

The Hoop and the Tree: An Ecological Model of Health

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Summary

A robust model of the fully-mature, whole, healthy psyche may be described as consisting of two “dimensions,” called here the “Hoop” and the “Tree.” The Hoop is a horizontal dimension having to do with relationship in all its aspects. The Tree is a vertical dimension, having to do with aspiration, as well as with roots and grounding. To be fully-mature, a psyche must have both of these dimensions fully-developed and in balance with each other. The existence of the Hoop-and-Tree structure is strongly supported by evidence from the world’s wisdom traditions and from modern psychology and science. The Hoop-and-Tree model shows that in essence, psychology is ecopsychology. The model also provides useful orientation in personal growth, therapy, and applied community psychology (social action).

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a vertical axis running through the center of your being, from deep in the ground to your highest aspiration or to your image of the divine. Imagine, also, that axis encircled by a hoop on a horizontal plane, with the axis intersecting the center of the hoop. What you have just imagined is the abstract form of a model for the whole/healthy/ideal human psyche. In abstract form it resembles a gyroscope. There are many elaborations of this form, but this simple form is the basis. The great wisdom traditions of the world, as well as many findings of contemporary psychology, tell us that this form is indeed the deep structure of the whole/healthy/ideal human psyche. They also tell us what the two dimensions of this form mean.

The vertical dimension has to do, in essence, with aspiration, deepening, and individual growth. I call this dimension “the Tree” because traditional wisdom and contemporary practice associate with this dimension imagery of trees or cognates of trees, such as mountains, ladders, and pillars. Traditional Tree imagery includes the Christian Tree of the Cross, the Jewish Tree of the Menorah, and the five Pillars of Islam. Psychological Tree imagery includes the Tree of the House-Tree-Person drawing and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Work along the Tree dimension includes ascending for “peak experiences” and descending to explore one’s cultural and psychological “roots.”

The other dimension has to do with relationship in all its aspects. I call this dimension “the Hoop” because traditional wisdom and contemporary practice associate with this dimension the imagery of hoops or hoop cognates such as wheels and cycles. Traditional Hoop imagery includes the Native American Hoops of the medicine wheel and sweat lodge, the Wiccan sacred circle, and the yin-yang Hoop symbol of Taoism. Psychological Hoop imagery includes the Hoop of the social atom and the sacred circle or container of the therapeutic relationship. Of course the mandala is a Hoop which appears over and over in both traditional wisdom and psychological practice.

Taken together, the Hoop and the Tree provide a robust metaphorical model for the psychologically and spiritually healthy self. The model can help us see where a psyche is incomplete--in ourselves or in a client. In a sense the model is a compass for the journey of the archetypal hero/heroine as mapped by Joseph Campbell (1968). It won't show you which way to turn, but it *will* tell where you are and give you some orientation when choosing your direction.

The Hoop-and-Tree model also reveals the unity underlying the superficial differences of all the tribes of humanity. It shows clearly that the psyche cannot be fully mature unless it is ecological, i.e.: unless it is in appropriate relationship, in harmony, with all the elements of the ecosystem in which it is embedded.

EVIDENCE FOR THE MODEL

The world's wisdom traditions, modern and ancient, tell us that the whole, healthy psyche may be described as a dynamic in which the two dimensions of Hoop and Tree are fully developed and in balance with each other. Sigmund Freud's model, for example, was a Hoop-and-Tree model. Freud said that a healthy person was characterized by the ability to do two things well: “to love and to work” (Erikson, 1963, pp. 264-265). If we understand “to work” as to work toward something, then Freud's template for health was relationship and aspiration: the Hoop and the Tree. Carl Jung's model was even more explicitly the Hoop and the Tree. Jung said that one's innate model of wholeness, the self, is symbolized by the mandala, or Hoop, in cross-section and in profile view by the Tree (1967, p. 253). The Christian story of Jesus tells of someone asking Jesus which spiritual commandment was the first and greatest. Jesus replied that two commandments are greatest. The first is to “love the Lord your god with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” And the second is “to love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31). This is a summary of Hoop-and-Tree teaching: the Tree aspiration to the Lord and the Hoop relationship to the community. Accept Divine love (ascent/descent along the Tree axis) and then give this love to the world (Hoop). General Systems Theory suggests that the underlying deep structure of the universe is characterized by both interdependence (Hoop) and hierarchy (Tree) (Laszlo, 1972, pp. 48, 67). In fact, the Hoop-and-Tree model appears over and over again in the wisdom traditions of the world and in contemporary science and

psychology as the template for wholeness.

The Sioux holy man Black Elk had a profound vision of this template when he was nine years old, a vision which shaped his life and deeply influenced the lives of his people. As he tells it, in this vision:

I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy. (Neihardt, 1972, p. 36)

What is it that makes the Hoop and the Tree the “shape of all shapes as they must live together”? In the following discussion I refer to many of the world’s spiritual and mythological traditions. My purpose here is not to oversimplify, nor is it my purpose to assert or deny spiritual significance for any of these traditions. I am just attempting a sort of meta-analysis. These traditions represent, among other things, the psyche’s earliest and most enduring attempts to explain itself to itself. In this sense they were our first psychologies. A broad look at all of these explanations shows a consistent pattern of the Hoop and the Tree as a model for wholeness. We’ll explore first the separate attributes of the Hoop and of the Tree, and then look at their complementary dance. We will see how the Hoop-and-Tree model integrates wisdom from many disciplines, ancient and modern.

THE TRADITIONAL HOOP

According to traditional teachings, the Hoop contributes the dimension of relationship in all its aspects. Relatedness, rebirth, interdependence, the cycles of life, the cycles of time, flow, receptivity, the cycles of gift and energy, and the hoop of healing are all aspects of relationship. Traditional teachings also tell us that neither wholeness or healing is possible without the Hoop.

Traditional Hoop cultures include Native American cultures of the plains and Great Basin, European Wicca, and Chinese Taoism. The Sioux medicine man Lamé Deer says, “To our way of thinking the Indian’s symbol is the circle, the hoop. Nature wants things to be round....With us the circle stands for the togetherness of people who sit with one another around the campfire, relatives and friends united in peace while the pipe passes from hand to hand....The nation was only a part of the universe, in itself circular and made of the earth, which is round, of the stars, which are round. The moon, the horizon, the rainbow--circles within circles within circles, with no beginning and no end” (1972, p. 112).

In the traditional Sioux world-view healing is accomplished by re-establishing right relationship with “all my relations,” often in the Hoop-shaped space of the sweat lodge. Similarly, the Native American medicine wheel meditation leads one to rebalancing relationship with the mineral realm, the vegetable realm, the animal realm, the human realm, and the spirit realm (Eaton, 1982). The patient of the Navajo medicine man sits in the medicine Hoop of the sand painting, surrounded by the Hoop of the family and the Hoop of the hogan in order to be returned to balance and health.

Like the Sioux tradition, the European Wicca tradition honors the circle. Wicca honors the Goddess and “the Goddess is the Encircler” (Starhawk, 1979, p. 95). Every Wiccan ritual begins with the casting of a circle wherein the healing takes place.

Chinese Taoism with its famous Hoop image of the yin-yang circle emphasizes the Hoop attributes of receptivity and flow. The principal text of Taoism, the Tao Te Ching, says the ideal human is “receptive as a valley....If you receive the world, the Tao will never leave you....We join spokes together in a wheel, but it is the center hole that makes the wagon move. We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want” (Mitchell, 1988, pp. 15, 27, 28, 11). This is the receptivity that is a prerequisite for relationship.

The Taoist yin-yang flows from light to dark to light, forever circling. Taoism teaches *tzu-jan*--following nature, and *wu-wei*--taking no unnecessary action. These attributes may be likened to the effortless skill of a surfboard rider who needs only one or two strokes to catch a great wave. This Hoop of Flow and the Hoop of Relationship are not different Hoops. If you are fully related to the world around you then there is no problem making the few strokes that will let you ride the wave all the way in. You instinctively know what to do in any situation.

The Hindu Wheel of Rebirth is also a Hoop image. The Hoop of Rebirth is the Hoop of Relationship viewed through time: I am related to you not just because we are brothers or sisters in this life but because I may have been your great-grandfather in a previous incarnation and I may be your great granddaughter in the future. I may once have lived in the very form of this water buffalo that pulls my plow today. Thus, to have a balanced Hoop one must have balanced relationships with all the beings in the ecosystem. This Hoop view also produces the virtue of *ahimsa*. Ahimsa is respect and consideration for all life, and fellow feeling with all living beings.

Hoop traditions often talk about our immersion in relationships by using the Hoop image of a web or a net. The Hopi people (and other Native American traditions) tell about Spider Woman, who is as old as time and as young as eternity, for she is the Earth Mother (Mullett, 1984, p. 16). Her web makes the shape of concentric linked Hoops. We are all part of her web--humans, animals, mountains, trees, rivers. If you touch any part of the web, the whole web will quiver.

The Buddhists and Hindus talk about our immersion in relationship

through the similar metaphor of Indra's Net. It, too, symbolizes the Hoop of all beings. All of existence can be imagined as a great net, like a fisherman's net, where every knot is a bright diamond whose facets reflect every other diamond knot. Each knot is a being. You are a knot; I am one. All beings are subtly and powerfully linked with each other as the knots are in a net. The ever-so-slightest touch on one knot of a stretched net makes the whole net vibrate. The universe is this way.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL HOOP

Contemporary psychology is beginning to discover through its own methodology what traditional Hoop wisdom has taught for centuries: we are all embedded in Spider Woman's Web/Indra's Net, and each of us is dependent on it.

Psychology's closest equivalent term for the Spider Woman's Web/Indra's Net is "field." This field is like an electric or magnetic field: invisible yet powerful. Gestalt psychotherapy says that there is really never any isolated person or organism available to study or treat. There is only the interaction of the person or organism with its environment, an interaction referred to as the "organism/ environment field." Every "psychological" problem occurs in a field that has social, physiological, psychological, and physical components. A key text in gestalt therapy says "Let us remember that no matter how we theorize about impulses, drives, etc., it is always to such an interacting field that we are referring, and not to an isolated animal" (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951, p. 228).

Psychological evidence confirms the traditional teaching that the Hoop of relationship is indispensable for health. We know, for example, that

- People who lack strong relationships have two to three times the risk of early death, regardless of whether they smoke, drink alcoholic beverages, or exercise regularly.
- Terminal cancer strikes socially isolated people more often than those who have close personal relationships.
- Divorced, separated, and widowed people are five to ten times more likely to need mental hospitalization than their married counterparts.
- Pregnant women under stress and without supportive relationships have three times more complications than pregnant women who suffer from the same stress but have strong social support.
- Social isolation is a major risk factor contributing to coronary disease, comparable to physiological factors such as diet, cigarette smoking, obesity, and lack of physical activity. (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Towne, 1995, p. 4).

We also know from the attachment studies of John Bowlby and others that the Hoop of Relationship is essential for the development of a healthy psyche (Bowlby, 1973), and that no human could survive long without at least a rudimentary Hoop (Myers, 1995, p. 85).

The “social atom,” which is diagrammed as a set of concentric Hoops, is a way to map the relationships that are essential to one’s health and well-being (Hale, 1981). The original concept, developed by J. L. Moreno (1934) and refined by Sharon Leman and Carl Hollander, maps only relationships with other human beings. This idea can readily be extended to include relationships with non-human aspects of a person’s environment, and thus map an “ecological atom.” Such a mapping coincides nicely with traditional teachings such as the Native American medicine wheel meditation, where the individual affirms and reestablishes all the relationships necessary for well-being. Such a mapping also acknowledges psychological findings that relationships with non-human aspects of the field/Web/Hoop can be essential for psychological health.

Many discoveries from various schools of psychology confirm the importance of the broader relationship field. Environmental psychology (Ittelson, *et al.*, 1974, pp. 12-14) tells us that:

- The environment has symbolic value.
- There is no physical environment that is not embedded in and inextricably related to a social system.
- The person has environmental properties as well as individual psychological ones. In other words, the person is a component of the environment.

A study on quality of life by Marc Fried showed that although the strongest predictor of satisfaction is a good marriage, the second strongest predictor is the immediate surroundings, especially the natural environment (Gallagher, 1993, p. 213). Other studies show that although children are more physically active in parks with hard surfaces, they are more imaginatively active in those that have some trees and grass (Gallagher, 1993, p. 210).

One of the pioneers of ecological psychology, James J. Gibson, gave us the concept of *affordances*. As David Abram (1985) summarizes, affordances “are the way specific regions of the environment directly address themselves to particular species or individuals. Thus, to a human, a maple tree may afford ‘looking at’ or ‘sitting under’, while to a sparrow it affords ‘perching’, and to a squirrel it affords ‘climbing’. But these values are not found inside the minds of the animals. Perception is...a reciprocal interchange between the living intentions of any animal and the dynamic affordances of its world....The psyche...is a property of the ecosystem as a whole” (p. 99).

We know now that disruptions in the wider environmental rings of one’s Hoop can cause psychological problems. The infamous Exxon oil spill in Alaska’s Prince William Sound, for example, contributed to many cases of depression and post-traumatic shock (Gallagher, 1993, p. 224). We also know

that this wider Hoop can contribute to healing. Simply having visual access to nature has in one study reduced the recovery time of postoperative gall bladder patients (Ulrich, 1984), and in another study lowered levels of job stress and headaches (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989, p. 162). We also have evidence for the spiritually healing effects of wilderness experience (Powch, 1994).

The Hoop of relationship is practically the *sine qua non* of psychotherapy. Therapy takes place within the “sacred circle” of the therapeutic relationship. One widely-cited review of psychotherapy outcome research estimates that 30 percent of the outcome can be attributed to relationship (Hoop) factors (second only to client participation at 40 percent) (Miller, Hubble, & Duncan, 1995). When the therapist is empathic, genuine, respectful, non-judgemental, warm, and trustworthy, this tends to produce a good therapeutic relationship and positive therapeutic outcomes. These data highlight a corollary of the Hoop-and-Tree model: that the Hoop is necessary for the Tree to grow. The Tree of the client’s psychological core grows within the Hoop of relationship.

THE TRADITIONAL TREE

Traditional wisdom tells us that the Tree has to do with what poet Robert Bly (1996) calls “vertical longing.” The dimension of the psyche which has to do with aspiration to a high place [something “to live up to”, a “higher calling”] and profundity [the “depths of the soul”] is a vertical dimension. The prime image for this dimension is the Tree or tree cognate. The Tree is one of humanity’s most ancient and widespread images for divine energy, centrality, verticality, growth, and route of ascent/descent to knowledge or healing. Where the Hoop is inclusive, the Tree is one-pointed or focused. In the wisdom traditions, the Tree is widely known as the Axis of the World or Axis of the Universe: both central and vertical. It is also widely known as the Tree of Life.

Tree cognates such as mountains, ladders, and pillars all carry the sense of verticality, while emphasizing particular attributes of the Tree: the mountain--centrality and rootedness, the ladder--route of ascent/descent, the pillar--the connection between above and below.

The Tree centers the universe in many traditions. For example it plays a central role in the Christian story as the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden and as the Tree of the Cross. It is the central axis of the world as Yggdrasil, the cosmic ash tree in Norse mythology. The Tree cognate of mountain centers the world in traditions as diverse as the Hindu (Mount Meru) and the Navajo (The Mountain Around Which Moving Was Done).

The Tree is also the vertical route to knowledge, particularly knowledge of the divine. For many shamans the Tree is *the* route of ascent and descent toward knowledge. In the Norse myth Odin ascended Yggdrasil to obtain knowledge of the runes. In cognate form the Tree appears as the verticality of Mohammed’s ascent, which is the archetype of Islamic prayer. Prayer is one of the five “pillars” of Islam. [Al-Qur’an](#) (the Koran) tells us that its wisdom is a

revelation “sent down” (*anzala*). Wisdom descended to Mohammed at the lote-tree (Al-Qur’an, 53: 13-16). The Tree appears as the shape of the Hebrew menorah and as the rollers on which the sacred Torah is wound. Moses ascended [the Tree cognate] Mount Sinai for the wisdom of the Law. Because it is a route to knowledge of the Divine, the Tree is also a route to the lesser aspirations of Wisdom, Judgement, Knowledge, Skill, and Power.

The Tree is particularly associated with knowledge of the good. According to the western alchemical tradition: “From [the perfect] man and gnosis is born the tree, which they also call gnosis [knowledge]” (Irenaeus, as cited in Jung, 1967, p. 318). The alchemist Hegemonius says, “But that tree which is in paradise, whereby the good is known, is Jesus and the knowledge of him which is in the world (as cited in Jung, 1967, p. 318).” “‘For thence [i.e., from the tree] cometh wisdom,’ says the ‘Allegoriae sapientum’”(Jung, 1967, p. 318). Al-Qur’an says, “Have you not considered how Allah sets forth a parable of a good word (being) like a good tree, whose root is firm and whose branches are in heaven” (14: 24). Our language itself associates wisdom with the Tree. The word *truth* as well as the word *Druid* and the word *tree*, all come from the same old Indo-European base *dru-* which itself means tree. The Welsh *gwydd*, related to the English word *wood* means *trees* and *gwydon* means *knowledgeable one*.

The traditional Tree, especially in its cognate form of ladder, extends through various degrees. It represents hierarchical stages of development. The thirteenth century Catalan mystic Ramon Lull says of his illustration of the ladder: “We begin at the imperfect, so that we might ascend to the perfect; and conversely, we may descend from the perfect to the imperfect” (Kuntz & Kuntz, 1987, p. 72). On this illustration the components of the universe are shown in ascending order as steps on the ladder: the stone, the flame, the plant, the beast, man, heaven, angel, and God. God is shown as the threshold of the palace of Wisdom. Lull says that it is through climbing such a ladder that one reaches the ultimate knowledge (Kuntz & Kuntz, 1987, p. 154).

In the world’s wisdom traditions the Tree also reaches down through its roots. The shaman follows the roots to the lower world (Harner, 1982, p. 32).

Christ descended from the Tree of the Cross for the harrowing of Hell, and planted a Tree there as a witness to the healing he brought (MacCulloch, 1930). The Sumerian goddess, Inanna, whose throne was made of the world axis huluppu tree, descended into the netherworld for wisdom (Perera, 1981).

Traditionally the Tree axis provides centering. We move down and up along this axis for grounding and wisdom.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TREE

Contemporary psychology of course has devoted a lot of attention to familial and psychological roots. In personal development we commonly speak of exploring one’s “roots” and of learning about one’s “family tree.” Freud pioneered the exploration of the psychological underworld and looked for the roots of problems in childhood. He also maintained a Tree or vertical orientation. The work, he said, is to bring unconscious material “up” into consciousness, to “lift”

repressions, and to “sublimate” (from the Latin, “to raise”) unacceptable impulses into socially valued motivations (Freud, 1966). Carl Jung emphasized the necessity of forging a vertical link between the conscious and the unconscious (Fordham, 1968). Freud (1949), Jean Piaget (summarized in Myers, 1995), and Erik Erikson (1963) have all proposed hierarchical stage theories of development. These are ladders, which are Tree cognates. Erikson (1963) explicitly makes the Tree connection by calling the positive aspect of the last stage of development the “fruit” of the seven preceding stages (p. 268).

Various Tree approaches to psychology have emphasized different parts of the Tree. It could be said that Freud and his followers were interested in the roots: the unconscious, and the repressed history of early childhood. People like Erikson were interested in development from the roots up through the trunk to the fruit. Alfred Adler, with his Individual Psychology, focused on motivations and issues of social success and power. In terms of the traditional/mythological Tree as a route to the Divine, Adler’s focus was above the roots, but not very far up the trunk. Skill and power can be understood as a hierarchical level on the Tree below wisdom and knowledge, which in turn are below contact with the Divine. Abraham Maslow, in his studies of self-actualization, explored the highest levels of the Tree. The highest level of the Tree also provided the perspective for Viktor Frankl’s Logotherapy (1959).

To speak of different levels on the Tree is not to say that one approach to psychotherapy is better than another. I am simply pointing out that there are differing approaches which pay attention to different parts of the Tree. It is likely that the effectiveness of therapy will depend in part on using an approach which matches where the patient is on his or her journey along the Tree dimension.

If there is no integration along the Tree axis, the body, the will, the heart, the mind, and the spirit will all act independently of one another. Or worse yet, a person’s consciousness will get stuck at a lower level and focus only on that level and lower levels, while ignoring development of the higher levels. You could call this a truncated Tree. Someone who has a truncated Tree will make decisions from the center of will and power (lower Tree levels) which have no connection with heart and spirit (higher Tree levels).

A related Tree dysfunction is narcissism. Narcissistic personalities have a grandiose sense of self-importance. They tend to exaggerate their accomplishments and talents, and expect to be noticed as superior even without commensurate achievement. Narcissistic types tend to exploit others in order to achieve their own ends. They typically lack empathy (the Hoop dimension).

Narcissism is a characteristic of the classic *puer eternus*. This “eternal youth,” sometimes called a “flying boy,” tries to soar toward the upper spiritual reaches of the Tree axis without being willing to be grounded or rooted in the dailiness or quotidian nature of life (Hillman, *et al.*, 1979).

We’ve seen that throughout history and all around the world traditional wisdom uses the Tree and its cognates as an image for the axis of the cosmos. Psychologically, the axis of the cosmos is in our own being. Our experience of

the world and life is just that: our own experience. So the Tree is not only the axis of the cosmos but also the axis of the self; it is not only a World Tree but also a Self Tree. In psychological work we see this clearly in the Tree drawing of the House-Tree-Person (HTP) technique. Of the three HTP drawings it is the Tree drawing which represents the deepest levels of the personality. "The tree, as a natural and vegetative form, draws upon fundamental and enduring feelings in relation to the self and, of all the drawings, is less likely to change over time" (Kaufman & Wohl, 1992, p. 25).

SUMMARY OF HOOP ATTRIBUTES AND TREE ATTRIBUTES

Countless other examples could be brought forward from psychological literature and the world's wisdom traditions to elucidate further the attributes of the Hoop and Tree dimensions. For now, I'll just summarize these attributes so we can move on to understanding how these two dimensions together constitute a robust model of the whole, healthy psyche.

The Hoop and the Tree are metaphors for two essential components of the human psyche. The vector of the Tree is *Aspirational*; the vector of the Hoop is *Relational*. The Tree has to do with deepening and ascending for growth, while the Hoop has to do with widening for growth. Healing along the Tree dimension proceeds by going up, or down then up (Freud, Jung, *etc.*). Healing along the Hoop dimension proceeds by going out, or in then out (Navajo sings, Native American medicine wheel, family therapy, *etc.*). The Hoop route to maturity leads through the search for connection and compassion to the wisdom of compassion; the Tree route leads through the search for knowledge and wisdom to the compassion of wisdom.

What is the Tree? Aristotle begins his [Metaphysics](#) with the famous line, "All men by their very nature feel the urge to know" (Aristotle, trans. 1961, p. 51). This is a major part of what the Tree is about. It is clear that different levels of knowing do exist. It is one thing to know how to drive a car, and another thing to know how to drive a car and also be able to repair it, and still another thing to be able to do both of these and build the car as well, and an even higher level of knowing to be able to drive, fix, build, and design the car. And there are higher and deeper levels of knowing than this. The highest level of knowing is impossible to put into words, but has been pointed at using words such as "knowledge of God," and "enlightenment." The Zen tradition says "You're at the top of a 10,000 foot pole, and yet you must take one more step. Where do you go?" These highest levels of knowing are not possible without deep insight. The Tree has to do with aspiration to the highest levels of knowing, as well as with the rootedness and centeredness which is required to reach these highest levels. The Tree is oneself as the process of being wise.

Another way of saying what the Tree is, is as follows: The Tree is one of the key images by which the self understands the self. It is the image with which the self talks to the self about its interior growing core, the core which aspires to skill, wisdom, and contact with the Divine; the core which knows where it stands

in the world, and which is able to draw nourishment from its ancestry and from the deep moisture of sleep, dreams, and unconscious processes.

If we were not in some way Trees, we would not have roots, we would not expect our labor to bear fruit, nor would we call a child “the apple of my eye.”

What is the Hoop? If the Tree is wisdom, the Hoop is compassion. The Hoop is relationship in all its aspects, including interdependence and flow. Where the Tree is transcendent, the Hoop is immanent. From the Hoop perspective wholeness is possible for all, the Divine is immanent in all, and all is in relationship to all. Where the Tree tends to view time as linear, moving from a beginning toward an end, the Hoop tends to view time as cyclical, or moving from an eternal present outward in all direction. Where the Tree is vertical, the Hoop is horizontal.

Another way of saying what the Hoop is, is that the Hoop is the image with which the self talks to the self about the greater self where all are connected. It is through the Hoop that we connect with other living beings, with the rocks, the soil, the air, the green and growing things, the dying and the dead which fertilize new life, the person we once were and the person we shall be. The Hoop has to do with hearing the beat, getting with the rhythm, feeling the music of what is, and skillfully entering in with just the right amount of effort and no more. The Hoop is oneself as the process of relating.

Because in some way we are all Hoops, we admire “well-rounded” people, and we do wish that “the circle be unbroken.”

THE DEEP STRUCTURE OF THE MATURE SELF

Now that we have looked at the separate attributes of the Hoop dimension and the Tree dimension, let’s see how the two dimensions come together in the structure of the spiritually and psychologically mature self. We’ll look at theoretical and practical evidence from psychology and evidence from the world’s wisdom traditions.

IN PSYCHOLOGY

In the *immature* person, there is an imbalance of Hoop and Tree. This is particularly evident in gender differences. In communication patterns at least, the immature male is more oriented to the Tree dimension and the immature female more oriented to the Hoop dimension.

For example, according to the studies of sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1990), boys tend to focus on the hierarchical social order, whereas girls tend to focus on the network of social connections, intimacy, and community. It is as though boys and girls grow up in two different worlds, and communication between the two is “cross-cultural communication.” This difference persists as boys and girls grow into men and women, at least until they reach a certain level of maturity. Tannen has shown that boys and men tend to use conversation as a way to negotiate status in a group and a way to keep others from pushing them

around. Girls and women tend to use conversation as a way to negotiate closeness and intimacy, and a way to gather others to them.

This difference between boys and girls begins very early. Tannen cites the research of Marjorie Harness Goodwin who spent a year and a half observing interactions among city kids. Goodwin found that boys gave orders as a way of gaining social status. The high-status boys gave orders just to maintain their dominance, not because they needed anything done. In girls' play, the girls tended to be more egalitarian, with everyone making suggestions and accepting suggestions from others.

Erik Erikson (1963) made a study of the spontaneous creations of boys and girls who were given a random selection of toys and asked to "construct on the table an exciting scene out of an imaginary moving picture." He found that the most significant difference between the boys and the girls was that the boys tended to construct towers and the girls tended to construct enclosures or interior spaces (pp. 97 - 106). The girls made Hoops and the boys made Trees.

The difference in orientation between males and females does not mean that *mature* men and women are this one-sided. It was, after all, a man who developed a major school of psychotherapy based on relationship. It was Carl Rogers (1961) who said that it is the therapeutic relationship itself that is therapeutic, and that what is most important in the therapist is nonpossessive warmth, accurate empathy, and genuineness. But the research that Tannen summarizes shows clearly that hierarchy and relationship--Tree and Hoop--are key ways for the psyche to orient itself to the world, and that immature males and immature females tend to be one-sided.

The immature psyche matures by developing both the Hoop and the Tree dimensions, and moves towards a balance of the two dimensions, each fully-developed.

Harvard psychologist Robert Kegan (1982) says that "the two greatest yearnings in human experience" are the yearning to be included and the yearning to be independent or autonomous. In his integrative study of human development, Kegan says that each stage of development is a temporary solution to the lifelong tension between these two yearnings (pp. 107 - 108). Inclusion is the Hoop yearning and autonomy the Tree yearning.

Ken Wilber (1996) extends the study of psychological development into the study of the evolution of consciousness itself. Wilber shows that the general pattern of this evolution is: transcend and include. "As the higher stages of consciousness emerge and develop, they themselves include the basic components of the earlier world-view, then add their own new and more differentiated perceptions. They transcend and include. Because they are more inclusive, they are more adequate. So, it's not that the earlier world-view is totally wrong and the new world-view is totally right. The earlier one was adequate, the new one is more adequate" (p. 67).

In other words, the evolution of consciousness proceeds in a Hoop-and-

Tree manner. Consciousness transcends, or moves up, along the Tree axis; and then it includes, or expands its Hoop. Another way of saying this is that evolution proceeds by differentiation (Tree) and integration (Hoop).

Wilber emphasizes that it is only by rising up on the Tree of higher consciousness that one is able to embrace the wider rings of the Hoop. Different stages of consciousness result in different worldviews. The oak is categorically different from the acorn, though related to it. To move from the self-centeredness of the young child to tribalism or ethnocentricity to a worldcentric morality requires growth up the Tree axis. Ultimately, from a high perspective, you begin to see the Divine in all. "You can become one with the great immanent system only by a laborious process of inner transcendence" (p. 313).

Thus the evolution of consciousness to the transpersonal level follows the Hoop-and-Tree model. The developing psyche constantly tries to balance the tension between the yearning for inclusion and the yearning for autonomy. The most mature consciousness rises to the highest level on the Tree and in the process, expands the Hoop to embrace the entire universe.

If the Hoop and the Tree were truly the deep structure of the mature self, then we would expect to find Hoop-and-Tree processes when we look at people who are psychologically mature. This is, in fact, what we do find.

A rigorous long-term study of adults, led by researcher Douglas Heath (1991), investigated the psychological characteristics of successful and fulfilled people. The study followed a group of men, and subsequently their life partners, (65 men and 40 women) from the time the men were in their junior and senior years of college until the men were in their mid-forties. The study involved extensive interviews, ratings by intimate others (closest friend, spouse), and batteries of some of psychology's most respected tests. A key finding of the study is that one of the two most consistent predictors of successful and fulfilled lives is androgyny.

By androgyny the researchers mean having many of the strengths associated with *both* masculinity and femininity. "Some stereotypic masculine strengths are self-reliance, independence, and ambition; some typical feminine strengths are sensitivity to the needs of others, loyalty, and compassion. Among other things, androgynous men and women feel fulfilled and make good marital partners, vocational colleagues, close friends, and responsible community members" (Heath, 1991, p. 19). In the study's subjects, mature androgyny did not result in a diffuse sense of self, ambiguous sexual identity, or paralyzing emotional conflicts. The subjects were typically vigorous, clear about who they were, and had energy available for a zestful life. Here we find a balance of Hoop and Tree elements in the make-up of successful and fulfilled people.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, former chairman of the Department of Psychology at the University of Chicago, has spent over twenty years studying the psychology of optimal experience. He and his colleagues around the world have interviewed thousands of people from many different walks of life. His research techniques include a sampling method in which people wear electronic

paggers for a week and are asked to write down what they are thinking about and how they are feeling whenever the pager beeps. The paggers are activated about eight times each day, at random intervals. As of 1990 he had collected over a hundred thousand such cross-sections of peoples' lives.

The term Csikszentmihalyi uses for optimal experience is "flow"--the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it for the sheer sake of doing it.

On the basis of his extensive research, Csikszentmihalyi concludes that what follows an experience of flow is psychological growth, or growth of the self. Growth of the self, he says, means that the organization of the self becomes more *complex*. "Complexity is the result of two broad psychological processes: *differentiation* and *integration*. Differentiation implies a movement toward uniqueness, toward separating oneself from others. Integration refers to its opposite: a union with other people, with ideas and entities beyond the self. A complex self is one that succeeds in combining these opposite tendencies" (1990, p. 41).

Now the movement toward uniqueness, or differentiation, is movement along the Tree axis. Union with other people, with ideas and entities beyond the self, is the essential quality of Hoop. So Csikszentmihalyi's conclusion supports the view that the mature self combines the Hoop and the Tree.

He emphasizes that neither the Hoop alone nor the Tree alone is sufficient. "A self that is only differentiated--not integrated--may attain great individual accomplishments, but risks being mired in self-centered egotism. By the same token, a person whose self is based exclusively on integration will be connected and secure, but lack autonomous individuality. Only when a person invests equal amounts of psychic energy in these two processes and avoids both selfishness and conformity is the self likely to reflect complexity" (1990, p. 42).

John Bowlby's work also supports the Hoop-and-Tree model, as well as the proposition that the Hoop is necessary for the Tree's growth. Bowlby says "the family experience of those who grow up to become relatively stable and self-reliant is characterized not only by unflinching parental support when called upon but also by a steady yet timely encouragement towards increasing autonomy" (Bowlby, 1973, pp. 322 - 323). Here we have the Hoop of unflinching parental support and the Tree of increasing autonomy.

Recent research suggests that there are both Tree and Hoop forms of intelligence. Tree intelligence is what is measured by traditional academic tests of intelligence, knowledge, skill, and power--all of which are levels on the Tree axis. Although the WAIS does contain subtests which tap some abilities outside the realm of academic intelligence (e.g. Block Design and Object Assembly), both it and other intelligence tests such as the Stanford-Binet emphasize judgement, comprehension and logical reasoning.

New discoveries suggest that in addition to the academic or "IQ" Tree

intelligence, there is a wholly separate cluster of abilities related to intelligence. Like academic intelligence these abilities also help a person to act purposefully, to think rationally, and to deal effectively with his or her environment. They help one do well in the practicalities of life. As a cluster, these abilities have been termed “emotional intelligence” (Goleman, 1995).

Emotional intelligence is Hoop intelligence. The psychologist and author Daniel Goleman summarizes the five main domains of emotional intelligence:

1. Knowing one’s emotions. Self-awareness--recognizing a feeling *as it happens*--is the keystone of emotional intelligence....An inability to notice our true feelings leaves us at their mercy. People with a greater certainty about their feelings are better pilots of their lives, having a surer sense of how they really feel about personal decisions from whom to marry to what job to take.
2. Managing emotions. Handling feelings so they are appropriate is an ability that builds on self-awareness....People who are poor in this ability are constantly battling feelings of distress, while those who excel in it can bounce back far more quickly from life’s setbacks and upsets.
3. Motivating oneself. Marshaling emotions in the service of a goal is essential for paying attention, for self-motivation and mastery, and for creativity. Emotional self-control--delaying gratification and stifling impulsiveness--underlies accomplishment of every sort. And being able to get into the “flow” state [Hoop of Flow] enables outstanding performance of all kinds. People who have this skill tend to be more highly productive and effective in whatever they undertake.
4. Recognizing emotions in others. Empathy, another ability that builds on self-awareness, is the fundamental “people skill.” ...People who are empathic are more attuned to the subtle social signals that indicate what others need or want. This makes them better at callings such as the caring professions, teaching, sales, and management.
5. Handling relationships. The art of relationships is, in large part, skill in managing emotions in others....These are the abilities that undergird popularity, leadership, and interpersonal effectiveness. People who excel in these skills do well at anything that relies on interacting smoothly with others; they are social stars. (1995, pp. 43 - 44).

These are all abilities of relationship--the primary attribute of the Hoop dimension. Emotional intelligence is not opposed to IQ, but is separate from it. A major study of a test for empathy, for example, shows only an incidental relationship between empathic acuity and SAT or IQ scores or school

achievement tests (Goleman, 1995, p. 97). Impaired functioning of the part of the brain that has to do with emotional intelligence can lead to impulsiveness, anxiety, and disastrous life choices, despite full functioning of the part of the brain measured by IQ tests (Goleman, 1995, pp. 27 - 28). Hoop intelligence and Tree intelligence are different. Both are necessary for full well-being.

IN WORLD WISDOM TRADITIONS

In the world's wisdom traditions just as in the modern psychology, we find countless inflections of this same deep structure of the mature self: the Hoop and the Tree.

For example, the tantric teachings of Hinduism describe the spiritual goal of raising the kundalini energy upward along the Tree axis of the spine and opening all the Hoops (chakras = "wheels") along the way. (Interestingly, the Western chakras of both Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Erikson's Eight Ages of Man map almost exactly to the descriptions of the kundalini chakras.) The Hopi people of North America, like the practitioners of tantra, believe that the human body is constructed around a central axis with vibratory centers similar to chakras ranked along this axis. Disease occurs when these centers are out of balance.

In the Jewish kabbalistic tradition the template for wholeness is the Tree of Life with its Hoop-shaped fruit (*sphiroth*). In mystical Islam the Mevlevi dervishes dance the Hoop-and-Tree shape of wholeness by whirling around the axis of their bodies (Hoop) and passing grace from up to down (Tree) (Vitray-Meyerovitch, 1987, p. 44).

This same shape appears in the sacred architecture of the Buddhist tradition. Structures called *stupas* appear throughout the lands influenced by Buddhism. Some of these are monumental, as is the Great Stupa of Boudhanath in Nepal, others are miniatures which sit on the altars of practitioners. All have the shape of the Hoop and Tree. If you were to look down on a stupa from directly overhead you would see the Hoop of a mandala: circles within squares or circles within circles. The side view would show you the stupa arising from a large base to a narrow spire at the top, the shape of Tree. Whether large or small, the stupa serves to remind one of the shape of the fully-mature self. Like the Hopi kiva, with its ladder ascending, its sipapu descending from a circular space, the stupa is an architectural expression of the Hoop and the Tree. The stupa "is an abstract image of the state of enlightenment attainable by all beings" (Landaw & Weber, 1993, p. 42).

The Tibetan Buddhist Kalachakra mandala is actually a plan view of a three-dimensional "palace" of a deity. The palace is a Hoop-and-Tree shape which, incidentally, maps quite well to the kundalini chakras. The Kalachakra mandala is used as a focus of meditation for spiritual growth and healing (Bryant, 1993). Here the person working for wholeness meditates on the Hoop-and-Tree shape of wholeness; in the Sufi dance the person puts the body into the shape of wholeness. The shape of wholeness is similar in both cases; only the external form of the practice is different.

There are many other examples of this shape. The literature of the western alchemical tradition includes many Hoop-and-Tree models for wholeness (see McLean, 1989, pp. 81, 104). The !Kung bushmen of Africa practice a traditional healing dance (called *!Kia*) which takes the shape of the Hoop and the Tree (Katz, 1976).

In Norse myth the World Tree Yggdrasil is Hooped by a great serpent. The myth tells how at the end of time the serpent will release its tail and thrash about, spewing venom and death all around. The serpent releasing its grip breaks the Hoop. The spewing of death and destruction when this happens suggests metaphorically how dangerous it is for the Hoop to be missing or broken.

Even in traditions which are predominantly Tree or predominantly Hoop, there are vestiges of the complementary dimension, suggestive of a Hoop-and-Tree shape of wholeness. Christianity for example emphasizes following the Tree of the Cross, but has as its major ritual the Hoop of Communion shared among the community in a Hoop-shaped bowl. Esoteric Judaism includes the Hoops of Receptivity and of Rebirth (Cooper, 1994. Halevi, 1992, p. 29). In Chinese culture the Hoop of Taoism is balanced by the Tree approach of Confucianism. In the Hoop tradition of European Wicca, the Tree of Life practice "is one of the most important meditations" (Starhawk, 1979, p. 44). The Sioux center the Hoop of their sun dance lodge with a sacred Tree.

Here again these examples could go on and on, and each one could be explored in greater detail. The essential point is that our psychological, mythological, and spiritual traditions tell us that the mature, healthy psyche has the shape of the Hoop and the Tree fully developed and in balance.

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THE MATURE SELF IS ECOLOGICAL

The Hoop-and-Tree template tells us that the mature self is ecological. Therefore psychology is essentially ecopsychology. The fully mature Tree roots us in the universe, because at the deepest level of the psyche, unconscious psyche and unconscious matter are related, though in ways we do not fully understand (von Franz, 1980). Furthermore, no one can be fully mature without being in right relationship with the Hoop of the rest of existence. Psychological and traditional evidence shows that the fully mature Hoop puts us into such a relationship.

Abraham Maslow was one investigator who found that the mature self is ecological. Maslow's research suggests that growth toward self-actualization takes the form of Tree within Hoop. (In the following quotation he uses "man" to mean human beings; he's speaking in 1959.) Maslow says, "Man demonstrates *in his own nature* a pressure toward fuller and fuller Being, more and more perfect actualization of his humanness in exactly the same naturalistic, scientific sense that an acorn may be said to be 'pressing toward' being an oak tree" (1990, p. 96). Here is the Tree. Where does it grow? Within the Hoop: "Living in

a family and in a culture are absolutely necessary to *actualize* these psychological potentials that define humanness” (p. 96).

Maslow found that highly mature, self-actualizing people “look upon nature as if it were there in itself and for itself, and not simply as if it were...put there for human purposes.” A self-actualizing person sees nature “in its own Being...rather than as something to be used, or something to be afraid of, or to be reacted to in some other human way” (1968, p. 76). In other words, *part of what health means is having this sort of relationship to nature*. From Maslow’s research, the most mature people do have an ecological orientation.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE HOOP-AND-TREE MODEL

THERAPY

The Hoop-and-Tree model provides a powerful way to guide interventions and assess progress in therapy. A client can be assessed for development along both Hoop and Tree dimensions. The Hoop and the Tree both manifest differently at different degrees or levels of maturity. What is this client’s state of development?

On the Hoop dimension one can start by assessing this person’s Hoop emotional intelligence. Then one can inquire if the person’s Hoop of relationship is whole. Is it a complete 360 degrees or does it have a gap? Is this person in right relationship with all beings? Is this person in relationship fully enough to be in the flow, in the Tao? Is she or he centered in a medicine wheel mandala of family and social atom and ecosystem and immanent spirit? How large is the Hoop? Is it expanded or contracted? How much does it embrace? How many rings does it contain? Extreme self-centeredness is a Hoop with no diameter. The mature person’s Hoop includes, as the Sioux prayer says, “all my relations.”

On the Tree dimension, is this person growing, rooted, and fruitful? What is this person’s skill level and level of academic intelligence? Is this person upright? Does he or she aspire to a higher goal? Towards what is the vertical longing directed? Is this person able to move up and down along the Tree and access various levels as circumstances require (e.g.: Erikson’s strengths of the Eight Ages, Maslow’s hierarchy)? Where are this person’s roots? Does she or he befriend dreams, honor ancestors, respect lineage? What *kind* of Tree is this person?

Finally, are the Hoop and the Tree in balance? We know that one of the hallmarks of maturity is the ability to live with ambiguity. Can this person harmonize both of these dimensions and not create false opposites, emphasizing one to the exclusion of the other?

Hosts of techniques exist to help a client mature in response to all of these questions.

SOCIAL ACTION

The Hoop and the Tree template describes not only the deep structure of

the healthy human psyche but quite possibly also the deep structure of the mature society.

Riane Eisler in [The Chalice and the Blade](#) (1987) examines the course of history over the past several thousand years and concludes that “underlying the great surface diversity of human culture are two basic models of society” (p. xvii).

One model, which Eisler calls the *partnership* model, is characterized by relatively egalitarian relationships, particularly between the sexes, as well as by a predilection for peace and a worship of the Goddess. The other model of society Eisler calls the *dominator* model. These societies are characterized by authoritarianism and hierarchy, particularly by the ranking of men over women.

As the partnership model is based on the principle of *linking*, it resembles what I am calling Hoop. As the dominator model is based on the principle of *ranking*, it resembles what I am calling Tree. One may argue with some of Eisler’s specifics, but it is clear that historically some societies have been more egalitarian, built around the linking principle, and some societies have been more hierarchical, built around ranking.

What I am proposing which is slightly different from Eisler’s thesis is that instead of facing a choice between the “good” partnership society and the “bad” dominator society, we can learn to integrate both relationship and hierarchy as they are fully expressed in the Hoop and the Tree. The evaluation of “Chalice” and “Blade” models is not an evaluation of equal factors. Eisler’s historical material can be seen as the intrusion of an immature Tree culture on a highly evolved Hoop culture. The Blade is immature Tree; the Chalice is more mature Hoop. Instead of *either/or*, with one being good and one being bad, an alternate possibility is *both/and*, with *conjunctio*, integration, harmony as the goal when both are mature.

One culture which began to bring the Hoop and the Tree into balance was the Five Nations (later Six Nations) of the Iroquois League (or Haudenosaunee). This civilization was the one which provided the model for the fundamental political structure of the United States of America. The Iroquois structured their society according to a Hoop-and-Tree image: the Tree of the Great Peace. Obviously this is a Tree image. The Tree is the Tree of aspiration which pierces the sky and reaches the sun, and also the Tree of Justice, because the Iroquois used the same word for both peace and law. This same root word is also used for “noble” and for “the Lord” in Iroquois translations of the Bible. The Tree of Peace is also a Hoop image, because the Tree has roots which extend to the four cardinal directions, making a mandala. This mandala reached out as a Hoop of Relationship toward all of humanity. The Iroquois culture hero Deganawidah said, “These roots will continue to grow, advancing the Good Mind and Righteousness and Peace, moving into territories of peoples scattered far through the forest. And when a nation, guided by the Great White Roots, shall approach the Tree, you shall welcome her here and take her by the arm and seat her in the place of council” (Wallace, 1986, p. 45). “We bind ourselves together by taking hold of each other’s hands so firmly and forming a circle so strong that if a tree should fall upon it, it could not shake nor break it, so

that our people and grandchildren shall remain in the circle in security, peace, and happiness” (Wallace, 1986, p. 34).

The Iroquois mythic Hoop and Tree image gave birth to a civilization which lasted for perhaps three hundred years, until it was largely destroyed by the incursions of European settlers. While the civilization was not perfect, it was marked by an emphasis on peace, a representative form of government, a balance of male and female energies, and an ecological orientation to the world. It’s interesting to speculate about what might have happened in the United States had the founding fathers adopted from the Iroquois not just a political structure but an entire worldview. Perhaps we would be closer to a Hoop-and-Tree society today.

The Hoop-and-Tree model gives guidelines for social action. We can learn from the Iroquois not only representative government and a hierarchy of “chiefs,” but also respect for the wisdom of nature and the importance of balancing male and female elements. We can ask if our decisions will benefit the “seventh generation” of our descendants. We can also ask our educational institutions to foster both Tree intelligence *and* Hoop intelligence. We can each ask our own spiritual tradition for its Tree wisdom *and* its Hoop wisdom. We can actively work for a mature balance of Hoop and Tree in our non-profit, governmental, and for-profit organizations. We can re-incorporate Hoop in a culture that is overbalanced toward Tree. We can work for social justice for all races, creeds, genders, and life-ways in the human ring of the Hoop, and work to extend our relatedness to other rings of the Hoop.

CONCLUSION

If you center a Hoop on a Tree axis and spin it, you have a gyroscope. A gyroscope is very stable; so stable in fact that it is used as the heart of navigation systems in the form of a gyrocompass. So we could say that having both the Hoop and the Tree developed in one’s psyche gives one stability and an internal sense of direction for following one’s life path. It can orient us in psychological space-time and help us consider which way to turn at points of decision. The evidence from the world’s wisdom traditions and from contemporary psychology gives us the Hoop and the Tree, an ecological model of health, as a compass for social action and personal development.

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