

Introduction to Animism

What is Animism?

Wikipedia defines Animism as “the belief that objects, places, and creatures all possess a distinct spiritual essence. Animism perceives all things—animals, plants, rocks, rivers, weather systems, human handiwork, and in some cases words, as animated and alive.”

In my tradition we are taught that all things possess a Spirit(or Consciousness), and a Soul. Whether through human hands, or natural means, all life, and all things brought into Creation are given the spark of life. Which includes words, emotions, and deeds.

However, Animists are a diverse bunch! We will not all agree, or experience Animism the same, and that's a beautiful thing. No one's perspective or philosophy about Animism is wrong, they're simply looking from a different point of view.

Questions to Reflect On

Below are three questions we should take time to consider periodically. It can be a helpful tool to work through them, and record your answers in a journal (in whichever method works for you). As you learn, or develop your own particular flavour of Animism you will be able to review your past responses, and see how you've grown and changed in that time.

“What is Animism to me?”

For me personally - Animism is the active relationship I seek with spirits around me. It is the work or practice of my philosophies, and teachings. It is developing respectful healthy relationships with wildlife, my furbabies, my things, and the land. To develop a bond, and connection to the life around me.

“Where do I notice Animism in my life?”

We all have our favourites, and for me it's books! I pick up a book and run my hand along its cover. I breathe deeply as I open it, and listen to the sounds of the pages as I turn them. I notice Animism in the sensory moments such as this. That urge to really *feel* what I'm holding in my hand. It's also there when a tool or thing I've had for years is suddenly beyond the point of repair. There's a sadness for the machine, or object I now need to replace. As a result I often attempt to recycle or salvage as much as possible.

“What questions do I have about Animism?”

If you're new to Animist philosophy, it can be challenging to understand the nature of it, or to turn it into a practice. Take some time to really consider what questions you have. Where do you get stuck? Is there something you don't understand? Do you wonder where everyone gets their specific “take” on Animism? Are you simply curious? As a curious person, I highly encourage learning things purely out of curiosity!

Animism: According to My Teachings

Much of my family's teachings revolve around Animism. We learn a wide range of philosophies and teachings about it. Not everyone in my family were Spirit Workers, but we are all Animists. Here we will touch on some of the fundamental concepts that are taught. These concepts are not “rules”; they are simply the perspectives, and philosophies we use in our practices. We have many, but today, I have chosen our main points that we all begin with.

The content below is introductory, and will include some suggested observations, meditations/reflections, and activities to try following each topic. These suggestions are meant to be a starting point. A way to help you define your individual path as an Animist. Where the questions, and activities lead you - is up to you. You may end up with more questions, you may gain a sense of what you're looking for, or wish to build. Take the suggestions and run with them.

Spirit and Soul

We believe that all things in Creation have a Spirit/Consciousness, and a Soul. In our tradition these two things are very much separate. This concept connects to multiple philosophies regarding Animism, the afterlife, creation, etiquette, and so much more. The topic of Spirit and Soul is one of our founding principles and one that touches virtually everything we do.

The Spirit: Is the consciousness all things possess. It is the experiential part of all Creation that resides in the material world. It is the part of all things that thinks, feels, and speaks. It makes us who we are, it's our mind, and personality, not our physical brain. It is the part of us that is meant to experience life, and learn its lessons.

When I speak to the Spirit of a tree - I'm talking to the physical tree standing in front of me. To that spirit, that consciousness it contains.

The Soul: Is the spiritual body that is born again, and again. Or the piece of ourselves that moves on once our time here is over. It is the spiritual self given to all of Creation. For those of us in the material world is the part of us that is born, given form so that it lives, dies, and returns to Creation, where the cycle begins again.

We don't know what the soul is here to learn or experience, and we cannot possibly understand the questions it carries, or the lessons it wishes to learn. We are taught that some things are not meant for our physical, mortal selves to know.

Suggestions:

To build a relationship with a Spirit we must first start with respect, and be open to the bond we are hoping to form. When you observe the world around you, consider the relationships you've formed to various things, objects, animals, people, plants etc. What feels different about those you bonded to, vs the ones you didn't? How do you feel about that difference? Is there anything you'd like to change?

A Child and Their Toys

Have you ever sat and simply observed a child playing with their toys? Young children especially, often treat their toys as living things. We'll see them have one sided conversations, they'll apologise to the toy if they drop it, they'll hug it when their toy feels sad. They may even think the washer and dryer will hurt their toy - because they are taught these machines could be dangerous if they go inside. Of course, let's not forget that creepy moment a child tells an adult something their toy has said - and it's correct.

In my tradition we are taught that most children are naturally Animists. They don't question the spirit of their toys. Their toy is alive, they simply accept it. This acceptance leads to a strong connection and communication. The Spirits of Toys have their place in our life too! They are often a friend, and teacher to the child - one of the first they meet. As children age, they will step away, or allow the toy to leave. The child knows they will meet new friends, and teachers as they grow.

By contrast, in Western Culture children are often taught as they grow that it's time to leave their imaginary friends behind. To stop playing with the toys that have been steady companions. It's the adult who decides when a child should leave these things behind. My Grandfather taught me that this can sometimes make a person feel disconnected. Like they've lost that Animist connection to the wider world, and it's something they want back.

He firmly believed that the connection they had was never lost, or severed, it was merely buried. That a series of small things will bring it closer to the surface, until it finally sprouts.

Suggestions:

Consider your own childhood, inner child, or a young child you know, what is the relationship they have with toys? Can you observe, or remember that Animist behaviour? As an adult - make a point to stop and play with a toy, have fun with it, let loose your inner child and "roll with it". How did it feel? How does the toy feel to you now? What response does it invoke?

The Natural World

When we sit in a place of nature quietly, simply observing or closing our eyes to listen, we can sometimes feel the life around us. We may observe the bird song, the animal sounds, the hum of insects, and say "this is where that sense of life is coming from." Yet, when we step back from that perception, and relax our focus, we feel the energy around us. It comes from the earth, the sky, the flora, fauna, and elements all around.

Spirits of Nature vary far and wide. They are spirits of the elements, emotions, events (creation, destruction, etc), animals, rocks, plants, trees, places, rivers, lakes, ponds, and seas. They are spirits of forests, mountains, volcanos, fields and deserts. They live within the largest urban sprawls to the most isolated, unlivable places on Earth. They are "good" and "bad", "light" and "dark", and everything in between. They are old, they are primal, and they are everywhere.

Gratitude is key here. According to our teachings these are the spirits that provide everything. Everything we build, everything we make, everything we eat, or use, is provided by these spirits. We remind ourselves of this, and offer gratitude and appreciation when we need, or use them.

Suggestions:

Sit outside, but this time (if possible) close your eyes, and simply feel. Feel the earth beneath your feet, or body. Feel the wind and sun on your skin, smell and taste the air. Get up and move around. Touch the grass, rocks, sand, dirt, plants (ensure they're safe to touch!). What emotions have stirred inside you? How do you show gratitude to the natural world? How do you *want* to show gratitude?

Human-made Objects

Many people may look around them and see objects full of synthetic or processed material and wonder "how can this stuff be alive?". My grandfather taught me that all material begins somewhere. We don't manufacture products, or materials from nothing. When we harvest resources, the material is often considered dead because it's separated from its source, yet it still carries a spark of the life it belonged to. A small spark of energy. As more materials are added, so is the spark they carry. It grows, and changes as the object forms. Humans (or their imagination) have shaped it, given it purpose, and set it free in the world.

Take a look around you. No matter how minimalist we are, we still have *stuff*, furniture, art, tools, etc. Yet instead of being surrounded by that song of life we feel in nature, we're met with silence. Human-made objects are created to fill a particular purpose or need, for the most part these spirits are happy to do the task they were created for. They appear to be "tamed", or quieter because they have been shaped by us, for our use. Objects that are mass produced have life, but it's quiet, it's small, it's new, and "sleeping". By using it we also add to the spark it's carried, and it will grow. Our use of it is what "wakes it up". This is why we may develop an attachment to a pen, pot, book, or virtually any other thing we use.

This doesn't mean all objects are happy with the forms they've been given. Say I go to the store and buy a new toaster. I bring it home, set it up, and it doesn't work - it's a lemon. I can't return it, so I try to get fixed, or repaired, yet nothing works. In our teachings - this is an example of what happens when the spirit disapproves. It didn't want to be a toaster, it's unhappy, so it simply refuses to do the task.

Suggestions:

Take a look around you. What is the difference between the objects you would be sad to lose, and the objects you would simply replace? What makes certain objects more valuable to *you*? Pick up the book you're reading, or the ereader you use, and run your hands over it. Feel the wear on it, its scuffs, nicks, folds, or scratches. How many hours have you spent with it? Are you its first home, second, or third? What emotions do you experience as you feel and observe this object?

Developing Your Animist Practice

For me, Animism is a very sensory experience, and a deeply philosophical topic. I want to experience the sight, sound, smell, and touch of it. I need to feel things, either the emotional response they invoke, or through my physical senses. This shows in my specific practices, but that doesn't have to be yours.

The suggestions I've given may benefit you, or they may not fit your path, and that's OK. If something doesn't fit - you're still making progress! To that end, whether you found benefit or not, there are questions to meditate on that can help you find your individual path. The response to these questions will change over time, recording them in your journal will allow you to see the changes.

Animism is a journey. Your perspective will shift as you learn, and develop your personal practices. It will grow, and evolve over time. Start small, with something that matters to you. It could be a book, a pen, or a toy - anything that comes to mind. When you use this object, be conscious of that use. Take the time to hold it, feel it, learn its shape. This is a journey that starts in small steps.

We often think our practices need to be more involved, but I find Animism is more effective when it is kept simple, practical, and focused on the relationships we hope to build. Below are some questions that can help you reflect on what you're looking for in your own practices.

1. What brought you to Animism? Or, what feels right about Animism?
2. What do you need in your practice?
3. What do you want in your practice?