

The Axis Mundi: its role in mindfulness and across disciplines

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

October 15, 2023

I first heard the term axis mundi from Reverend Craig Barnes this summer while at the Chautauqua Institute. He described it using T.S. Eliot's phrase, "the still point of the turning world." My ears immediately perked up, as did my heart. I know that place, I thought to myself, it's home.

Rev. Barnes went on to talk a bit more about the axis mundi and how it is interconnected in cultures and relations across time as a symbol of the axis between heaven and earth. My curiosity piqued; I left with a desire to know more. What I learned fascinated me.

Axis mundi is talked about in most of the world religions, essentially as the connection between heaven and earth. It is incorporated into architecture, reflected in nature, and woven into most cultures including for example, Greek civilization. It is interconnected to and a part of most disciplines and world views.

In astronomy, axis mundi is the Latin term for the axis of Earth between the celestial poles. Elsewhere, it is called the tree of life, the center of the Earth, the world axis, or the world pillar. It is portrayed in da Vinci's painting, *Vitruvian Man*. Some cultures describe it as a cosmic mountain. In Japan, this is Mount Fuji. In the Old Testament, it was Mount Zion. It was Mount Olympus in Greek mythology and the Black Hills from the Sioux.¹

Some cultures visualize the axis mundi as a column or pillar, while others see the axis mundi in the image of a tree. Hindus call it the fig tree in the Upanishads, while in Buddhism it is the Bodhi Tree under which Siddhartha Gautama gained enlightenment. It has been explained that the tree is understood to be the "reconciliation of macrocosm and microcosm."²

1 <https://fractalenlightenment.com/35796/spirituality/axis-mundi-understanding-the-connection-between-heaven-hell>

2 <https://fractalenlightenment.com/35796/spirituality/axis-mundi-understanding-the-connection-between-heaven-hell>

It is interesting to study how the axis mundi shows up in various religions and cultures. The real questions are, of course, *Why does this matter? What does it have to do with interconnectedness and mindfulness?* And if it does, *how do we find it for ourselves?*

It matters, according to Craig Barnes, T.S. Eliot, and many others, because we all revolve around something. Our lives can revolve around fear, concern around external matters, or a person. These things, all of which are part of our conscious or unconscious belief system can be inherited or intentional. Belief systems, including our axis mundi, can be helpful or not so helpful.

The challenge with revolving our lives around fear, ephemeral things, or anything other than truth is that they will at some time fail us or leave us. Change is the only constant. The axis mundi is the place within us that will never leave us—as long as we are alive, at least. It is always present, accessible, and unblemished. It is the resonance of our true self; some call it our soul. The axis mundi is also called the deeper self, no-self, and transcendent self. Internal Family Systems, a branch of psychology which sees humans as a web of interconnected parts, calls it the "Self" with a capital S. The key is to be able to access it, feel it, become conscious of it, and then return to it again and again.

Paradoxically, the deeper and more genuinely we connect with our internal axis mundi, the more we are connected to others, and the world around us.

I didn't always know that I had an axis mundi or how to connect with it. I didn't believe there was a place within me, or a part of me, that no one and nothing could ever harm. Finding this has been a decades long process with many paths leading to the ultimate connection. It is well worth all it took to get to this place.

A turning point in my own journey came four years ago. I injured my back and needed to take a break from Hatha and power yoga. A yoga practitioner for over 30 years, I had never

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explored Kundalini yoga. The practice, which includes breathwork and the use of sound, mantra, and mudras or hand gestures, didn't burn many calories, and my revolution at that time still involved imposed beliefs about body and health. But the gift the world offered me was that I had no choice. If I wanted to practice yoga, it was going to have to be this route, at least temporarily. I started and never left!

Many of you know that through that spiritual practice, I found my voice and now play the harmonium, an Indian musical instrument. Sound, in my case, through the Sikh tradition and language of Gurmukhi have led me finally to my inner axis mundi. These days, sound and singing are a central tenant of my spiritual practices. The sounds and words quickly connect me to my home inside, my axis mundi. We have a worship service in November which will focus on the Sikh religion.

German-born spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle calls this axis mundi the *vertical dimension*. He explains that most of us are more accustomed to living in the *horizontal plane* as experienced when we talk with others, watch the news, or focus on our daily tasks. Those things are necessary and good; the interconnection with the vertical axis, the eternal home within us all, the axis mundi, is also important.

Tolle says, "You enter the vertical dimension as you become present. As you become present, the stream of thinking subsides and is replaced with awareness. You know you are, but that's it and that's all you need to know."³

Sound is certainly not the only path to connect with our axis mundi. Athletes can find it in their sport, gardeners in gardening, and others in mindful stillness. Some people have mystical experiences where the veil of illusion is dropped. They see the interconnectedness of all existence, and feelings of awe and mystery abound. Great joy, laughter, and play can all connect us to the still point within us. Ironically it is often in times of great tragedy or crisis that people experience

this stillness. "Somehow I knew things were going to be okay," folks say. Or they talk about how time stood still, or they felt a peace that made no sense in the face of tragedy.

Whatever or however it happens, accessing our axis mundi requires us to override or set down our thinking, so that we may experience, or know, this place of wholeness and interconnection. As we detach from others and all we believe we know, we find our home, the still point in a turning world, as Eliot said. We realize there is nothing that must be done, and from there, so much happens. Once we find that place, we can always return to it, again and again. We begin to live, truly live and be present, in the interconnected world, internal and external, of we are an essential and beautiful part.

May it be so.

Amen.

3 <https://youtu.be/hGB9tfmhVA8?si=SoED-Eo1u0SUddoZk>