

# SO THE SPIRITS FEEL TREASURED

Creating Sacred Prayer Trees

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**Above:** a sacred tree near Lake Baikal, Southern Siberia

**Opposite Page:** sacred prayer trees in Tuva and Mongolia

One of the ways that you can ground your shamanic practice in your everyday life is to dedicate a special place in nature as a sacred space. One wonderful way to create such a place, is to dedicate a 'shaman tree' that will become your place for offerings, your gratitude prayers, and honouring the spirits in all the realms.

I have such a tree in my own back garden. However, even urban apartment dwellers can create this kind of sacred space on a balcony or in a corner of a room with a potted tree such as a fig.

Another option is to work with your neighbors to dedicate a tree in the local green space to be a site for everyone to place gratitude prayers. This sort of practice is common across Siberia and central Asia, where people have dedicated trees to be special places on the landscape that become the focus for entire communities to pray and make offerings.

Your tree may be located in a prominent place near a mountain, at a crossroads, on the site of a spring, on a riverbank, in a clearing in a forest, or any location where

there is a strong sense of the spirits of the land.

These spirits, referred to as *Cher Ezed* in the Tuvan language, are thought of as masters, or owners, of these places. The shamans negotiate with these owners, or *ezed*, so that their people and the livestock under their care are able to thrive.

To ensure that the spirits of nature feel treasured and honoured, the Tuvan people dedicate particular trees as places through which the *ezed* of nature



saplings sprouted from one root, are especially sacred across the region as nine is considered the most sacred number in Tuvan culture. They honour nine sacred springs, nine sacred mountains, and nine sacred celestial objects; the Sun, Moon and the seven stars of the Great Bear or Big Dipper constellation. At other times, a tree is chosen simply due to its proximity to a place that is to be honoured, such as a sacred spring or waterfall. In this case, the tree may be of any species.

Once a tree is chosen, the shaman performs a special blessing ritual to sanctify the tree as a place for ritual. This blessing dedicates the tree as a place where prayers may be carried directly into the spirit worlds.

This is possible, because all trees are echoes of the great World Tree which unites all the realms of the spirits and connects the Heavens to the Earth. In addition, offerings made at a special shaman tree strengthens the spirits of place and supports the fertility of the land and livestock, as well as encouraging harmony, luck, and good health for the people.

Here is a prayer from the Tuva that communicates the sense of how important the spirits of place are to the welfare of all beings:

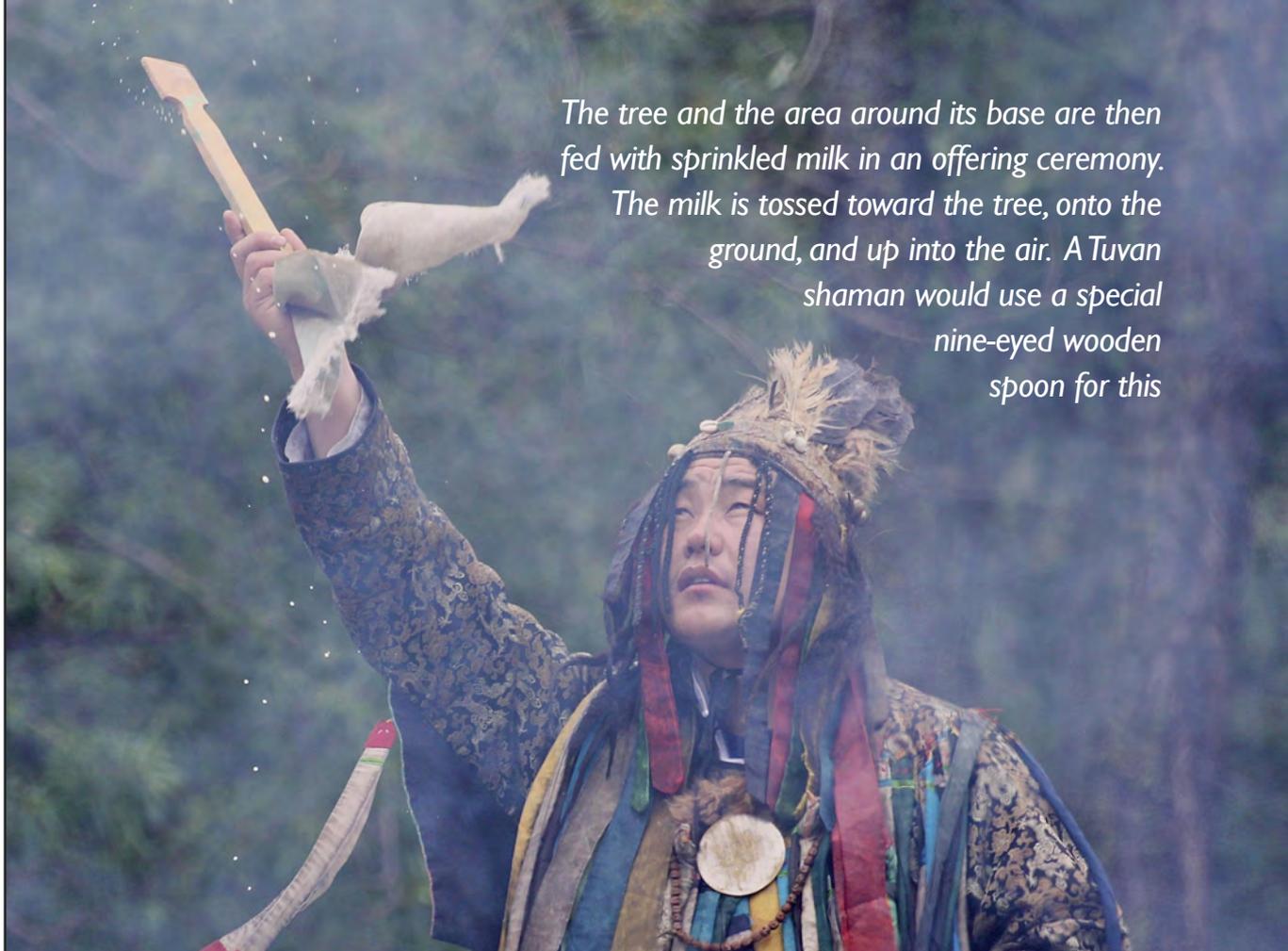
*From the ezed of the mountains  
that stand imposingly,  
From the ezed of water  
that rushes noisily,  
From the ezed of mountains  
that are many-peaked,  
From the ezed of grasses and trees  
that grow multibranching,  
We beg good fortune.  
From the ezed of flowing waters,  
the ezed of whirlpools  
at river bends,  
the ezed of airy winds,  
the ezed of lying stones,  
We beg good fortune.*

may be honoured. Depending upon the local customs, these specially honoured trees may be a pine, a birch, or a larch. The tree is chosen for being especially tall, very ancient, and/or having a special shape, unusual branches, or an auspicious number of trunks.

Trees with three trunks are thought of as money or abundance trees in Tuva, whereas a tree with two trunks might be dedicated to honour a marriage or the union of two clans.

Trees with nine trunks, which started life as a small cluster of





The tree and the area around its base are then fed with sprinkled milk in an offering ceremony. The milk is tossed toward the tree, onto the ground, and up into the air. A Tuvan shaman would use a special nine-eyed wooden spoon for this

**Above:** tying khadag offering scarves onto a prayer tree in Mongolia

**Right:** shaman's nine-hole offering spoon and bowl of milk

Then the area beneath the tree is prepared, by clearing brush and grasses away, so that it is possible to walk all the way around the tree.

The tree and the area surrounding its base are then fed with sprinkled milk in an offering ceremony. The milk is tossed toward the tree, onto the ground, and up into the air. A Tuvan shaman would use a special nine-eyed wooden throwing spoon (*tos-karak* in the Tuvan language) for this purpose, but any spoon dedicated to sacred work can be used.

Large stones are placed in a circle around the base of the tree. These assist in further grounding the tree and also echo the sacred mountains. The stones are then blessed by smearing them with butter. At this point, the tree is ready to receive the *chalama*.

Next, four or more metres of cotton cloth, in three solid colours - red, yellow, and blue - are braided into a master prayer ribbon or *chalama* that is tied around the trunk of the tree.

While the shaman braids the fabric, the other end is held firmly by the oldest member of the community. This person is usually



kneeling on the ground, but if that isn't possible, they sit on a sacred cloth. The elder person's role is as an anchor, representing the spirits of the ancestors being 'woven' into the *chalama* to reflect their ongoing connections to our world and to access their blessings for the tree and the community.

When the braiding of the fabric is completed, the cloth is tied around the trunk of the tree, about a metre or so up from the ground. It is tied snugly enough to keep it in place, but not so tight as to 'choke' the tree. The *chalama* must be long enough to leave

'tails' after it is knotted, and these may be up to about a metre long.

This master *chalama* braid will become the vessel that holds the smaller *chalama* that people leave as offerings to ask for blessings and to honour the spirits.

Once the master braid is in place, the shaman again blesses the tree by dancing and singing around it, while drumming or rattling. A shaman's song, or *algys* in Tuvan, is sung to praise the tree and its place in the centre of the Universe as a representative of the World Tree.

Here is a translation of a typical *algys*h for the shaman tree:

*Shaman tree!  
You are the most  
wonderful tree on the Earth;  
Shaman tree!  
They say you are the  
most beautiful tree in the world;  
Shaman tree!  
They say you are the  
goodness of an animal;  
Shaman tree!  
You embody all the spirits;  
Shaman tree!  
They say all the people's  
lives are tied together in you;  
Shaman tree!  
They say you preserve  
among your beautiful  
branches people's fortunes;  
Shaman tree!  
They say you give your  
healthfulness to the animals;  
Shaman tree!  
They say you give  
children a happy life;  
Shaman tree,  
Sacred tree.*

At this point, the *chalama* and the tree would again be fed with milk and small pinches of cooked rice. Women go around the tree nine times and men go around the tree

three times as they make offerings. People always travel around a tree or sacred site clockwise.

These offerings are given with gratitude for the blessings the spirits provide. As it is with other indigenous cultures around the world, the offerings not only give thanks for what already is in place in our lives, but in advance for the blessings to come.

Once trees are dedicated in this fashion, the subsequent offerings at these trees would include tying smaller braids or strips of cloth to the master *chalama*. In Mongolia, the dominant colour used for such offerings is a sky-coloured, brilliant blue that may be either cotton or silk.

These cloth offerings are threaded into the braided fabric of the master *chalama* and securely tied. If there are low branches, the smaller *chalama* or strips of cloth may be attached to the tree's branches. When tied directly to the tree, these cloth offerings are only half knotted and never secured too tightly so as not to choke the growth of the sacred tree.

Other typical offerings include milk, clear alcohol such as vodka, cooked rice, and sometimes sweets. Whichever form of offering is used,

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the person making the offering always walks around the tree three times clockwise while chanting and praying thanks to the spirits.

Where there are no trees, the people of central Asia pile rocks to create an artificial mound. This conical rock cairn, known as an *ovaa* (*ovoo* in Mongolian), may be a small pile, no higher than the knees, or as large as a small hill. Sometimes, a sapling or wooden pole is erected in its centre to function in the same fashion as the shaman tree. The Tuvan ceremony to dedicate such a place is called an *Ovaa Dagyrr*.

When a pile of stones is used as the sacred location, it is typical to

*Below: the author supports her mother Agnes Rysdyk, as shaman Ai Churek braids the *chalama* during a tree ritual in 2004 (Photo: Carl A. Hyatt)*





**Above:** a sacred tree decorated with a *chalama* and smaller offering *chalama* after a ceremony held by the author in 2012

**Opposite:** Ai Churek braids a *chalama*  
(Photo: Carl A. Hyatt)

leave an offering of a stone as well as a fabric tie. By bringing a stone, the person adds to the size, and therefore the power, of the sacred place. As with the tree, the *ovaa* is circumnavigated three times clockwise by the person as they pray their gratitude to the spirits.

#### **YOUR OWN SHAMAN TREE**

Read through these instructions thoroughly before you begin.

You will need:

- Your drum or rattle.
- Several large, grapefruit or melon-sized stones.
- A small slab of butter.
- A long enough strip of solid red,

yellow and blue cotton cloth to go around the tree. These strips should be around 15-40cm wide, narrower if the tree is smaller.

- Strips of blue or other coloured fabric, 30-100cm long, or small spools of 10-15mm wide ribbon in solid colours, such as red, yellow, and blue, or blue, green, and purple, or red, yellow, and orange.
- A ritual spoon.
- A small bowl of milk.
- A small bowl of cooked rice.
- Your other offering materials.

The first task is to choose a suitable tree. You might like to undertake a shamanic journey to meet the spirits of the land. You

can ask the spirits you meet to show you which tree would be the best candidate for your shaman tree. You can also ask the spirits of the land how they would like to be honoured as a part of the ceremony you will be performing.

Once the tree has been chosen, honour the spirits of the directions by using a drum or a rattle and singing a power song to each of the directions. Then, while still in a prayerful state, clear away brush and grass at the base of the tree so that it is easier to walk around. Do this work with a loving attitude as you are creating sacred space.

When you have completed this part of the ceremony, make offerings to the tree and the land with pinches of cooked rice in gratitude for their willingness to participate in the ceremony. It is important to only use cooked rice, as fresh rice can kill small animals and birds.

Next, place the rocks in a circle around the base of the tree and bless them with a smear of butter. As you work, sing to the other beneficial spirits of the land and let them know that you wish them to find good and comfortable homes amid these stones.

The master *chalama* is braided from the three colours of cloth. The three colours may be any bright colours, however white or black must not be used as, according to Tuvan culture, they do not increase luck. I usually use red, yellow and bright blue. For me, these primary colours represent the three realms of spirit, the past present and future as well as birth, life and death. In being braided, they also represent the non-linear aspect of these sacred triads. Using primary colours also creates a bold foundation for the many smaller offerings that will be placed on the tree.

Since it requires quite a length of fabric, have someone - preferably an elder - hold the other ends of the cloth as you braid them. If you are working alone, secure the ends of the fabric in some way so that you will find it easier to braid. Sing a power song as you braid the cloth, so that you are empowering it as you work.

When it has been completed, tie the master *chalama* around the

trunk of the tree. If the tree is one with multiple trunks, tie the *chalama* so that it enfolds all of them.

You are now ready to feed the *chalama*, fully bringing it and the tree to life as a sacred place. Sprinkle spoonfuls of milk on the *chalama*, on the tree, on the ground around the tree, and into the air. Thank all the spirits for gathering in this place and for listening to your prayers. Sing a song from your heart to give thanks. Whatever words you use and what ever song you sing, it is your grateful attitude that is the power behind whatever words you use.

Since the tree is now activated, you may add individual cloth prayer ties, ribbons or braided *chalamas* from the three colours. These prayer ties can be offered for any purpose that is close to your heart. Give thanks for health, good friends, loving family, a roof over your head, and whatever else you feel enriches or blesses your life.

You may also place gratitude prayers for what you are in the process of manifesting. Remember to feel that your prayer has already been fulfilled, so that you contribute to creating the reality for its manifestation. Close your ceremony with a heartfelt prayer of thanks to the spirits, to the land, and to your ancestors.

As you add to the tree over time, you will find that it, and its many braided expressions of gratitude, connect you to everything in your life. The sacred tree becomes the centre of your universe and a direct line to all the spirits, and the wind will play with your cloth and ribbon offerings and contribute to sending the prayers that they represent throughout the realms and into all directions.

Evelyn C. Rysdyk is a shamanic teacher and healer. She is the author of 'A Spirit Walker's Guide to Shamanic Tools' and 'Modern Shamanic Living'. Evelyn delights in supporting people to remember their sacred place in 'all that is.' Whether through face-to-face contact with people or through the printed word, she tries to use loving humour and passion to open people's hearts and inspire them to live more joyful, fulfilling and purposeful lives. She is in joint practice with Allie Knowlton. [www.spiritpassages.com](http://www.spiritpassages.com)

This article is an edited excerpt from Evelyn's book 'A Spirit Walker's Guide to Shamanic Tools.' See a review of the book in Issue 84 of Sacred Hoop.



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