

## Things You Should Always Ask About (Points of Research)

### Context, History, Culture

Literally every practice and Tradition has its own cultural context. *Nothing and no one exists outside of culture.* You need to be aware of where your information comes from in as many ways as you can be.

How has this practice been used previously, how is it used now? Where did it come from. Who is using it now, and who used it in the past? This can tell you what to look for, what to avoid, and in a more social sense, give you the tools you need to respect the t/Traditions you work with. It can also help you know when to change something.

### Why people practice

Why do people do this? What is its purpose? This goes for individual practices and traditions, as well as Traditions as larger systems. This is related to the previous point in some ways, but it is also a practical concern.

### What a practice does for you

What do you need, and can the practice(es) or t/Tradition you are investigating actually help you achieve that? What are you looking for *in life*, and will this further that end?

### Related practices/Traditions

What else do people who do what you are looking at do? Based on these same research points, do you like those things? Do you dislike them? Is the practice linked to a larger Tradition? The Tradition to other traditions? Do any of those interest you? If not, why not?

### The state of your own knowledge

In your investigation, your own knowledge is important. Always consider the following:

What do you know for sure right now?

What do you kind of know right now?

What do you know you don't know?

What don't you know you don't know?

Who knows more than you and/or who you can ask for help?

## Some More Specific Things

**Altars:** Altars are shrines and/or working spaces used in various traditions (not just Pagan ones). They're used to represent what is holy or important, show reverence for it, and provide a place to interact with these things.

**Healing and Cunning:** Many traditions focus on or have a subset of healing and cunning practices. These are magical practices which focus on spiritual, physical, mental, and sometimes even social health. Healers are sometimes called **Cunningfolk** because they hone the ability to *know* what is wrong with their patients. In traditional cultural contexts, these people either double as doctors, or are consulted alongside doctors. The originally European concept of the **witchdoctor** is closely related to the practice of **cunning**. Also related to these practices is the concept of **cleansing**, or the removal of unwanted energies and entities, as well as **protection**, preventing unwanted energies or entities from entering or interacting with a space.

**Spirit:** usually refers to unembodied disembodied energetic beings, as well as the energetic part of an embodied organism. It may also refer to *universal energy* of which all things are thought to be composed, or a neutral term for universal divinity.

**Quarters/Directions/Elements:** You're gonna hear about this one a lot. A lot of rituals and Traditions make use of directional correspondences, associating the "four directions" or "quarters" with aspects of reality. This usually takes the form of the classical elements (earth, air, fire, water) but this is **not universal**. I repeat **not all Traditions do this**. Some directional correspondences use categories of spirits, stages of the human life cycle, specific deities, and a number of other things. **Some traditions do not care about directional correspondences and that is okay.**

**Totem:** Other words for this include **spirit animal**, and **power animal**. The term 'totem' is useful because it captures non-animal versions of the phenomenon as well. A totem is an aspect of nature (usually but not always an animal) that one's spirit is intrinsically linked to, that one has a piece of. Traditions which work with totems often view this piece of nature as the soul, or one of many souls. A sick or unhappy totem means a sick or unhappy person.



*A Take on Things You'll Hear, What They Mean, and a Highly Incomplete List of Things to Know Early On*  
-Stefan Sanchez-

### What is this and why is it important?

The premise of this workshop is simple: to give those in attendance a basic understanding of the ideas they will encounter in the Pagan community, as well as an ability to begin talking about and investigating them in an educated manner. For newbies, this will provide a much-needed foundational understanding of the culture(s) of Neopaganism (as well as the related and overlapping cultures of the Occult and Esoteric spiritualities), primarily as it exists in the U.S. (and especially Texas). For levels of experience ranging from *'just barely not a newbie'* to *'been doing this longer than some of these people have been alive'*, this will move toward addressing a very real problem you have likely observed: We don't like to think about what things mean, or make sure we're on the same page as everyone else. This is a problem for experienced practitioners because it makes communication not just across traditions, but between individuals extremely difficult. Similarly, this is a problem for newbies because it means that it takes much longer than it needs to for new Pagans to get the hang of things, or maybe even to realize that there is a 'hang of things' to get. My desire for all of you participating in this conference, is to know what you are talking about when you talk about it, and to know what you are doing when you do it. This is a much loftier goal than it sounds, but I believe it to be worthwhile, and I believe we can make progress toward it with the right foundations!

The following is a quick-reference for some of the things you will encounter in this discussion, with the aim of capturing the things you are most likely to need to know, and some major takeaways.

## What's in a Tradition?

“**Tradition**” refers to two things: in simple terms, 1) The meaningful things that are done, and 2) the set of reasons, ideas, and *meanings* behind those meaningful actions. Think of meaning 1 as lowercase-t tradition and meaning 2 as capital-T Tradition if you like.

On capital-T Traditions: you are likely to see these overlap A LOT.

Here are some helpful terms for understanding the basic parts of T/traditions of Paganism

**Practice:** A thing or set of things which are done, think of this as a little-t tradition or a set of little-t traditions

**Ritual:** This term has a highly contested meaning, but for the most part, you will encounter it in the form of a formalized (sometimes very loosely) ceremony which makes use of one or more practices in a Tradition (or group of traditions) toward a particular goal. Rituals may be performed in groups or alone, and may have religious, spiritual, social, magical (or all four, and even simply personal) goals.

**Pantheon:** In simple terms, a collection of deities associated with a Tradition. Pantheons are almost uniformly associated with cultural Traditions, but are often brought into other Traditions, in part or in whole.

**Entities:** Spirits, gods, things in between. Nonhuman things which are ‘alive.’ The overwhelming majority of Pagan traditions have ways of categorizing and interacting with these.

**Cosmology:** The way the cosmos works, what exists, who and what lives where. Think “map of the universe.”

**Metaphysics:** Related to but distinct from cosmology, *how reality works*. Identities, souls, fate, energies, natural laws, and the way in which things exist are part of metaphysics.

**Mythology:** A body of myths and lore associated with a tradition and/or pantheon. Metaphysics is often apparent in myth, though sometimes you have to think about it to figure out what's going on.

## Practitioners and Practice Forms

**Devotion (Devotee), Contemplation, Reverence and ‘just being a person’(!!!!!!):** Paganism isn't all about magic and not every one has to be clerical and/or mystical. It's perfectly possible to simply develop a relationship with divinity, deities, spirits, the world, etc, without trying to have superpowers or being the personal chef of Dionysos (that would be cool though, I guess). Certainly in a religious or spiritual context, devotion, contemplation and reverence to/of the Important Thing is key. **(Stefan says be the best that you can be, and if that doesn't involve authority or superpowers, that's okay. You. Do. You. Not. Who. Someone. Else. Says. You. Are. <3 )** You can give offerings, say prayers, think about your beliefs and what they mean for you, admire the wonder of the world. All the ‘magic’ starts with figuring out what you love and who you are anyway!

**Priestcraft (Priestess/Priest):** This is fundamentally a clerical practice. Priestcraft is acting with religious authority, often with a devotional relationship to one or more deities, within the structure of a particular Tradition(s), in the name of both any divinities in question, and for the maintenance of that tradition. Priestcraft takes many forms and mixes with other forms of practice.

**Shamanism (Shaman, Shamanist, Shamanic Practitioner):** Shamans undergo a twofold initiation: initiation by spirits, and initiation by a human teacher(s). Shamans mediate between the ecology of the nonhuman and human worlds, pass between the two, and are tasked with bringing knowledge from nature and the spirit world to the human world, aided by the powers of the spirits. **Shamanists** structure their spiritual lives around the visions and clerical practices of Shamanism but do not themselves have or use the same arts or powers as shamans. **Shamanic practitioners** are those who practice shamanic arforms while lacking traditional training. Shamanism is usually associated with indigenous cultures. *(Ask Stefan why that conception is problematic)*

**Witchcraft (Witch):** This term has highly contested history. Often times it refers to several sets of specific religious/magical traditions (The Witchcraft Traditions, such as Wicca and Traditional Witchcraft), but this is not a universal use even in Paganism. One useful line of thought is that the historical “witch” evolves out of originally shamanic practices still being necessary and useful, but changing and adapting in the face of cultural change. I can't give you a final definition (one doesn't exist), but **Witchcraft** in neopaganism has a tendency to emphasize the magical use of “what works”, operation outside of traditional religious structure, and personal relationships with spiritual entities. These practices frequently (and are in some cases designed to) resemble both shamanism and priestcraft very overtly.

## Practices

**Energy** in the sense that our community uses it actually is fairly consistent with energy as conceived by contemporary science, but we acknowledge, and even make a point of learning to perceive, energies that are not measurable by current scientific paradigms. Energy is, in a sense, existence that is not matter, but it definitely interacts with matter, and the two transition between each other. Emotions, societies, the elements, organisms, and everything else all have unique energies and combinations thereof, it's a part of reality, and we all have/participate in it. Energy in some sense figures heavily into many Pagan practices, and into arguably all Pagan metaphysics. You're very likely to encounter folks working with the energies of the **classical elements (earth, air, fire, water)**

**Grounding/Grounding Out** is an electrical metaphor for ridding oneself of excess energy. Related to the idea of **centering**, or ‘being here’ and/or ‘coming back to earth.’ The two are very often presented together **“grounding and centering.”** You'll likely be taught some version of this several times throughout these sessions. *NOT a synonym for “fixing a problem.”*

**Meditation:** A **concentration exercise** usually geared toward energetic, emotional, or mental work of some kind, toward potentially spiritual or mundane ends. These involve physical, mental, emotional, and sometimes magical processes to various extents. Often used as part of devotion and contemplation.

**Altered States:** Related to meditation, states of consciousness in which a person is simply different, experiences things differently, and perhaps has abnormal physical, mental, or magical capabilities.

**Magic:** Another contested term. When Pagans and other magical practitioners say ‘magic,’ they usually refer to the manipulation of the self or the world through will. There is also a tendency to use ‘magic’ to refer to various energies, and things with non-human and non-physical Power in the world as ‘magical.’ So there is *magic as an action or process* and *magic as an ambient force*.

**Spells:** A spell is a specific and precise act of magic. They are often accomplished by way of ritual, though some accomplish them through the use of meditation and altered states.

**Energy Work:** The manipulation of energy. This is pretty self explanatory, and the concept exists in a large number of both Pagan and nonpagan belief structures in the modern day. For the most part the way that we conceive of it today originates from Eastern mystical practices mixing with Victorian era occultism.

**Divination:** A practice used to receive information outside of the perception of the five senses. Most popularly an attempt to tell the future. Various tools, meditative methods, rituals, and altered states can be used to accomplish this.