

# Deosil and Widdershins

## *Celestial power from the sun's path*

IF YOU DON'T KNOW which way to turn, allow the Sun's course to aid you in ritual circles. Wise ones have been doing the same since time immemorial, codifying discoveries and attuning to the Sun's travel through the heavens. In the broadest view, a circle symbolizes the completion of a cycle of existence, the eternal return, perpetual motion, continuity through time, clockwork. The symbol in all its complexity is simple to draw and widely applied in ritual, often for protection. Inside the ring lies the realm of magic, performance of a sacred rite. Outside lies the material world, containing evil forces and all kinds of unruly spirits, as well as a realm that might be influenced by the powers conjured within the circle.

The size of the circle may be widely varied and used in widely varied ways. The form may be created in boulders, pebbles, salt or chalk. Inside the ring may be a solitary witch, a coven or other group, perhaps for healing, expanding capacity as necessary. The ceremony may include an altar and tools, and offer invocations to deities, singing, dancing, drumming, scents, herbs, spells, divination, auguries,

potions, any number of devices. Often a circle of celebration occurs on holidays and special occasions.

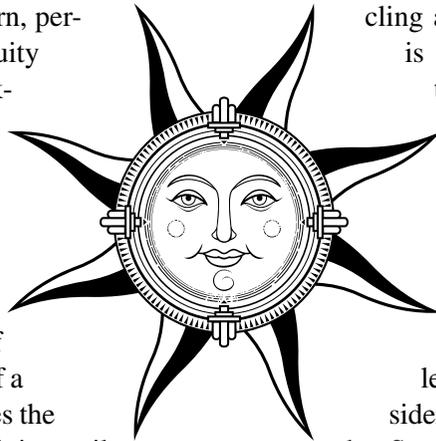
Deosil and widdershins describe the two classical approaches to ceremonial working with circles. In their most basic forms, deosil is clockwise around the

Sun, east to west, to the right if circling an object. This motion

is perceived as a positive force, drawing in energy from the Sun, perhaps relating to the right hand bias of many cultures. Widdershins refers to counterclockwise, west to east, skewed left for circles and considered unlucky, "against the Sun," especially by early

Sun-worship cultures. (Alert readers will immediately note that the directions apply only to the Northern Hemisphere and the opposite prevails in the Southern.)

The roundabout words themselves clue us into old beliefs. "Deosil" derives from Irish-Gaelic and its first syllable has nothing to do with god. The "deo" refers to deum, meaning "day" and refers to the Sun. Oddly enough deosil is pronounced JEE-zhel — yes, go figure Gaelic pronunciation. "Widdershins" was first cited in 1513 from widdersyns, "start my hair,"



meaning “my hair stood on end,” a good description of some responses to left hand movement. The root is German, *wittersinnig*, “against sense,” also interpreted as “opposite the usual.”

### *Signifying*

Stone dolmen circles from the Megalith Era reveal the antiquity of the symbol. Doubtless built as burial sites, perhaps the ring of boulders such as Stonehenge provided protection for the deceased and also a site for memorial rites. We know that the earliest Pagans worshipped within groves and sought to build their altars where trees formed a ring.

We have no record of when the deosil/widdershins distinctions began, but the druids knew. They took advantage of the knowledge in their circumnavigation ceremonies, walking around their temples from the south and keeping the structure on the right. This course they believed propitious; the contrary path, *tuathal*, fatal or at least ominous. In Britain, it was considered unlucky even for travelers to pass widdershins around a church. In the folk tale, “Childe Rowland,” the protagonist and his sister are carried off to Elfland after she runs counterclockwise around a churchyard.

But two Asian religions at the same site differ on approaches to shrines. Tibetan Buddhists go around deosil,



while followers of Bonpo go widdershins. Tibetan monks consider the Bonpo usage a perversion of right practice. The Bonpo adherents claim that since they are the native population of Tibet, their practice is definitive.

Some Jewish traditions also vary. In the synagogue, as the Torah is removed from the Ark for reading, the scroll is taken from the right and returned on the left. At a wedding, the bride circles the groom seven times widdershins. Dancers on all occasions also circle in that direction. Fortunately the dancing tends to take place indoors — according to one myth, if you dance nine times around a ring of toadstools you will come under the power of the fairy kingdom. Imagine the shock!

### *Circling the globe*

In folk tales, wherever imagination sparkles and stories are born, circles pop up as magical devices. *Szepasszony*





is a taboo word in Hungary, for instance, even for those who can say the sneezy name. It refers to the Fair Lady, a beautiful demon with long hair who wears a gown as white as her heart is black. In colloquial usage, a sick child is sometimes said to be “suckled by the Fair Lady.” She comes out during storms and hail to dance and seduce young men. Water dripping from eaves into a circular puddle constitutes a “platter,” the space from which Fair Lady casts a spell — most potent at noon. Villagers are careful to evade such puddles or even a circle of short grass, since they may be the rings where Fair Lady dances out her malignant intentions.

In Russia and Poland old stories prevail about Nocritsa the Night Hag, also known as Kriksy and Plaksy. She torments children at night and in some regions mothers take precautions to keep the demon at bay. They draw a circle around a cradle with a knife, a double protection as it is believed that evil spirits cannot touch iron. Sometimes the knife is reinforced by an ax placed under the crib or cradle.

Talmudic literature contains several stories about using circles to make rain. Choni the Circle, also known as Choni the Rainmaker, offers a droll example of the power of piety. In his day, the second century BCE, a drought blighted Israel, despite the best efforts of the rabbis to enact prayer vigils. As spring approached, they decided to call on the legendary rainmaker, famous for his close relationship to God.

Choni drew a circle, stood inside, and said, “Master of the Universe, Your children have turned their faces to me, for I am like a member of Your household. I swear by Your great Name that I will not move from here until You have mercy on Your children.”

Rain spattered down in droplets. “I did not ask this,” Choni pointed out, and asked for more rain. More came down angrily in torrents. “I did not ask this,” Choni persisted, “but rains of benevolence, blessing and generosity.” The torrent abated and such rains fell as saved the thirst-ridden crops. Then Choni said that the rains had fallen enough and should go away. As he prayed, so they did.

Though Choni had rescued the people, the head priest sent for him and reproached the rainmaker for forcing God’s hand. “Were you not Choni,” said the priest, “I would pronounce a ban on you. But what can I do? You misbehave toward God and yet He does what you want... And about you the verse says, ‘Your father and your mother should be glad and your mother should rejoice.’ ”

*In common usage*

Martainn MacGille Mhartainn, an eighteenth-century Scottish Gaelic writer,

provides an excellent account of how circles had become customary to serve in everyday life:

“Some of the poorer sort of people in the Western Isles retain the custom of performing these circles sunwise about the persons of their benefactors three times, when they bless them, and wish good success to all their enterprises. Some are very careful when they set out to sea, that the boat be first rowed sunwise, and if this be neglected, they are afraid their voyage may prove unfortunate. I had this ceremony paid me when in Islay by a poor woman, after I had given her an alms. I desired her to let alone that compliment, for that I did not care for it; but she insisted to make these three ordinary turns, and then prayed that God and MacCharmaig, the patron saint of the island, might bless and prosper me in all my affairs.

“When a Gael goes to drink out of a consecrated fountain, he approaches it by going round the place from east to west, and at funerals, the procession observes the same direction in drawing near the grave. Hence also is derived the old custom of describing sunwise a circle, with a burning brand, about houses, cattle, corn and corn fields, to

prevent their being burnt or in any way injured by evil spirits, or by witchcraft. The fiery circle was also made around women, as soon as possible after parturition, and also around newly born babes. These circles were, in later times, described by midwives, and were described effectual against the intrusion of *daoine sìth* or *sìthichean*, who were particularly on the alert in times of childhood, and not infrequently carried infants away, according to vulgar legends, and restored them afterwards, but sadly altered in features and personal appearance. Infants stolen by fairies are said to have voracious appetites, constantly craving for food. In this case it was usual for those who believed their children had been taken away, to dig a grave in the fields on quarter day and there to lay the fairy skeleton till next morning, at which time the parents went to the place, where they doubted not to find their own child in place of the skeleton.”

– BARBARA STACY

*The fascinating process for casting the ancient Lughnasadh Circle Ceremony is available on our website, at [www.thewitchesalmanac.com](http://www.thewitchesalmanac.com).*

