

Living in the Briar Patch

by [Richard Hodges](#), © 2012

*There is a reality even prior to heaven and earth;
Indeed, it has no form, much less a name;
Eyes fail to see it; It has no voice for ears to detect;
To call it Mind or Buddha violates its nature,
For it then becomes like a visionary flower in the air;
It is not Mind, nor Buddha;
Absolutely quiet, and yet illuminating in a mysterious way,
It allows itself to be perceived only by the clear-eyed.
It is Dharma truly beyond form and sound;
It is Tao having nothing to do with words.
Wishing to entice the blind,
The Buddha has playfully let words escape his golden mouth;
Heaven and earth are ever since filled with entangling briars.
O my good worthy friends gathered here,
If you desire to listen to the thunderous voice of the Dharma,
Exhaust your words, empty your thoughts,
For then you may come to recognize this One Essence.
Says Hui the Brother, "The Buddha's Dharma
Is not to be given up to mere human sentiments."*
On Zen, by Dai-o Kokushi (1234-1308)

The above poem was written late in the 13th century, called by some scholars "the greatest of centuries." In many parts of the world unprecedented change was taking place, and sensitive thinkers were writing profoundly questioning meditations that often sound contemporary in their concerns. Other 13th century writers of note include Rumi, Roger Bacon, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham. This was the era of the building of High Gothic cathedrals, and of the *Pax Mongolica*, a peaceful regime enforced by the Mongolian Empire along the Silk Road to ensure freedom of trade. This regime greatly increased wealth all the way from Europe to China, and facilitated a current of cultural and religious ideas that flowed in both directions. But was there perhaps already a premonition of the great fall in the spiritual depth of human life that was soon to overwhelm the world? Just below the surface of writings like "On Zen" one detects a desperate quest for fresh truths hidden, as it were, in plain sight. And in our latest half-century, the era of the *Pax Americana*, with its worldwide regime of imposed "free trade" in goods and ideas, is there not heard a similar sound?

The poem evokes for me an image: the Buddha's Briar Patch is where the Rabbit's innocence can hide from the Fox's avidity for enlightenment. This image, which seems related to the story of the wolf and sheep that Gurdjieff tells in *Beelzebub's Tales*, is based on a myth cycle that I often heard as a child, about Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox. And the Briar Patch.



Hares in Foliage and a hunt, Coptic, 5th Century

This story is a uniquely American folk-tale combining West African elements (the Rabbit as Trickster, for example) and American Indian. There is a Cherokee tale in which Rabbit tricks Fox into throwing him into the briar patch, not knowing that this is his natural element. This story was melded with African trickster stories. The version I grew up with was published in the 1870's in Joel Chandler Harris' popular Uncle Remus books.

Br'er Rabbit is like Mullah Nasr Eddin, who defeats his enemies, who seem stronger than he is, by guile, or maybe dumb luck. "Mullah Nasr Eddin" translates from Arabic as "Teacher (*Mullah*) of Victory (*Nasr*) of Religion (*Al-dīn*).” The idea, I think, is that the apparent simpleton succeeds simply because of his faith, his abandonment to “*Sha Al-lāh*,” what God wills, i.e.

whatever actually happens, as opposed to what people expect. This is the kind of innocence that Rabbit possesses.

In my version of the story, Rabbit, being perfectly innocent, plunges into the briar patch and is unharmed because of his innocence. It is his refuge, like taking refuge in the Buddha. Fox, in his avidity for enlightenment, for power, for knowledge, for doing, would eat the rabbit; but when he tries to go into the briar patch after him, he is too aggressive and gets pricked and has to draw back.

Rabbit and Fox represent what Gurdjieff calls the Two Natures: the quiet, upward-oriented nature; and the aggressive, downward-moving nature. Evolution and Involution.

The Briar Patch is the key: it is what enables the two natures to remain separate and not destroy each other. The Briar Patch is one's ordinary self (which is prickly), the world (which is prickly), other people (who are prickly), human organizations (which are all prickly, including the Gurdjieff Work Organization and other spiritual communities). We don't often recognize how important this prickliness is to our inner life. Our place is to be between the two natures, to recognize them both, and to let them play together, and to stay un-identified with them. Our truest nature comes from a higher place than the Rabbit and the Fox, a plane "higher than the Sun." The Briar Patch is sent from this level, and helps us, as is said, stay in front of the unique Human situation, in between.

A Persian Miniature

Here is my vision of the way the story might be represented in a Persian miniature:

Rabbit is nestled among briars. His eyes half-open, he seems to be meditating. His ears are extended toward Fox, echoing the Jewish "mudra" of blessing, best known from the Vulcan hand sign in Star Trek, which was indeed adopted from the Jewish ritual. Fox is looking on, hungrily. His head and snout are turned toward Rabbit. His tongue is hanging out, he is drooling. One or two branches of briars twine around Rabbit's head, like the Crown of Thorns. But it is Fox who has two or three bleeding wounds, on his snout and nose. He doesn't seem to notice, so intent he is on getting to Rabbit.

Rabbit is purest white, with pink inner folds of his ears, eyes, and the pads of his feet. Fox is reddish brown, with black highlights, and strangely glowing reddish eyes. The briars are dark brown, the actual thorns almost black. The background is a profusion of luxuriant green vegetation implying perhaps the Green Man.

Above the tableau, in the middle distance, but perhaps only a shadow, it looks like one or two farmers wearing broad hats and carrying sticks, perhaps a shotgun. Who are they? Are they hunting Rabbit, or Fox? Are they watching and enjoying the show? Are they just out for a walk and totally unaware of the epochal drama taking place at their feet?



The Briar Patch
Illustration by Mary Baker

The Green Man

The Green Man was a widespread symbol in ancient Europe and the Middle East. The Green Man was a very frequent medieval image, and can be seen carved or painted in churches and manuscripts. It represents Nature in both its aspects: cornucopia of green goodness; and pitiless destroyer. Though the image is most familiar to us in Christian contexts, it has pagan roots. Some scholars say the Green Man image goes back to Hindu India at least as long ago as the Gupta period (4th-6th C. AD).



Green man, Parish Church, Sutton Benger, Wiltshire, c. 1300

Alongside its obvious meaning of Nature's Bounty, the Green Man has always had a darker side: the Green Man is also known as Beelzebub, and sometime called "Three-headed Beelzebub". In the traditional Beltane (May Day) Mummers' plays of old Celtic Europe, Beelzebub as the Green Man fights with his club against St. George, who wounds him with his sword. This reflects the age-old struggle between the autochthonous human essence (Beelzebub) and the spirit of civilization (the dragon-tamer, St. George); or perhaps the struggle between pagan religion and Christianity.

A version of the story is told in the movie "The Wicker Man" (the original 1973 version, long considered a "cult classic"). Key action takes place in the Green Man Inn, and a May Day Mummers' play culminates in the unexpected climax of the plot.



THE GOSPEL ACCORDING to S. MATTHEW.

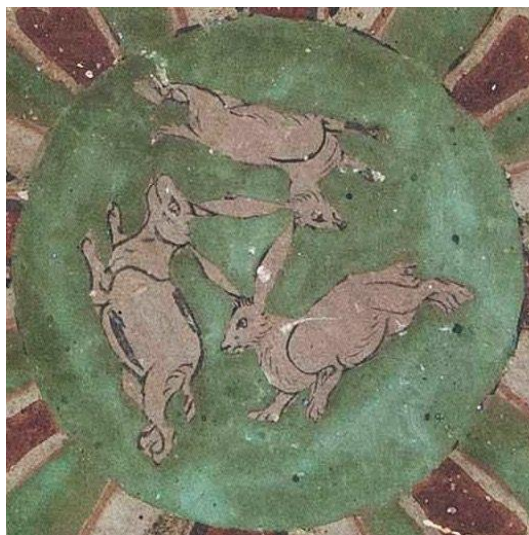
Green man image from a 1619 edition of the King James Bible

The Green Man as Beelzebub, in the form of a horned goat.

In some versions of the Mummers' play, a Doctor character mysteriously appears and tends the wound of Beelzebub. Who is this Doctor? A hoped-for Saviour of the older way of being? My speculation is that in adopting Beelzebub as the main character of his *magnum opus*, Gurdjieff may be saying that the Doctor is himself, and that his mission is to heal the wound of Beelzebub.

The Triple Rabbit

In an image called the Triple Rabbit or the Three Hares, three rabbits are depicted leaping around a circle, and invariably each rabbit shares an ear with its adjacent rabbit. This image was in use from China to Europe, from at least the 6th century to late medieval times.



Three Hares from Dunhuang, China, 6th Century



Three Hares, Egypt or Syria, 13th Century

One of Gurdjieff's movements ("**Blue Red Black Yellow**") may imply a reference to this image



Triple Rabbit from Cathedral of Paderborn, Germany, 12th Century

The legendary fecundity of the Rabbit suggests that the image may be a symbol for the Creation of everything in the Universe from three principles. The triangle of interlocking ears suggest that Creation is a vibration, a cosmic sound that can be heard by those with a "third ear," an ear that is not attached to their own head but which links them to other forces in the cosmic dance.

The Green Man was often depicted adjacent to the Triple Rabbit.



Green Man and Three Hares, Wissembourg Cathedral, 7th Century, rebuilt 10th and 11th Centuries



Three Hares and Green Man, old church in Throwleigh, Devon



Roof Boss, Chichester Cathedral, 11th Century

Six Green Man images, each adjacent pair sharing an eye, reminiscent of the Triple Rabbit. The vegetation emanating from the mouth is an iconic attribute of the Green Man.

What is the meaning of this juxtaposition? As with the Green Man, there is very little textual evidence for how ancient people understood the Triple Rabbit. A hint is that the Hare was associated with Mary because of an ancient belief that it was hermaphroditic and could give birth without losing its virginity; the motif may thus refer to the Virgin's role in the redemptive project of Trinitarian Christian theology. It has been suggested that this icon of redemption is juxtaposed to the Green Man because the latter represents sinful humanity. This echoes our idea of the complementary symbolism of the Rabbit and the Fox.