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NewAcropolis

Philosophy and Education for the Future

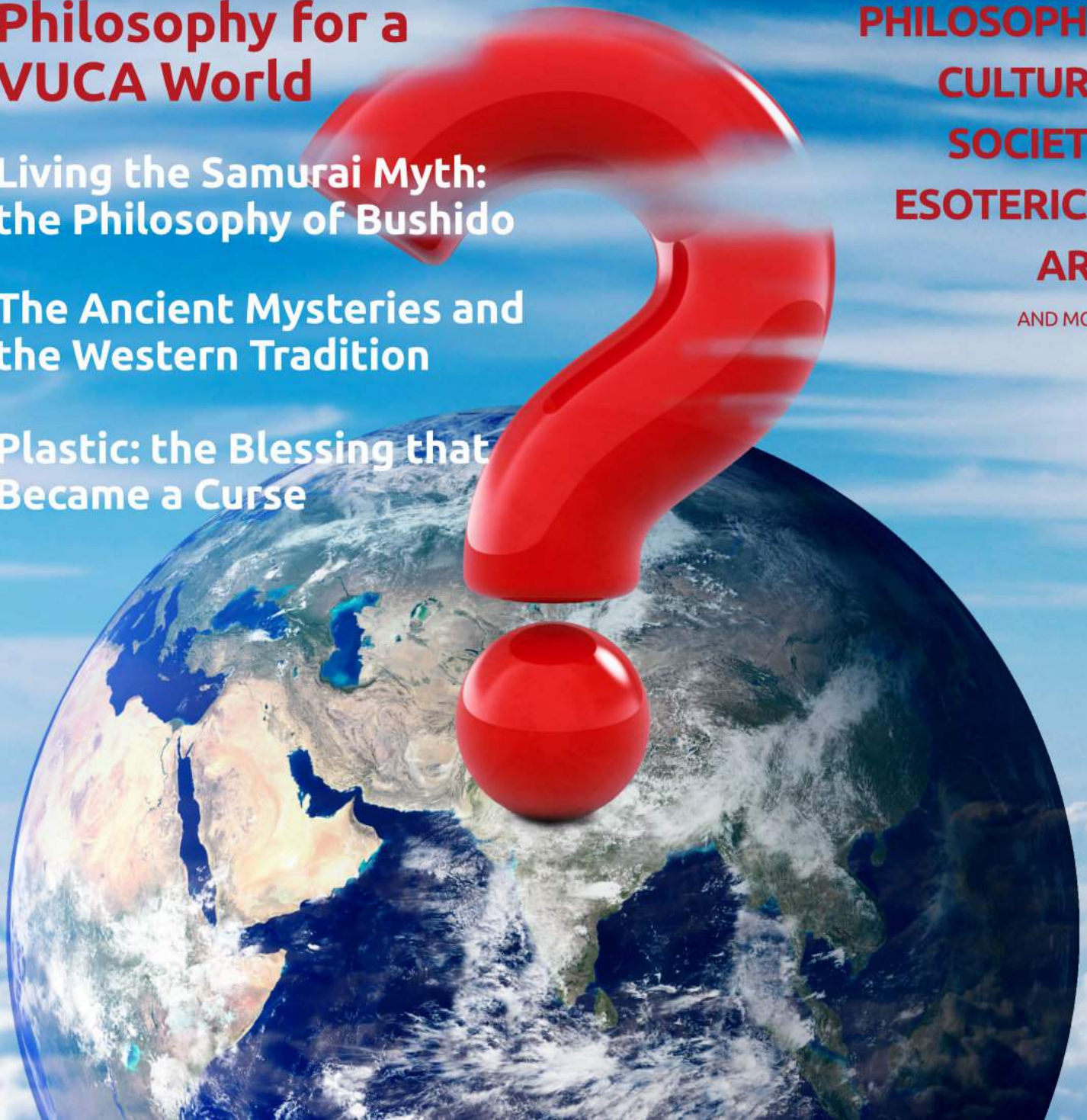
Philosophy for a VUCA World

Living the Samurai Myth:
the Philosophy of Bushido

The Ancient Mysteries and
the Western Tradition

Plastic: the Blessing that
Became a Curse

PHILOSOPHY
CULTURE
SOCIETY
ESOTERICA
ART
AND MORE





About Us

NEW ACROPOLIS is an international organization working in the fields of philosophy, culture and volunteering. Our aim is to revive philosophy as a means of renewal and transformation and to offer a holistic education that can develop both our human potential as well as the practical skills needed in order to meet the challenges of today and to create a better society for the next generation.

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 **Philosophy**
Culture
Volunteering

What's Inside

EDITORIAL | 05



PHILOSOPHY | 06

Living the Samurai
Myth: the
Philosophy of
Bushido



ESOTERICA | 10

The Ancient
Mysteries and the
Western Tradition



SOCIETY | 08

Philosophy for a VUCA
World



ART | 12

Beethoven, the
Prometheus of
Western Music



CULTURE | 14

Re-enchanting
the World



SCIENCE & NATURE | 16

Plastic: the Blessing that
Became a Curse



MYTHS OF THE WORLD | 18

The Mysterious
Yggdrasil

Character and Destiny

No one knows what the future will bring. But if there is something like a law of cause and effect, then we know that we need to sow 'good' in order to reap 'good'. It is also clear what kind of people we need as a society in order to meet the inevitable challenges that will come our way. Just think for a moment: what kind of person would you like to be with in moments of crisis? In no particular order, I think we would all like to be with people who are: trustworthy, wise, guided by ethical principles rather than self interests, kind, humble, responsible, helpful, unselfish, hardworking, self-disciplined, confident and have a sense of humour.

The unabating high level of corruption, fake news and exploitation in our modern societies demonstrates the need for what used to be called 'a person of character'. Remember when 390 MPs (out of 650) overclaimed on their second homes allowance and had to pay back more than a million pounds? No system can survive if everyone who can (and thinks they can get away with it) is trying to exploit it. A good society needs to be made of good people, and there is no doubt that our individual character has a significant impact on how we function as a society.

There is a maxim in business: "Hire for character, train for skills". Character used to be highly valued in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. Then it went out of fashion because it sounded Victorian and judgemental (it seems that somehow a lack of success became associated with a lack of character, but what about the notion of the 'corrupt rich?'). However, since 2000 quite a lot of research has been going into character education and there is evidence for a link between character and social mobility. There is no denying that confidence, responsibility and self-control have an important impact on our lives and that it would be logical if more promotions were given to people who show a sense of responsibility, reliability and honesty. So, if character has an impact on our career chances and future earnings, then surely we must think about how we can provide more

character education in the name of equality of opportunity.

A number of schools have integrated character education into their curriculum in the last 10 years and have not only reported a positive link between character education and academic achievement but also improved motivation, behaviour, attitudes, well-being, relationships and social skills. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue at Birmingham University pioneers research that promotes a moral concept of character in order to explore the importance of virtue for public and professional life. You can even do an MA in character education there.

So, what is character? The word comes from the Greek *charassein*, meaning 'to engrave, to carve', which implies the idea that character is acquired as we grow up. Although the word character, and many character traits as well, can be morally neutral – resilience, for example, could be the disposition of a 'sinner' as well as a 'saint' – it is often applied to our moral qualities. According to Michael Josephson, 'character is the moral strength to do the right thing even when it costs more than you want to pay'. We constantly reveal our character by how we respond to ordinary and extraordinary pressures and temptations and by the way we treat other people (especially those who we think are 'not important' to us).

How is character formed? By the process of how our innate temperament becomes 'engraved' by the external influences of our environment (parents, teachers, peers, events). However, this process is life-long and ultimately our character is our own choice. Anne Frank, who died in a Nazi concentration camp, was only 13 when she wrote in her diary: "The formation of a person's character lies in their own hands."

We need to start to thinking about character again, both as individuals and as a society. Without the cultivation of our moral character we cannot achieve happiness as individuals and justice as societies. Let's heed the often quoted adage: "Watch your thoughts, for they become words. Watch your words, for they become actions. Watch your actions, for they become habits. Watch your habits, for they become your character. And watch your character, for it becomes your destiny."

Sabine Leitner



Living the Samurai Myth : the Philosophy of Bushido¹

The word Samurai originally meant ‘those who serve’, although individuals of this elite warrior class in medieval Japan were also referred to as *Bushi*, or warrior. And *Bushido* was the code of morality which the Samurai were meant to follow, not just in battle, but also in day-to-day activity. Speaking of this code in his book *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, which is widely considered to be an authority on the subject, Inazo Nitobe says that it was not written down anywhere, but had organically formed over centuries. Even though the Samurai comprised less than 10% of the Japanese population at the time, traces of their morality are still found in the everyday life of Japan.

The spirit of service which is embodied in the doctor’s profession, seeks to ensure that self-interest or personal preference should not cause deviation from duty. Lawyers too, whether on one side of the case in hand, or the other, are ideally guided by the principles of justice and truth, above every other consideration. Similarly, the Samurai were trained to be guided by the spirit of *Bushido*, a moral code of conduct, towards nobility, the eternal human values.

Its guidelines never gave clear-cut lists of do’s and don’ts, but demanded internal purification so as to learn to independently discern between what is right to do and what might be deemed dishonourable. Nitobe describes the virtues that characterized this Samurai nobility as rectitude, courage, benevolence, politeness, and mercy, amongst others, in great detail.

Zen Buddhism, Shintoism, and the teachings of Confucius seem to have had a great influence in shaping *Bushido* in its practical and moral approach. An anecdote shared by Nitobe illustrates this: A foremost teacher of swordsmanship, on seeing his disciple master the art, tells him, ‘Beyond this my instruction must give way to Zen teachings.’

Nitobe points out that the teachings of Confucius and Mencius also had a strong influence, drawing a direct relationship between the practice of values by individuals and the resulting collective social order. Being virtuous was therefore regarded as an individual responsibility of self towards society, and not just a goal for personal growth. For example, the highest requirement that defined a ruler was Benevolence, according to Confucius, which was a central virtue of *Bushido*.

The Samurai were said to be very loyal to their feudal lords, and fought in service of their masters, ready always to lay down their lives. But if the master were to go against morality, a good Samurai would do all that he could to explain the honourable stand. If he failed to convince, the Samurai would prove his sincerity by taking his own life so as not to compromise his integrity, remaining loyal to his code of conduct, without having to betray the master. This was considered an honourable death, regarded nobler than living without values.

1. This is an abridged version of an article appearing in *The Acropolis*, the magazine of New Acropolis India:
<https://theacropolis.in/magazine/living-the-samurai-myth/>

Rectitude was another essential virtue to be mastered. Nitobe describes it as aiming a straight arrow at what is right, and to shoot. It seems simple; as soon as you recognize something as right, just do it. Is it simple? Yes. Is it easy? Not always. Why?

It takes courage to surpass our comforts, to do what is right despite the difficulties. Hence, for the Samurai, courage was not relevant only in the face of an external battle, but also when there is a need to live fully each day. Similarly, can we too dare to live with a sense of adventure, and extract the beauty of life amidst adversities?

While on the one hand the Samurai had the courage to lay down their own lives with serenity on a battlefield when needed, on the other hand it is also said that they cherished the breath of life in every single moment. It seems to suggest that there is an air of humour in their approach, a lightness towards life, undeterred by external circumstance; a sensitivity to beauty, situations and relationships and yet ever ready to let go with a poetic smile, if duty demands. Nitobe illustrates this seeming paradox using another anecdote: Dokan, the great builder of the castle of Tokyo, was pierced through with a spear. His assassin, knowing the poetical predilection of his victim, accompanied his thrust with this couplet, "Ah! How in moments like these our heart doth grudge the light of life." Whereupon the expiring hero, undaunted by the mortal wound in his side, added the lines: "... had not, in hours of peace, it learned to lightly look on life."

There is a phrase which goes: *Bushi no nasake*, which speaks of the tenderness of the warrior, suggesting that true power comes not from a position of external authority. Nor does it come from brute force. Instead, true power is the ability to uphold a choice, to exercise mercy, to forgive and be compassionate. These are not a sign of weakness, but an expression of inner strength.

It follows that benevolence and politeness in manners was important to develop. Another anecdote describes a stranger who stops a person with a small parasol, enough for just one, on the street to ask for some address. Even though it is sunny, and answering may take long, the one with the parasol will close it first, out of respect, and then answer. He would rather partake in the suffering with the stranger, if he cannot alleviate it.

Can we rebuild such a value-based culture today? Where shall we start? Today it is evident that the one who can calculate best within seconds, and has all the knowledge about politics, the economy, science, languages, etc. is celebrated most. But then, what really is the difference between a computer and a human being? What sets us apart from the machines that we create, as well as from the animals and plants?



Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147-1199)

Traditions universally highlight that human beings have the capacity to choose nobility, and uphold values at all odds. We can imagine and find solutions to challenges together, and we can choose to live in harmony with one another, and with life. The principles of *Bushido* can serve to awaken our conscience, in order to reach our best potential, individually and collectively. Just as the mythical Phoenix rises from its own ashes, might we too dare to revive the Samurai myth and awaken once again, our inner warrior?

Shraddha Shetty

PHILOSOPHY FOR A VUCA¹ WORLD

The acronym 'VUCA' was initially used by the US military to describe the more Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous world that came into being after the end of the Cold War. It was then adopted by business as a framework for dealing with the rapid changes taking place in technology and global markets.

Although some people question the whole concept of VUCA and take the view that the world has always been Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous, I would suggest that there are times in history when life is more stable – such as the Pax Augusta of the Roman Empire or the Tang dynasty in China – and others which are characterised by rapid change and confusion – such as the end of the Roman Empire as it rapidly descended into the Dark Ages. In such times, greater adaptability is needed on the part of both individuals and societies to navigate these times of transition successfully.

VOLATILITY

The word 'volatile' was first defined in Dr Johnson's famous 18th century dictionary as "something able to fly". From that it came to mean something flighty, fickle and able to change from one moment to the next. The Covid-19 pandemic and the world's reaction to it has been a prime example of volatility.

It was something that took the whole world (barring a few experts) by surprise.

How is it possible to find inner stability and lasting happiness in a world that is constantly changing?



1. This article is loosely based on a series of talks given by various speakers at New Acropolis London to celebrate *World Philosophy Day* in November 2020.

According to Plato, the key lies in realizing that this world of change is only the flickering shadow of another reality that is stable and real. Philosophy, or love of wisdom, is the search for that reality which does not change. The first step, as the Stoic and Buddhist philosophers have pointed out, is to accept the inherent instability and impermanence of material things, and even of thoughts and feelings. This acceptance can lead us to look for stability and happiness in our inner resources and in a meta-physical dimension of reality.

In consumer societies, there is an emphasis on having, rather than being. Happiness and prestige are perceived as coming from having those things considered to be desirable (which change from age



to age). But any dispassionate observer can see that the possession of material things does not necessarily bring happiness. As Aristotle pointed out, wealth may add to our happiness, but it does not cause it. Happiness comes from within, so if we want to be happy we need to change our focus from having to being, as the psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm recommended in his book *To Have or to Be*.

UNCERTAINTY

A volatile world will by nature also be uncertain. Who knows what will happen tomorrow? Will Covid be ‘conquered’ this year? Will humanity become extinct as a result of climate change? How much more will the political landscape of the world change over the coming years? The future looks extremely uncertain.

These uncertainties often lead to many fears and anxieties, so perhaps the first thing to do would be to trust more and let go of our fears. After all, as the poet Robert Burns said (in Scots dialect), “the best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft agley”. In other words, we can make all sorts of plans for our lives, but things won’t always go the way we want. Even Napoleon, with all his intelligence and willpower, ended up defeated, with his masterly plans in ruins.

Imagine, however, if there were no uncertainty – if we could know exactly what would happen tomorrow and every day for the rest of our lives. If everything were predictable, life would be very boring. In Buddhist philosophy, uncertainty is seen as an opportunity for transformation.

Yet, for some reason, the unknown generally produces fear in us... though not in children. For them, the unknown is something to be explored with curiosity and wonder. Another reason for fearing the unknown is that we are attached to things we already possess and fear to lose them. Perhaps if we were to accept that nothing is secure, we would become more free. Instead of worrying what a new situation will be like, we could wonder about how it might be, as a child would.

COMPLEXITY

This is one of the ‘VUCAs’ it would be difficult to disagree on: our world is definitely more complex than any bygone age we know of. Just think about the inside of a computer, or all the algorithms and robots on the internet, the satellites in space, the immense variety of apps, the advances in AI and biotechnology, the systems within systems, all of them interconnected and interdependent. Compare this to the Middle Ages, with its monastic libraries of a few hundred handwritten and hand-illustrated books and manuscripts, or even the complex bureaucracy of the Roman Empire, and we can see that our world has become immensely complex, and hence increasingly fragile if any of these interdependent systems should break down, affecting other complex systems in a domino effect.

What is the best way of dealing with all this complexity, from a philosophical point of view?

Marcus Aurelius wrote in his *Meditations*: “Contentment comes from doing a few things and doing them well.” Perhaps this was just wishful thinking on his part, because his own life as Emperor of all Rome must have been pretty complex. Nevertheless I believe it encapsulates a truth which is still applicable today. Although we cannot escape complexity entirely, we can at least avoid unnecessary complexity and allow time for simple activities such as walking in nature or having meaningful conversations with real people, with our devices switched off. Let us not forget that it is we, human beings, who have created this complex world. We can begin to simplify it if we wish.

At the same time, we should not deny or reject complexity, because to do so would be to run away from life itself. In ancient Egypt there was a guiding principle: Unity in Plurality², a principle which we can also find in the cosmogonies of all the world, as well as in the scientific paradigm. In the beginning was a single principle and from this emerged an infinite multiplicity. Today we have lost touch with that principle of unity and have become lost in the labyrinth of complexity.

AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity refers to a lack of clarity about a person or situation, when there may be more than one interpretation or meaning. This might be due to incomplete or contradictory information, or where information is too inaccurate to draw clear conclusions. There are many different types of ambiguity: semantic, scientific, moral, philosophical, and so on.

Often, ambiguity is unavoidable and indeed should not be avoided, because to do so would be to oversimplify life. For example, as the Existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir pointed out, there is an inherent ambiguity between freedom and responsibility. Absolute freedom is impossible, because our actions have an effect on others and vice versa. At the same time, if we were to go to the other extreme of absolute responsibility, we would never

dare to act for fear of affecting the freedom of others. The solution perhaps lies in that well-tried phrase: “live and let live”. For de Beauvoir, we should try to act in such a way as to allow the freedom of others, but we must be willing to restrict the freedom of those who seek to eradicate the freedom of others (i.e. tyrants), in order to preserve the freedom of all.

Ambiguity, like the other three ‘VUCAs’, can produce feelings of anxiety and lead to paralyzation: when we don’t know how to interpret a situation, we may just not act. But as de Beauvoir says, “Since we do not succeed in fleeing it, let us, therefore, try to look the truth in the face. Let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity. It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting³.”

There are other positives to ambiguity. In novels for example, morally ambiguous characters and situations add depth to a story. In poetry, it is often ambiguity – double meanings, different levels of interpretation – that expand our consciousness and allow us to go beyond rational understanding to perceive Life itself. The following excerpt from Keats’s *Ode to a Nightingale*, is a good example of ambiguity and different levels of meaning:

*Tender is the night, and haply the Queen-Moon is on
her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light, save what from heaven is
with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.*

To sum up, how can philosophy help us to live in a VUCA world? Philosophy gives depth of understanding and can lead us to the gates of the transcendental truths of life. After that, as the Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus tells us, it is a matter of opening our (inner) eyes and seeing. This ‘seeing’ can give us the serenity and enthusiasm not only to survive, but also to thrive in a VUCA – or any other kind of – world.

Julian Scott

2. See *Thebes* by J.A.Livraga.

3. Simone de Beauvoir *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

The Ancient Mysteries and the Western Tradition

To research the ancient Mysteries has always held a particular fascination. As we have been left with only few scattered clues, the study of this topic remains challenging and rewarding at the same time.



I believe that if so few traces have been left it is because the Mysteries dealt with the most sacred and intimate 'nature' of both the human being and the universe.

This article will focus on the ancient Mysteries as we know them in the West, while keeping in mind that this is a universal tradition which we can find in many ancient civilisations across the globe. Before dealing with the ancient *Mysteries* we must consider what is implied in the concept of *initiation*. By looking at the etymology of both terms, we discover that they share common roots.

The word mystery comes from the Greek *mystērion* (plural *mysteria*) which in turn derives from *myein* (to close one's mouth, to keep silent). Here we find the allusion to something secret or hidden and also the inability to communicate something whose nature is ineffable.

The term *initiation* derives from the Latin *inire*, which means to enter or to penetrate. In Latin *penetralia* refers to the most hidden, most secret and intimate part of something. In the Greek tradition, the terms relating to initiation are *Teleutan* (to die), *Telein* (to finish or to accomplish) and *myein*.

From the above definitions we can deduce that initiation and the Mysteries belonged to a domain into which one entered and of which absolutely nothing could be said. And why could nothing be said? Because the experiences of initiation and the states of consciousness related to them are subjective, internal and non-communicable. In other words, what was lived and experienced during the Mysteries can be known only by those who have gone through

those initiations. In a fragment, Aristotle tells us that the initiates did not learn (*mathein*), but experienced (*pathein*) the Mysteries and were 'brought' to an appropriate state of mind. It was not a matter of theoretical learning but of internalizing contents that were the experience of the 'inner man'.

The Mysteries dealt with initiation practices and knowledge which by reason of their nature had to be kept hidden from the masses. The type of knowledge I am referring to concerns the path of spiritual transformation and rebirth (death, transformation and rebirth being very prominent features of the Mysteries). The Mysteries sought to change the very nature of the human being. Through a process of spiritual purification and elevation the human being would increasingly come to resemble the Gods and would come to recognise his divine origin. Only those who had acquired the moral and intellectual qualities and the spiritual sensitivity necessary to uphold such a lofty ideal would naturally be welcomed into the actual Mysteries.

At this point, it is important to highlight the fact that most of the records we have relate to the public aspect of the Mysteries. As with religion, we have to distinguish the exoteric from the esoteric. When discussing the Eleusian Mysteries of Greece, for instance, scholars distinguish between the Greater and the Lesser Mysteries, the latter involving the participation of everyone in the community except for murderers and those who were unable to speak Greek. This obviously represents the majority of the people who took part in the public aspect of the Mysteries. From this large group of Mystery candidates, a much smaller number was secretly selected, to be part of the circle of true initiates. The process of selection would have already taken place in the schools of Mysteries, of which I will say few words later.

To take another example: in Egypt we have to distinguish between ceremonies which were 'public' and rites which were performed inside the temple by those few individuals who were allowed to enter that sacred precinct. The aim of the 'public' ceremony was to draw together a relatively large group of individuals who would provide the magnetic focus

for the descent of certain spiritual and elemental powers, which would help to regenerate the whole community. The initiation rites dedicated to the few had more specific 'magical' aims and led the participant to a complete transformation of their inner nature and to the spiritual apotheosis of the human being (elevation to a divine status and communion with the Gods) .

The Mysteries were always based on an archetypal myth, the narration of a divine story of a meta-

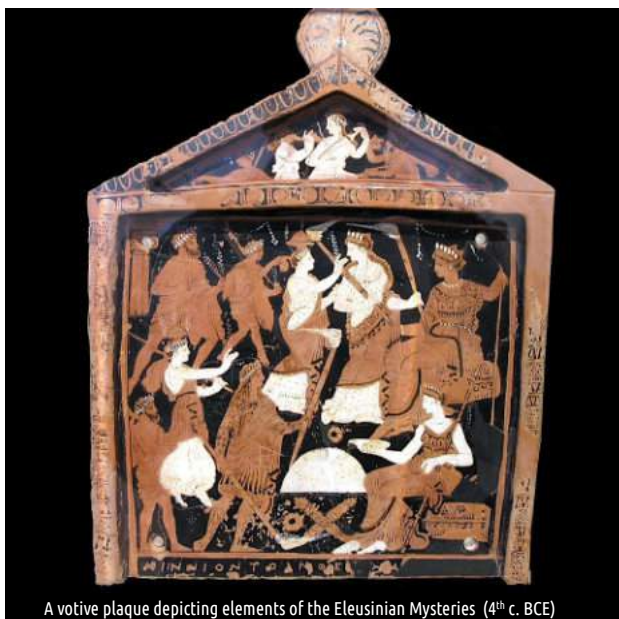


Triptolemus receiving wheat sheaves from Demeter and blessings from Persephone.

historical type, which at the same time remains embedded in human life and man's existential condition. To get closer to the hidden meaning of the ancient Mysteries, we have to try to decode the spiritual message contained in these myths. Because a myth is essentially *symbolic*, we have to study its different levels of meaning and interpretation: the psychological (related to the transformation of man's psyche), cosmological (related to the knowledge of the invisible aspect of the Cosmos and Nature), anthropogenic (related to the origin of man), initiatic (related to inner experiences and the unfoldment of the spiritual potential in the human being), etc.

Aristotle also tells us that, in the ancient Mysteries, something was told, something was shown, and

something was done. The thing told was a story or myth; in the Eleusinian Mysteries, it was the myth of Demeter and Persephone, including the rescue of the latter from the underworld. The things shown included various symbols associated with the myth: a basket, a cup with a drink, a pomegranate, an ear of wheat, etc. The thing done was a ceremony acting out the myth. The actual stage on which that performance took place was known as the *Telesterion* (initiation hall). In that ceremony, the initiates learned what death really is. They also came to realise, in various degrees, their own immortality.



A votive plaque depicting elements of the Eleusinian Mysteries (4th c. BCE)

On this journey, death presents itself to the consciousness of the initiate as an integral part of life, as a passage to a different state of consciousness. This is actually the opposite of what happens today, where the reality of death has been removed from everyday life as if it did not exist.

In the ancient Mysteries, we find constant references to agricultural symbolism and natural cycles (see also the Mysteries of Dionysus, Orpheus and those of Osiris and Isis, to mention but a few). To cultivate the land meant self-cultivation, but also to enter into communion with the cosmic whole (the Earth, the rhythm of the Sun, Moon and Stars). This unitary vision, which was a kind of mystical revelation, is what in Eleusis was known as *Epotheia*. The famous symbolic gesture of the hierophant of Eleusis who reaps an ear of grain in silence alludes to this

mystical experience. This gesture is connected to an experience that is neither mental nor emotional but is intuitive and direct. The ear of grain is an image of something generative, it reminds us of the *Physis* of the Pre-socratics – which is both ‘Nature’ and ‘Origin’. The ear of grain also represents multiplicity (the various grains of corn). Harvesting the ear in silence alludes to the falling on the ground and decay of the grains with their consequent rebirth in spring, but it also alludes to an original unity that manifests itself as multiplicity. There is therefore this sense of belonging to a unitary and original consciousness, of which Heraclitus tells us that ‘it loves hiding itself’.

Self-cultivation, the development of moral qualities, the unfoldment of man's latent spiritual powers, all this formed part of an educational (from the latin *educere*: to lead out) system. In these ancient higher-learning institutions (known as schools of Mysteries) the study of the inner nature of man and of surrounding nature was part of a step-by-step didactic journey. When the ‘student’ had acquired certain moral and intellectual qualifications he was introduced to the hidden and sacred aspects of the Mysteries. Disciplines such as philosophy, science or medicine, in their most profound aspects, also remained secret sciences, that is, they kept their roots in the Mysteries. Philosophy had, at its innermost core, an initiatic and spiritual character, which gave access to intuitive truths that transcend logical-discursive thought. Even Plato, who studied in the higher-learning centres of Egypt (probably in Heliopolis), shows great familiarity in his works with the Mystery teachings.

This ‘didactic’ approach was not limited to specific brotherhoods practising this or that cult, but it set the tone for a whole culture. We know that many Greek artists and philosophers were (to a lesser or greater extent) initiates of the Mysteries. And it is not too difficult to realise that higher states of consciousness coincide with the natural tendency of wanting to translate these inner experiences into sociopolitical actions. In other words, to speak of Western civilisation also means to speak of its invisible roots, the Mystery tradition.

Agostino Dominici

Beethoven

the Prometheus of Western Music

December 16, 2020 was the 250th anniversary of the great German composer, Ludwig van Beethoven. Although thousands of publications have been written about him, we would like to focus in this article on the Promethean aspect in his music, which is particularly evident in his Third Symphony, the 'Eroica'.

Prometheus was a Titan in Greek mythology who stole fire from the gods and gave it as a gift to human beings. For this he was cruelly punished by Zeus, being chained to Mount Caucasus and condemned to have his liver eaten by an eagle every day. The next day it would grow back again and his torment would be

repeated, until finally the hero Heracles came to liberate him.

The heavenly fire symbolizes the power of the mind, and Prometheus represents that generous spirit which acts out of compassion for suffering humanity. By giving us mind, he gave us idealism, progress, ingenuity, but also frustration at seeing the gap that exists between ideals and reality and the 'titanic' effort required to bridge it.

Beethoven was one of those human beings who feel a kinship with Prometheus, those who are imbued with energy, will and strength, courage and



generosity. They are the human beings who suffer for humanity and also suffer because of their own imperfection. Beethoven wrote in his notebook: "I curse my hands because they cannot write in musical notes the celestial music that the angels are dictating to me."

He was a child of the French revolution. He regarded Napoleon as a leader who was capable of carrying out a political revolution and felt that he himself was responsible for launching an artistic-musical revolution. He did not recognize any privileges of birth or wealth, but believed intensely in his own genius. Analysing Beethoven's letters we can see that Beethoven had been observing Napoleon for many years. They were both the same age; both originally from humble origins and both had worked hard to move something in the world, Napoleon in politics and Beethoven in music. Beethoven saw Napoleon as his "elder brother," his "better self." Beethoven wrote a letter in 1798 in which, after years of doubt and adaptation, he said that he had fully assimilated "the principles of Napoleon" into himself.

Philosophy and religion

During his stay in Bonn, Beethoven enrolled at the university to study Philosophy and Literature. His readings included Homer, Marcus Aurelius, Shakespeare, Klopstock and Schiller. He conversed with the most famous artists and nobles of his time. He liked to debate with others about religion, philosophy, politics and literature. Enthusiastically, Beethoven wrote down a famous phrase of Immanuel Kant in his notebook: "The moral law within us, the starry sky above us - Kant!".

Beethoven's religious understanding was simple and undogmatic. Like a golden thread, we can see in his letters and notes a devotional faith towards "the Deity". He had no interest in Christian theological sermons, but throughout his life a noble ideal of duty and self-sacrifice in service to a higher cause became deeper and stronger within him.

The Creatures of Prometheus and the Eroica Symphony

There is a link between Beethoven's only ballet, *The Creatures of Prometheus* and his Symphony No. 3, the *Eroica*. The basic story of the ballet is as follows: with the fire stolen from heaven, Prometheus wants to give life to his creatures, a woman and a man of clay. They wake up and take their first steps, stiff, like puppets. Prometheus is disappointed, his creatures are still not capable of thinking and feeling, they have neither empathy nor culture. Prometheus asks Apollo to educate them so that they can become real human beings. Apollo asks the Muses to provide this education. We can see in this story Beethoven's view of the value of



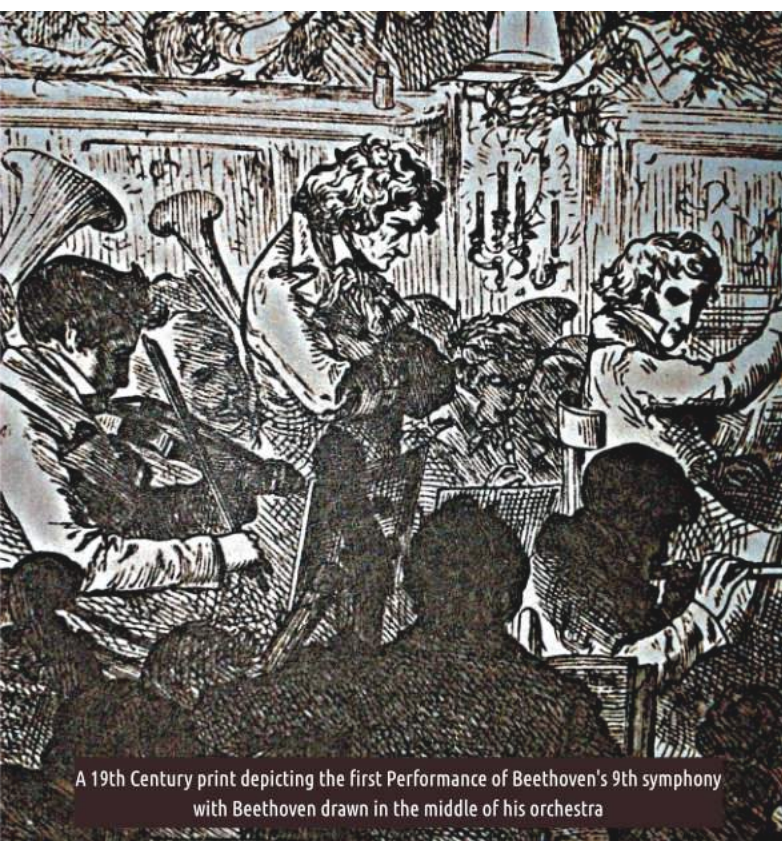
Relief depicting the creation of Man by Prometheus

the arts, particularly music, in educating human beings so that they may become more human and more 'Promethean'.

The myth of Prometheus also had a political significance. Beethoven originally dedicated his Third Symphony to Napoleon, his "political-cultural hero", although he later removed this dedication when he felt that Napoleon had betrayed his revolutionary ideals by declaring himself emperor. The Third Symphony, premiered in 1804, is one of the most revolutionary and at the same time most popular works in the musical history of the West. It broke sharply with the habits of

listeners, for whom listening to music had mostly meant fun and relaxation, something secondary, though desirable; a way of enhancing the value of social events, where music had to be pleasing, superficial, “nice”.

Years later, close to his death, a friend asked Beethoven which symphony he considered his best, thinking that Beethoven would say the Fifth or the Ninth. He was surprised when Beethoven replied: “The Eroica”. It is a very long symphony (over 50 minutes), very difficult to play, both technically and energetically, and also in terms of a convincing interpretation - even for philharmonic orchestras of the highest level.



A 19th Century print depicting the first Performance of Beethoven's 9th symphony with Beethoven drawn in the middle of his orchestra

Beethoven needed three years to compose this work and in the summers he retired to Heiligenstadt, a village to the North of Vienna, close to his beloved Nature, his permanent source of inspiration. We have to consider his personal circumstances. In 1796 he started to become deaf, and in the early 1800s, at the same time as he was working on the Eroica, he experienced terrible moments of sadness, to the

point of depression. His hearing became much worse and his doctors' recommendations did not help at all. He thought he was going to die soon, and in 1802 he wrote his famous “Heiligenstadt Testament”, in which he confessed at the end: “It was virtue that upheld me in time of misery. Thanks to it and to my art I did not end my life by suicide.”

In his *Eroica*, he put into musical form not only the ideals of the French Revolution, the love of freedom, the will to overcome all forms of servitude, but also his own heroic struggle against his deafness, or rather his inner struggle to accept his deafness and, consequently, his isolation from social and personal life, to focus on his mission to serve humanity through his music, as he also wrote in his Testament: “It was only my art that held me back. Ah, it seemed to me impossible to leave the world until I had brought forth all that I felt was within me.”

There are many other famous works that we could classify as part of that “Promethean creed” which is so particular to Beethoven: the *Egmont* Overture; *Fidelio* (also called ‘the opera of humanity’), the *Missa Solemnis* (sacred music, but not ecclesiastical, full of piety), the *Ninth Symphony* (Beethoven wrote that “the most excellent receive joy through sufferings”) and the 32 piano sonatas – the “New Testament” of pianists. Works with such mystical passages that one wonders in what spiritual worlds Beethoven was when that music was “coming down”. Music that captures us in a kind of “sacred shudder” that dissolves the petty things of everyday life and brings us closer to the true human being, regardless of their beliefs, race, sex, age or education.

Sebastián Pérez and Walter Gutdeutsch

Re-enchanting the World



Photo by Louis from Pexels

As a part of his 'de-sacralisation thesis', historian and sociologist Max Weber described the 'disenchantment of the world', a scenario of industrialised practice and attitudes leading culture to a point where people are no longer open to ideas of mystery or magic.

In this disenchanted world, human life is dominated by logic, everything becomes predictable, knowable and mechanistic. These industrial and scientific revolutions were undoubtedly positive and necessary in some key areas. However efficiency and production processes accelerated to their extremes and have tended to diverge away from any concern or awareness for nature. The sacred and enchanted aspects of human beings disappeared and any consequences beyond the

immediate needs of production were of little concern. Charles Dickens with his ruthless character Ebenezer Scrooge perhaps epitomises this disenchanted form of human life, where the separation between daily living and the sacred is almost complete...

Furthermore, religious historian and author Mircea Eliade suggests that "The sacred is an element of the structure of consciousness, not a stage in the history of consciousness": try as we might, even in a disenchanted world, sacred structures remain. Eliade explains that rather than seeing themselves as at home in the cosmos, the modern individual has come to occupy their own shattered universes, populated by rituals of personal significance. Birthdays and anniversaries replaced 'holy

days' and transitions in nature. Secular religions, like football, club culture and festivals became the pilgrimages and temples of industrial and post-industrial life.

At the dawning of a new moment in history, however, we find many young people expressing themselves in mysterious or 'magical' ways. Marking the seasons or lunar cycles and a growing interest in astrological symbolism, it is not uncommon to find 'bio' descriptions on social media along the lines of 'Sagittarius Sun / Libra Rising Girl' or 'Very Leo Moon'. There are also crystals, herbal teas, tarot readings not to mention the phenomena of the urban shaman and ayahuasca ceremonies. All 'non-rational' yet familiar features of a contemporary cultural landscape. Today there is perhaps more readily available information on these topics than at any point in history. Information is not knowledge, however, and can an individual with an internet connection, dabbling with ceremonial drugs, gurus and city living, really reach the profound depths of spiritual experience?

Writing about contemporary or Neo-Paganism, Professor Denise Cush¹ describes it as traditions with an ancient root, re-conceptualised for the modern world and unified by an understanding of the sacredness of nature. Along with Druidry and Wicca, Professor Cush

includes aspects of Hermeticism and esoteric Buddhism in her assessment and goes on to compare examples of Neo-Paganism with ancient mystery traditions. Comparable, Cush says, in the sense that knowledge is revealed to the individual through ceremonial or ritual experience. The sacred cannot be read about or learnt

symbolic action to bring about change or transformation". In this she perhaps summarises what is occurring, an aspiration to change: coming into contact with the transcendent, mysterious or magical in order to reveal new possibilities within the manifested world.

The ancient traditions, however, have always understood that change is not immediate,



intellectually, rather it is discovered through one's own life and actions.

As with anything in the current times, there is the danger that the sacredness of nature, ritual and ceremony could become commodified, bought like a pair of trainers or a handbag. What is the purpose of re-enchanting our lives and the world in which we live, why rediscover ritual and the symbolic dimension? Professor Cush explains ritual as "the use of

requiring patience and commitment. Neo-Paganism and the approaches to mystery and magic which we see today, however, do suggest new aspirations for culture. Most importantly of all, perhaps, is the desire for human beings to take their place within nature and the cosmos once more, rather than continue to live in the shattered fragments of our individual worlds.

Siobhan Farrar

1. RE:Online. Paganism, Professor D. Cush
<https://www.reonline.org.uk/subject-knowledge/paganism/festivals-and-celebrations/>

Plastic

the Blessing that Became a Curse

Plastic was one of the greatest inventions of the 20th century, but it became the doom of the 21st. Since the first synthetic plastic product emerged in 1907 in the form of *Bakelite*, it became an instant success thanks to its two unbeatable features: plasticity and cheapness. Plastic materials can be formed in several ways and can be used almost everywhere, from packaging

and construction to textile manufacture. If we check what we wear or use – our clothes, smart phones, lunchboxes or bags – it is very likely that all of them contain plastic in some degree. From the 1950s, when mass production discovered plastic and started to use it on a bigger scale, plastic production began to grow exponentially. 65 years later, in 2015, primary plastics production was 407 million tonnes, and around three-quarters



Photo by Magda Ehlers from Pexels

of it (302 million tonnes) ended up as waste.

This is a big problem, because plastic is a non-organic, non-degradable material, so that after disposal it does not disappear or perish. Instead, it stays with us, polluting our environment, and ourselves in the long run.

Improperly managed plastic waste, through drains and rivers, ends up in the oceans, creating large garbage patches and killing the living creatures there. Today, microplastics can be found everywhere, from the bottom of the ocean to the top of the Himalayas, and they will not disappear quickly as degradation of such materials takes from 100 to 1000 years.

Millions of tons of plastic waste are not used again, but discarded, and only 20% of it is recycled. Packaging, the dominant generator of plastic waste, is responsible for almost half of the global total, with 42%. Building and construction is the second largest sector utilizing plastic (19% of the total), and the textile industry comes third. The biggest plastic polluters of the world, not surprisingly, are the developed and industrialized countries, like the United States, China or Brazil. In Europe, Russia and Germany hold the first place in total plastic waste generation. But while plastic waste is disposed of adequately in most developed countries, in poor countries like the Sub-Saharan region or in India, waste is

disposed of inadequately and is therefore at risk of polluting the land and the oceans. Moreover, the non-recycled waste of developed countries often ends up in these poor countries, bringing another wave of problems to the already existing waste problem.

So, what can people do, if they feel a responsibility for nature and the health of the world, including their own health? Stopping plastic production around the world from one day to another is an option, but not a realistic one. Although it seems that we cannot exist today without plastic in our highly industrialized societies, we can definitely reduce plastic consumption. Maybe we need to give up a certain level of comfort, but it does not mean we have to give up everything. There are cases when plastic is still useful and necessary, but in most cases, we need less plastic than we actually use. Here are some ideas and hints that we can already follow, even starting from today:

- Stop using single-use plastics, such as plastic straws, plastic bags, or plastic lids on takeaway cups, and use instead paper straws (or no straws at all), washable textile bags, and reusable cups with no lids.
- In the bathroom, use bar soap instead of liquid soap, or refill the same plastic bottle with liquid at wholefood shops. Soap bars are cheaper and contain less chemicals too.

- Buy food from bulk food stores, avoid packaged foods and pre-packaged products. Always use your own bag when you are shopping.

- Recycle old mobile phones or buy used ones. If you don't need your phone any more, sell it or give away rather than binning it. Mobile phones contain several plastic pieces, as well as polluting metals.

- Use bamboo cotton buds with recycled cardboard stems and bamboo toothbrushes. Refill shampoo bottles.

- Skip plastic bottled drinks, buy drinks that come in glass bottles, or use your own reusable drink bottle.

- Reuse old plastic products by giving them a second chance, such as using plastic containers as plant pots.

- Sometimes it can happen you get a plastic bag from someone even if you do not ask for it. Clean it and reuse it as many times as you can, but do not throw it out.

- Do an environmental protection volunteering activity regularly, like joining a beach clean-up, or pick up litter from the woods or a local park. Such activities keep you fit and help nature as well.

Istvan Orban

The Mysterious Yggdrasil

An old Norse poem, *Völuspá* or 'Prophecy of the Seeress' (written down in the 12th century), tells the story of the birth and life of the universe, as well as its end. At the very beginning, when the seeress remembers the time when there was no land, no seas, no earth, no sky – only the primordial void out of which everything came forth – she recalls the seed from which grew a tree of the universe, time and life: Yggdrasil.

That giant ash, “the noblest of trees”, is at the centre of the universe, binding it together and supporting it, and at the same time it is all of the universe. Its roots and branches cradle all nine worlds of the Norse cosmology. In the middle there is a tangible world – Midgard (“middle abode”) – the realm of humans, surrounded by the ocean, in which a gigantic serpent dwells and encircles the world. Beneath Midgard, there is a sombre and glacial place – Niflheim (“home of mist”) – the underworld. In Yggdrasil’s crown there is a dwelling of the gods – Asgard (“abode of gods”). From this realm, the All-Father Odin can see all other worlds. It is near the World Tree in Asgard that the gods gather to make their decisions.



"The Ash Yggdrasil" (1886) by Friedrich Wilhelm Heine

Yggdrasil has three roots, each growing in a different direction. One extends to the edge of the world into the wild and rocky desert land of the enemies of gods, the giants; the second, deep into Niflheim, and the third into Midgard (in the *Poetic Edda*) or Asgard (in the *Prose Edda*).



Odin sacrificing himself upon Yggdrasil (1895) by Lorenz Frølich

The World Tree is a living entity and is nourished by three wells (initially there was possibly only one). Beside the root that penetrates the land of giants flows the fountain of Mimir (“memory”), in which wisdom and knowledge are hidden. It was from this well that Odin himself desired to drink to know everything and had to sacrifice one of his eyes. Since then,

Odin’s eye lies at the bottom of Mimir’s well. Out of the second well of the underworld (“bubbling boiling cauldron”) spring all the rivers of the world (the *Grimnismal*). And the fountain near the third root is called the Well of Fate. It is home to three prophetic sisters (Norns), weavers and carvers of destiny: Fate, Becoming and Obligation. They rule over past, present and future. Not even the gods can undo what they have predicted.

The magnificent ash is home to many mythological creatures. The three vertical dimensions – underworld, earth and heavens – correspond to three creatures in the *Voluspa*: the dragon/serpent gnawing at the roots, the eagle nesting in the crown and a squirrel running up and down the trunk, provoking both the eagle and the serpent. Near Yggdrasil in Asgard lives a goat that provides drink to the fallen warriors feasting in Valhalla. The leaves of the Tree of Life give her sustenance.

Time in the manifested world is not merciful towards anything. Life is ever-changing and has to be renewed, so the Tree as a symbol of life is also changing and in need of nourishment and renewal. The *Poetic Edda* says: “The tree Yggdrasil endures more pain than any men guess. It’s eaten from above by the deer, on the side by rot, from beneath by serpents.” Every day the Norns have to draw sacred water from the Well of Fate and sprinkle the Tree with it so that it will not

wither and rot away. Hence Yggdrasil is renewed and remains evergreen.

The dew of Yggdrasil, called honey dew, falls upon the world’s valleys. Equivalent to the ancient Greek ambrosia, it is gathered by the bees – those who work with perseverance and are able to perceive the wisdom of nature.

The Cosmic Tree has many names, but Yggdrasil is the most common. It means “horse of Ygg” (one of the names of Odin is Ygg or Terrible One). Once, the legend says, Odin sacrificed himself to learn the wisdom of the runes. He pierced himself with his spear and hung for nine days on the World Tree.

The Tree contains the life of the cosmos and its renewal. Another story tells that at the beginning of the world two human beings emerged from Yggdrasil and populated the world. At the end of time, when Ragnarok takes place, Yggdrasil will shiver and groan, but will survive. A couple of humans will find refuge in its trunk and, nourished by its dew, they will live through the destruction of the world to start again in a new cycle thanks to the Tree of Life.

Nataliya Petlevych

