has a great deal to do with Truth and Sovereignty.

Let us begin by examining Truth in the Celtic tradition. I capitalize the word Truth for a specific reason. I am not referring here to the concept of honesty or the correlation of facts. As Tom Cowan points out in Yearning for the Wind: Celtic Reflections on Nature and the Soul, “None of these is deep enough or eternal enough. Truth...is a relationship with life, a relationship known deep in the soul that balances our personal lives with the Great Life Itself.” Truth as relationship is a radical concept to the current prevailing worldview. It would not, however, be news to many ancient cultures. Similar in scope perhaps to the Navajo concept of Beauty, and the Chinese notion of the Tao (which is often translated to simply mean “the Way”), Truth in the Celtic tradition would not be so strange an idea to other earth-centered people. It is about the fundamental unity and balance of all things within a greater whole. As author Greywind defines it in his book, The Voice Within the Wind, Truth is “a measurement of the degree of which a thing is rightly integrated with the underlying unity of all things.” When we live our lives in Truth, we are living our lives in harmony with the world and with our soul.

Truth is important to the integrity of the world. Truth, in fact, is not just a measurement to how integrated a thing or person is with the Soul of Life, it is the force that binds all things together. This is evidenced by several strands of Celtic thought. On the one hand we have the story of Cormac Mac Art and his Cup of Truth. When a lie was spoken over this cup, it shattered. It took three truths to restore the cup to wholeness. We see this story mirrored in a Celtic oath which proclaims, “May the sea rise up to swallow me, the earth open up to swallow me, and the sky fall upon my head if I be forsworn.” The cosmos itself could be understood to be a macrocosm of Cormac’s Cup of Truth, and it is by cultivating right relationship to the world that it is bound together, both within and without.

We also have accounts of advice from Druids and wise kings to future rulers on the importance of the “truth of the ruler”. As we have studied in An Audacht Morainn, or the Testament of Morann, truth played an important part of the rule of a king. It was through the truth of the king that the fitness of things was maintained, that the land
remained fertile, and that the people flourished. The king’s truth kept the cosmos in order.

The so-called “high kingship” in Ireland was not much of a social position. It was a ritual position, and could perhaps be more accurately called the “sacred kingship”. It is interesting to note that despite the stress of kings in Celtic society, there is no word for coronation. The word in Irish is *bainís ri*, and means “marriage of the king”. This refers to a ritual marriage between the king and the goddess of the land; the goddess of sovereignty. For the king of Tara this would probably be under the guise of the goddess Méadhbh (Maeve), who I will discuss shortly.

This does not however apply only to kings in the common sense of the word, as a person who rules over others. In fact, perhaps it applies even more to the sense of the king as one who rules him or herself. Central to the Celtic way of being in the world is *laochra*. Laochas in modern Irish means “heroism” or “valour”. Each person in Celtic society was the hero, but also the king, of their own life. In terms of the sacred warriorship this means that each person is responsible for stepping into alignment with sovereignty, and with Truth. This comes surprisingly close to the Shambhala warriorship of the Tibetan tradition with concepts such as the universal monarch. From a mystical perspective Laochas is sacred warriorship.

When St. Patrick asked one of the Fianna (a band of warriors-outcasts who protected Ireland) who had returned from the Otherworld after the coming of Christianity, what sustained the warriors before the gospels, he answered, “The truth in our hearts, the strength in our hands, and the promise on our lips.”

We get the sense from this that the Fianna were not aggressive brutes living off the thrills of violence. Something deeper served as the enlivening principle to their lives. It may be important to note that all of the stories about the Fianna take place in the wilds of nature; that nature was the world in which they lived, fought, and died.

Nature and communion with the land has a lot to do with truth, sovereignty, and sacred warriorship. As we have seen, the kings ability to rule is dependent on his marriage to the goddess of the land. Just so, our ability to “rule our lives” so to speak, is dependent on an active and engaged relationship with the powers of nature and the earth. The story of the Irish epic of *Táin Bo Cuailgne*, or the Cattle Raid of Cooley gives us some instructions as to how to honor this relationship.

One of the main characters of the story is the goddess and queen, Méadhbh. Méadhbh is the goddess associated with the Hill of Tara, and is named the intoxicating one. It is she that gives her name to the sacred drink of Mead. As the goddess of the land, it is not surprising then to find that she has rules for those who would “be her husband”. It is Méadhbh that demands our Truth. Tom Cowan calls these Queen

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Maeve’s Rules for Soul Making. He must be without fear, without jealousy, and without stinginess.

Fearlessness does not mean we are absent of fear. As Chogyam Trungpa explains in his book, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, fearlessness has more to do with a willingness to go into what we fear. It is a willingness to always live in alignment with our Truth no matter the cost. Sometimes Truth can be a very painful road in life. Sometimes living in our Truth requires us to sacrifice something, to go to frightening places in our psyche and in the world. Sometimes it also means turning our backs on those things, places, and people with which we have harmful relationships with that for whatever reason cannot be healed at the time. Often living in Truth requires that we move into our pain. It takes great courage to do these things, and the cultivation of fearlessness and gentleness of spirit. Fearlessness is not hard, but rather it is very soft and tender. If we move into these things with a hard mind we will likely end up doing damage where we meant to heal. For that reason compassion for self and others is the twin sister of fearlessness.

Méadhbh also requires that we be without jealousy, for as she says in the Táin, “I am never with one man without another waiting in his shadow.” Jealousy is the desire to possess what another has, and that we are without. As such it comes from a place of being unable to recognize our interconnectedness; that what another has, we also have. It comes from a place of desire rather than longing. Desire is a need of the ego, and as the Buddhists teach so aptly is a root cause of suffering. Longing on the other hand is rooted in the needs of the soul, and it brings us together in recognition of our interconnectedness. It creates beauty.

The final rule that Méadhbh has for us is to be “without stinginess”. I see this as almost a reaction to jealousy. If we are without jealousy it is easy to be without stinginess. We become stingy when we over identify with the ego, and believe that by giving something away we are giving away our own vitality. But our life is not hidden in our possessions. This is the great mistake of consumerism. To believe that what we can own and possess will ultimately make us better and fulfill our longings. What we can possess however, always falls short, and soon becomes obsolete. The cycle begins all over again, as we accumulate more and more.

The scene in the *Táin* which follows Medb’s listing of her rules may appear greatly ironic in all of this. Méadhbh and her husband, Ailell, have an argument about who is actually the sovereign ruler of their realm, Connaught in the West of Ireland. To settle the dispute, there possessions are paraded out before them to be compared. Ailell wins because he possesses the white bull of Connaught, and so the *Táin* begins, and Medb tries to steal the brown bull of Cooley in order to maintain her position as queen. Cattle of course were the measure of wealth in ancient Irish society. The irony of this should serve as hint that something deeper may be taking place in this story than what appears on the outside.

To be without stinginess is to be generous. Generosity and prosperity in the
Celtic traditions have always been symbolic of the land and the goddess of the land. Perhaps this is the reason why the Celts threw so many valuable possessions into rivers, lakes, and bogs. It was in the giving away of wealth to the land that the reciprocity between the human community and the spirits of place was maintained; that the relationship between soul and nature was nourished and sustained. To give away freely in the spirit of generosity is to acknowledge that our vitality is nourished not by the possessive nature of the ego, but in the nourishment of the longings of the soul.

Celtic warriorship is about stepping into right relationship with the world by means of working with the longing of the soul, and being steadfast in that work. It is also deeply rooted in the maintenance of our relationship with the earth. A goddess gives us these instructions and our “marriage”, our union with her, is dependent upon our ability to live in Truth. But the way of the warrior is a gentle path, and it is easy to lose our way on it. It is why in the Shambhala tradition, warrior training is synonymous with meditation training. They are mirrors of each other. In meditation it is also easy to forget why we are sitting, and to lose our mindfulness. In this tradition of meditation when we catch ourselves thinking, we simply label those thoughts “thinking” without making a judgement on them, and then return our attention to the breath. The same holds true, in its own way, for the path of warriorship.

It is difficult to talk about being free from jealousy, fear, stinginess, or indeed any virtue, without stepping into the muck and mire of preachy moralization. That is surely not the point of Méadhbh’s statements, and most definitely not the point of mine. Although she certainly does paint a particular portrait of a moral code, it should not be seen as a way of making yourself or others guilty about our human shortcomings. We have all been jealous, afraid, or stingy, because it is a human emotion and we are all human. The way of the warrior is not so much about not feeling particular things, but in seeing them for what they are, and slowly and gently, to move ourselves in a direction that is more in line with the longings of the soul than the desires of the ego.
We live in a time of global crisis. For the first time in our human history, we face the dilemma of the wholesale degradation and destruction of our planet. Such is the disconnection between humans and the natural environment that we have forgotten the fact that like the myriad of plants and animals who share this world, we are first and foremost creatures of the earth. In so doing, we have allowed our lives to become unbalanced and unsustainable towards the planet. In our forgetting of this ancient knowledge we have unwittingly repressed our relationship with nature, and thus a complete experience of soul to the unconscious. The enlivening presence by which we once lived our lives, has become dormant within us. It is as eco-philosopher David Abram has observed, “We are human only in contact and conviviality with what is not human. Only in reciprocity with what is Other do we begin to heal ourselves.” It is imperative that we awaken to the need for healing and balance in our relationship with nature.

The Celtic and druidic traditions offer us a great source of healing and renewal through an engagement with the natural world, as well as with the numinous reality of the Otherworld. The Irish terms for these, coích anama (which translates to “soul shrine”) and anam (soul), suggests an interweaving of both realities as being our fundamental make-up. The very fact that the body was considered a shrine is a radical departure from many of the current religious notions; namely that the body, being earthy, is something that must be transcended in order to access the sacred. Contrary to this, it has been suggested that the Celts viewed the soul as existing around the body. This can be a profoundly liberating perspective. The body and soul are like a weaving
or braiding of two threads into a single entity. We might say that our braid has become frayed at the edges, and has begun to unwind. A major aspect of what Thomas Berry refers to as the “Great Work” of our time, is the re-weaving of these two strands.

Initiation is the means by which this task can be achieved. Initiation is a process which involves a breaking down of the ego-self, which consists of our habitual patterns and limiting images of our self-identity; as well as a rebirth of the ego into a more balanced relationship with the deeper self, or the soul. This is a natural process which every person has or will experience at some point in their life. It is an imperative from the world of the soul, which asks us to dive deep within and seek there a more sustainable vision of our life. In many earth-centered societies this rite of passage would have been a natural stopping place on the path of life. We have lost our maps though, and so many of us wander, lost and confused on what C.G. Jung called the “night-sea voyage”.

A primal Irish map of this process, which can be expressed and experienced in a variety of ways, is what Frank MacEowen calls the Three Spirals of Initiation. Using the triple spiral from the Newgrange passage tomb complex as a guiding symbol, he lays out his model as the downward spiral, threshold spiral, and upward spiral.

The downward spiral is basically a descent into the unconscious, and an experience of the breaking down of the basic ego structure, for the purpose of disposing of habitual and limiting patterns of behavior which feed the ego and deny the soul. This can be a frightening time, especially when, as in our society, we are not properly supported while going through such experiences. It is the death of an old way of being, which no longer serves the vitality of the soul. What must be understood though, is that this death will prepare the grounds for a rebirth of a more authentic self.

The threshold spiral is the period after the initial breakdown of the ego structure and a time of seeking a vision for a more “soul-centric” way of belonging to the world. It is at this stage on the initiatory journey when one encounters their dán. Dán is an Irish word with an interesting set of meanings. It can mean poetry, art, a gift or skill, and destiny or fate. Simply said, in this context, our dán is a unique soul-gift that each of us possess which we were born to birth out into the world as our destiny. This is the soul-sustaining vision that we travel the downward spiral in search of. If the downward spiral is our descent to the Underworld, the threshold spiral is our wandering within the Underworld in search of this new vision.

The upward spiral is the integration of the vision, our dán, into life, and the alignment of the ego into a deeper relationship with the soul. Another word relating to dán is bradán. Bradán refers to both the salmon, traditionally seen as a fish of wisdom in the Irish tradition, but has also been interpreted to mean “life principle” that which nourishes and sustains us. Our life principle is the place from which we draw our fundamental nourishment and energy. Our bradán can be drawn from many sources, and not all of them are necessarily of the highest value to the soul. We can choose to draw our nourishment from life-affirming sources, such soul and nature, or we can
draw it from our life-negating sources, such as our dysfunctional and disconnected society.

It is interesting, however, that this concept would be linked with the salmon. The salmon, in Celtic mythology, is a fish of wisdom, which imparts *imbas* (divine inspiration or poetic frenzy). The salmon is the symbol par excellence of the wisdom of the initiatory path. Their journey from the source pool to the ocean, and their final swim back up the river where their death feeds the life of the new spawns clearly reflects the process of initiation. Bradán suggests that the place we might draw our nourishment from is wisdom and our dán itself. It suggests that by aligning ourselves with our soul-gift – by living the story we were born to tell – that we enter into a deeper communion with Dana, the enlivening principle of the universe, and the initiatory process.

Simultaneous with the initiatory journey are two other processes of connection, alignment, and reintegration, which work on similar levels. These processes are ones that assist us in aligning our lives to our soul as well as with aligning our soul to the soul of the world. They are parallel journeys, and all three work as a single process of healing and transformation.

A 16th century manuscript from Ireland, contains a poem which details the workings of what it refers to as the three “cauldrons of poesy” or the cauldrons of the soul. The cauldrons are like mediators between body and soul, ensuring both physical and spiritual health. They have often been compared to the chakras of the Hindu tradition, and perhaps rightly so, as they are very much akin to “energy centers”. They are conduits for spiritual energy, directing its flow through the body and soul.

The first cauldron, the *Coiré Goiriath*, or the Cauldron of Warming is our connection with life itself. It is positioned in the belly, and is said to be “born upright” in all people. The position of this cauldron is indicative of our most basic health. If the cauldron were on its side, we might be suffering from a threatening illness, or else be getting ready to depart our life. For the cauldron to be completely tipped onto its lips would indicate that we are in the process of dying. I would venture to say that what warms this cauldron is “Dana energy”. Dana or Danu is the primal mother goddess of the Irish, who gave her name to the Danube river, the area around which the Celts emerged into history. Dana, however, can also be related to as a primal “energy” similar to chi in Chinese philosophy. It is both a nourishing and initiatory energy. Therefore it would be accurate to say that the Cauldron of Warming holds and simmers our life force, and serves as our connection with Dana. The downward spiral might be thought of as our descent into the Cauldron of Warming. Interestingly enough the cauldron is often used as a symbol of initiation in the Celtic traditions, such as in the Welsh tale of the poet Taliesin. Taliesin gains his poetic wisdom when three drops from the cauldron of inspiration, which he was stirring over a fire, splash out and burn his hand. Trying to ease the burning, he brings his hand to his mouth and so imbibes the elixir he had been stirring.
The second cauldron is the *Coire Érmai*, or the Cauldron of Motion, and is our connection with the emotions. However, as alluded to in another translation of the term, "Cauldron of Vocation", it also contains our dán, or destiny. It said to sit at the place of our heart. The position and activity of this cauldron indicates the person’s engagement (or disengagement) with their dán. The dán is activated by engaging with the deep longings of the soul. Just as we might think of dán as Dana in motion, the Cauldron of Motion might be thought of as being the Cauldron of Warming in action; the essence of life’s movement towards the fulfillment of the soul’s deep longing. Unlike the Cauldron of Warming, it is possible for the Cauldron of Motion to be inverted in the living. As Celtic scholar and shamanic wisdom-keeper, Caitlín Mathews points out, “In most people, only the [Cauldron of Warming] is operative, and the [Cauldron of Motion] is inverted over it, indicating a closed circuit of experience.”  

The text points out that the forces which turn this cauldron are joy and sorrow. Another interpretation of these two forces by Frank MacEowen is “longing” and “ecstacy.” If our dán is truly rooted in the longing of our souls, then it is revealing to note that it is the same force of longing, and the ecstasy of such an initiatory encounter, that is the driving force which can turn the Cauldron of Motion, opening us to that “circuit of experience”. This is the energy and momentum of the threshold spiral at work, which brings us into contact with a renewed and life-sustaining soul-vision.

The third and final cauldron is the *Coire Sois*, the Cauldron of Wisdom. This cauldron is our connection to vision, poetic knowledge, and Otherworldly wisdom. It is said to be positioned in the head, or in the area of the third eye in many other mystical traditions. Like the Cauldron of Motion it is on its lips in most people. However it is through the turning of the Cauldron of Motion, that the Cauldron of Wisdom is able to turn itself. Here, like the upward spiral of initiation, we have the alignment of dán with bradán – our vision, the motion of Dana in our souls, becomes the new source from which we draw our essential life energy from. We shift from drawing on the ego, and instead drink deeply from the soul. With all three cauldrons upright and simmering, we become a clear conduit for Dana to express itself in our bodies and in the world.

To carry this map out one step further, we can also witness this same pattern of the three cauldrons in the cosmological map of the Three Realms in the Celtic traditions. The three worlds of sea, land, and sky (sometimes spoken of more generally as underworld, middleworld, and upperworld), are often conceived of as the Great Triskele. The Great Triskele, as described by Séan Ó Tuahail in his *Foclóir Draíochta* (Dictionary of Irish Druidism) is a, “binding (which is indivisible and may never be broken down to three separate parts) [which] insures the integrity of the cosmos; as an individual binding it ensures slán [health]...” These three worlds, which as Ó Tuahail points out, are indivisible, and serve as a macrocosm to the three cauldrons of the soul-shrine. Like the three worlds, the cauldrons are an indivisible binding which ensures the integrity of the body and soul.
Just as the Cauldron of Warming, is the life-sustaining energy center in the body, the underworld serves the same purpose to the three realms. It is the place of primal life-tending energy. In Celtic cosmology, as in the cosmologies of many other shamanic and animistic cultures, the three realms are seen as being bound together by a world tree, an *axis mundi*, which facilitates the hierophany of the sacred, of Dana, into ordinary reality. The underworld serves as the roots of the world tree, and is also symbolic of the unconscious. Although we are always connected with the underworld and the unconscious in some manner, we have a choice as to how conscious our connection and relationship to it is. We can choose to be asleep to this primal reality, or we can be awake to it, and participate fully in this realm of consciousness. The path to this waking up is the same path as turning the Cauldron of Warming; the downward spiral of initiation into the underworld of our unconscious, to recover the vision of our dán.

The middleworld relates to the Cauldron of Motion in that it is the place of ordinary reality and ego consciousness; the place where everyday life plays out. It is literally the place of motion. When the Cauldron of Motion is inverted, and our dán is inactive, we have a “closed circuit of experience” to the mysteries of awakened living. This condition also closes off our experience of the middleworld. When this cauldron is inverted we are closed to a true experience of ordinary reality because we have closed off the experience of the sacred to the underworld, and repressed it into our unconscious. Following our soul-longing deep into the underworld is the path of seeking a vision of our dán, and opening ourselves to more expansive and conscious ways of life, rooted in the mysteries of soul.

The upperworld, like the Cauldron of Wisdom, is a place of vision, poetic inspiration, and wisdom. Just as the underworld might be thought of as the dwelling place of the imminent divine, the upperworld is the place of the transcendent divine (which both meet and intermingle in the middleworld). The upperworld is the realm of enlightenment, as thought of as in many of the Eastern traditions. In the Celtic tradition it might be thought of as the place of divine inspiration and poetic frenzy. In this way it mirrors the Cauldron of Wisdom. Similarly to the cauldrons the process of awakening to life, of activating the Cauldron of Motion, leads eventually to the turning of the Cauldron of Wisdom, opening us up to the upperworld, and the activation of our “poetic inspiration”, and the dynamic balance between soul and ego, in which is held the potential for a deeper relationship with the Soul of Life.

The cauldrons of the soul are a microcosmic expression of the three worlds, manifested in the soul-shrine of the body. The soul of our bodies is the soul of the world, and the soul of the world is the soul of our bodies; and this soul reaches out, encompassing all things within it. In this way we are fundamentally woven into the very fabric of life. As Tom Cowan writes in *Yearning for the Wind*, “The soul is not in the body, the body is in the soul. This is not easy to understand or to live. But we must try. If we don’t, we circumscribe our life and greatly reduce the ways we know our souls, we strengthen the Great Split between us and creation.”

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The “Great Split” is the belief that we are separate from creation, from the shaping powers of life. It is the belief that we are somehow outside the world, looking in. The truth is, however, that no such split has ever existed. It is the great illusion of our times, which tells us that we are separate, thus lulling us into a sleep where we forget our most ancient connection and relationship – that to the primal Earth-Spirit. The three cauldrons and the three worlds teach us about the interweaving of nature and soul, the visible and the invisible. Through the process of aligning with these realities we are aligning with soul and nature, and awakening to the Soul of Life.

Initiation is the movement which brings these realities into alignment within ourselves. This process is nothing more than the journey towards wholeness; towards the fulfilling of our potential as fully realized human beings. It is the process of waking up to our dán and living in alignment with it. This is the doorway, or threshold, to an authentic relationship with both nature and soul as a single weave.

When we wake up to the presence of nature, we are also waking up to the presence of soul. They are intricately woven together, and relationship with one requires us to relate in some way to the other. Any attempt to know and work with the soul, which does not know and work with nature as well is fundamentally incomplete. Just as one cannot not understand what it means to be human without taking into account the wider relationship it has to the landscape from which it was birthed, we cannot understand the human soul without understanding the more expansive soul of nature, in which it dwells.

There is a story in the Irish tradition of Cormac mac Art, and his journey to the Otherworldly Land of Truth where he sees the well of wisdom. The image of this well is a potent one, and points to certain fundamental orientations of the Celtic soul. Swimming within it are five salmon, which eat the hazel nuts that fall from the nine trees around it. Flowing forth from the well are five streams. Manannan, the god of the sea, and thus an Otherworldly figure, tells Cormac that the five streams are the physical senses. He says that all people drink from the streams, but that only poets and the aos dana drink from both the streams and the well. Just as one can see the five streams of the senses as having their source in the well, one can also take another perspective, and instead use the streams as pathways back to the well itself. In other words, the simple process of being physically present and awake to nature through our senses, is a viable doorway to accessing the dimensions of the soul.

To be truly present with nature however, we are required to slow down, and develop mindfulness to the world around us. Our modern world has compelled us to shut down our senses in some very traumatic ways. Our fast-paced lives do not afford us the luxury of a deep and sensual relationship to the physical world. By staying locked into our own limited and self-confined patterns of tuning out of the world we close ourselves off to any sense of authentic relationship to the soul of life; in effect we replay the patterns of soul-repression that have contributed to the “Great Split”, or “Wounded Soul” as I have come to call it.
What the world needs in this time of unprecedented crisis, both on personal and global levels, is a waking up to the sacredness of life; in effect, a global initiation and re-alignment between soul and nature. This is the world that we have inherited, and it is up to us to decide in what condition the future generations of the earth will inherit it in their own turn. We each hold the potential for waking up and blending with the soul of life. All it takes is a single draught from the streams of the enlivened senses to begin our journey to the well of wisdom – the place where the aois dana, those initiated into the activated soul-gift of their dán, drink from. We become the aois dana, because we become ambassadors of Dana into the world. We become in ourselves an axis mundi, a world tree, by opening our souls to the life-tending currents of Dana, and becoming a hierophany of this enlivening presence into the world.

Endnotes


5. MacEowen. The Spiral of Memory and Belonging, p. 194

6. Ó Tuahail. Foclóir Draíocht.

The Rite of Passage: a meditation-intensive which combines entheogenic soundscapes with the contemplative process of looking honestly at your life with a soft gaze.

Awareness Practice II: Place-Bonding: cultivation of a conscious relationship to place.

Weaving the Soul: Living in Alignment With Dán: an exploration of Dana in relationship to dán (soul-gift) and bradán (life principle); re-weaving life to right relationship with the soul.

Awareness Practice III: Druidic Senses: cultivation of an awareness of self in relation to the visible (ordinary) and invisible (non-ordinary) environment.

Nemeton: seeking the forest shrine where your soul and the natural world embrace and nourish one another.

Shapeshifting: shapeshifting is an ancient and viable method of gaining insight and wisdom from the psycho-somatic experience of altering one’s consciousness from one “shape” to another.

Awareness Practice IV: Keepers of Place: each place has its elder, or “dana-spirit”, and in keeping with our theme of reciprocity between the human and “more-than-human” community, this is about recognizing these spirits, and paying homage to them.

The Shadow: the first part in a brief foray into Jungian theory and practice, to explore the idea of the Shadow and how we might practically work with it

Anima and Animus: the second part of our meditation on Jung, this time on the idea of the archetype of the “opposite within”, and the practice of working with the masculine and feminine archetypes we all possess.

Awareness Practice V: Contemplative Nature Walk: a day-long activity out in nature (or as near to it as possible) focusing on mindful attentiveness to each aspect of our awareness practices.

Death and the Trickster: an exploration of the theme of death, in both a literal and metaphorical sense, as well as lessons from the god Lugh, the trickster-psychopomp of the Irish tradition.

The Voyage of Maelduin: The imramma, Otherworldly sea-voyage, tales of the Irish tradition are argued to be a “Celtic Book of the Dead”, guiding us through gateways of soul encounter as symbolized by the islands visited in the tales.

Awareness Practice VI: An Sith: “an sithi” translates as “peace” but also has the connotation of the Faery People. This practice is about merging with the peace of the land.

Many more readings, practices, meditations, and writing assignments will be included in the full course...