

# FIVE PATHS OF THE LIVING WORLD

Naturalism -- Animism -- Pantheism -- Panentheism -- Vitalism

*& the Bengali Patua Scroll Tradition*

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*A complete deep-dive into six traditions that place life, nature, energy, and the living world at the center of their philosophy. What they are, where they came from, what they believe, how they differ -- and what they share.*



*Personal Reading Series • April 2026*

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## PART ONE: ORIENTATION

# 1. Why These Six Traditions? What They Have in Common

When you look at the history of human spiritual and philosophical thought, one of the great fault lines runs between traditions that place the divine outside the world -- a creator God separate from and above creation -- and traditions that place the sacred inside the world, woven through nature, life, and matter itself.

The six traditions in this guide all fall on the second side of that line. None of them require a transcendent deity who stands apart from creation and judges it from above. All of them, in different ways, say that the sacred is here -- in the forest, in the body, in the energy running through all living things, in the stories painted on a scroll by a traveling singer.

They differ significantly in their details -- whether they are philosophical systems or spiritual practices, whether they are ancient or modern, whether they accept the supernatural or reject it entirely. But they share this foundational orientation: the world itself is where the sacred lives.

**The Six Traditions at a Glance** Naturalism: The natural world is all there is. No supernatural. Science is sacred. Animism: Every rock, river, tree, and animal has a spirit. The world is alive. Pantheism: God and the universe are identical. God IS nature. Panentheism: God contains the universe but also exceeds it. The universe is in God. Vitalism: A non-physical life force animates all living things beyond mere chemistry. Bengali Patua: Sacred scroll painters who honor Hindu, Muslim, and folk traditions simultaneously through painted story-songs. No walls between traditions.

# 2. A Note on Zionism, Patua & What We Are Not Covering

## Why Not Zionism?

Zionism is frequently confused with a religion because it involves Jewish identity and the sacred land of Israel. But it is in fact a political movement -- specifically, the 19th-century movement for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Israel, founded by Theodor Herzl in 1897. It is not a theology,

not a spiritual practice, and not a worldview about the nature of reality. Including Zionism in a comparison of spiritual traditions would be like comparing Buddhism to the civil rights movement. It belongs in political philosophy, not religious studies.

## **Why Include the Bengali Patua Tradition?**

The Bengali Patua tradition might seem like an unusual addition to this list -- it is not a named religion, not a philosophical school, and not widely known outside of Bengal and the world of sacred art. But it earns its place here for a powerful reason: it is one of the most vivid living examples of what happens when a spiritual practice refuses to put walls between traditions.

The Patua artists -- hereditary scroll painters and singer-storytellers of West Bengal and Bangladesh -- have painted and sung stories from Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and folk religion simultaneously for centuries. They are the living embodiment of the idea that all sacred stories belong to everyone, and that beauty is the vehicle through which truth travels. For anyone building a new path that honors many traditions without being captured by any one of them, the Patua are a direct ancestor.

## PART TWO: THE SIX TRADITIONS IN DEPTH

### 3. Naturalism -- The World Is Enough

#### NATURALISM

*Philosophy / Worldview | Global*

<b>Type</b>	Philosophical worldview and ethical framework
<b>Origin</b>	Ancient Greece (pre-Socratic philosophers); systematized in the 17th-19th centuries
<b>Key claim</b>	The natural world is all that exists. There is no supernatural realm.
<b>Deity</b>	None. The universe itself may be experienced as awesome and worthy of reverence.
<b>Sacred text</b>	None specifically. Scientific literature and philosophical texts.
<b>Followers</b>	Hundreds of millions hold broadly naturalist views (including many atheists, agnostics, secular humanists, and scientists)

#### What Is Naturalism?

Naturalism is the philosophical position that everything that exists is part of the natural world -- that there is no supernatural dimension, no realm beyond nature, no gods, spirits, or forces that operate outside the laws of physics. It is less a religion and more a fundamental orientation toward reality: the world we can observe, measure, and experience is the world.

This does not mean naturalism is cold or spiritually empty. Some of the most profound experiences of awe, wonder, love, and meaning in human life can be understood entirely within a naturalist framework. When you stand under a sky full of stars and feel something vast and humbling -- a naturalist says that feeling is real, that the cosmos IS vast and humbling, and that we do not need to add a god to the picture to make it sacred.

#### Types of Naturalism

- **Metaphysical Naturalism:** The most fundamental form. Only natural things exist. There are no supernatural beings, souls, or forces.
- **Methodological Naturalism:** The working assumption of science: when investigating reality, only natural causes and explanations are considered. Does not claim supernature doesn't exist --

only that science doesn't use it as an explanation.

- **Religious Naturalism:** The most interesting form for our purposes. Accepts the naturalist worldview but argues that the natural world itself -- its beauty, complexity, and interconnectedness -- deserves the same reverence we might otherwise give to a god. Ursula Goodenough's 'The Sacred Depths of Nature' (1998) is its most eloquent expression.
- **Spiritual Naturalism:** Similar to religious naturalism. The spiritual dimension of human life -- awe, gratitude, ethical commitment, transcendent experiences -- is real and important, but it arises from and is grounded in the natural world, not a supernatural one.

## Key Thinkers

- **Democritus (460-370 BCE):** Greek atomist. All reality is matter and void. The first thoroughgoing naturalist in Western philosophy.
- **Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677):** Argued that God and Nature are one substance (Deus sive Natura -- God or Nature). Influenced pantheism and naturalism equally.
- **Charles Darwin (1809-1882):** Evolution by natural selection explained the diversity and complexity of life without supernatural agency.
- **John Dewey (1859-1952):** American philosopher who developed naturalistic humanism -- ethics and meaning grounded in human experience, not theology.
- **Ursula Goodenough (1943-present):** Cell biologist and religious naturalist. 'The Sacred Depths of Nature' (1998) is the most beautiful case for finding the sacred entirely within the natural world.
- **Carl Sagan (1934-1996):** Astronomer and humanist whose work 'Cosmos' expressed profound reverence for the universe without any supernatural framework.

## What Naturalism Looks Like in Practice

Naturalism is primarily a philosophical worldview rather than a set of practices. But those who hold naturalist views often find their own forms of ritual meaning:

- Spending time in nature as a form of communion with the cosmos
- Scientific study as a form of reverence -- learning the deep story of reality
- Secular ritual: marking seasons, births, deaths, and transitions without supernatural framing
- Ethics grounded in human flourishing rather than divine command
- Meditation and mindfulness understood as training the natural brain, not contacting the divine

**Connection to The Living Way** The Living Way is not purely naturalist because it does work with subtle energy, chakras, and prana -- concepts that go beyond what current science can measure. But it shares naturalism's reverence for the physical world as sacred in itself, its rejection of a punishing external deity, and its grounding of spiritual practice in direct lived experience. Carl Sagan's sense of cosmic awe and Ursula Goodenough's sacred depths of nature are very much alive in The Living Way's relationship to the earth.

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## 4. Animism -- Everything Is Alive

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### ANIMISM

*Spiritual Worldview | Worldwide / Indigenous*

<b>Type</b>	Spiritual worldview; the oldest known form of human religiosity
<b>Origin</b>	Prehistoric. Present in all indigenous cultures worldwide. The term coined by anthropologist E.B. Tylor in 1871.
<b>Key claim</b>	All things -- animals, plants, rivers, rocks, weather, the earth itself -- possess spirit, consciousness, or personhood.
<b>Deity</b>	No single god. Instead: spirits of place, ancestor spirits, animal spirits, plant spirits, nature spirits -- an entire world alive with personhood.
<b>Sacred text</b>	Oral tradition. Stories, songs, ceremonies passed person to person.
<b>Followers</b>	Hundreds of millions across indigenous traditions worldwide. Also widely present in new age spirituality and neo-paganism.

### What Is Animism?

Animism is the oldest spiritual worldview on earth. Archaeological evidence suggests it has been present in human cultures for at least 100,000 years -- possibly for the entire duration of Homo sapiens as a species. Before any named religion existed, before any written scripture, human beings looked at the world around them and understood it as alive.

The animist world is populated not just with physical things but with presences, persons, and powers. The river is not just water -- it has a spirit, a personality, a way of being in relationship with the humans who depend on it. The bear is not just an animal -- it is a being with its own inner life, its own relationship to the sacred, its own knowledge. The mountain is not just geology -- it is a living presence whose moods and patterns reveal something about the nature of reality.

*"The world is alive. Everything has a spirit. The question is not whether spirits exist but how to be in right relationship with them."*

*-- Core animist understanding, as expressed across many traditions*

### Animism Around the World

## **Shinto -- Japan**

The indigenous spirituality of Japan. Kami (spirits) inhabit natural places -- mountains, rivers, trees, and extraordinary rocks. Shrines mark places where kami presence is particularly strong. Rituals maintain right relationship between humans and the kami of their place.

## **Aboriginal Dreamtime -- Australia**

The world's oldest continuous spiritual tradition (~65,000 years). The Dreamtime is not a past time but an ever-present dimension in which ancestral beings created the landscape and continue to sustain it. Songlines -- sacred routes across the landscape -- map the journeys of these ancestors and must be sung to keep the world alive.

## **Andean Pachamama -- South America**

The earth itself (Pachamama -- Earth Mother) is a living being who must be honored, fed, and thanked. Offerings are buried in the earth. The apus (mountain spirits) are consulted for guidance. Bolivia legally recognized the Rights of Mother Earth in 2010.

## **West African & Diaspora -- Africa, Americas, Caribbean**

Yoruba, Akan, Bantu and many other traditions hold that orishas, Iwa, and other spirits inhabit nature and interact with human life. These traditions became Candomble, Vodou, Santeria, and other diaspora religions in the Americas.

## **Siberian & Central Asian Shamanism -- Russia, Mongolia, Central Asia**

The shaman travels between worlds -- the world of the living and the world of spirits -- to retrieve healing, knowledge, and lost soul fragments. Every illness, misfortune, or disorder has a spiritual cause and a spiritual solution.

## **New Animism -- The Contemporary Revival**

Anthropologist Graham Harvey's 'Animism: Respecting the Living World' (2005) marked a turning point in how animism is understood academically. Rather than dismissing it as 'primitive religion,' Harvey argued that animism offers a sophisticated relational ontology -- a way of understanding the world as made of relationships between persons, not just objects. This 'new animism' has been influential in environmental philosophy, indigenous rights movements, and contemporary spirituality.

The new animism asks: what if the indigenous peoples were right? What if the world is not made of dead matter to be used, but of living presences to be respected? What if the ecological crisis is, at its root, the consequence of treating the living world as an object rather than a subject?

**Connection to The Living Way** Animism is probably the tradition most deeply woven into The Living Way's DNA. The practice of sending energy to a room before entering, the idea that plants have spirits (as Mischa Schuler told Hali Sarah), the reverence for the earth as a living being, the offerings to animals -- these are animist practices in their essence. The Living Way's earth chapter is animism applied to modern life.

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## 5. Pantheism -- God IS the Universe

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### PANTHEISM

*Philosophy / Theology | Global*

<b>Type</b>	Philosophical and theological worldview
<b>Origin</b>	Ancient India (Upanishads, Advaita Vedanta); Ancient Greece (Stoics); systematized by Spinoza in the 17th century
<b>Key claim</b>	God and the universe are identical. There is no God separate from or above the cosmos. The cosmos itself IS the divine.
<b>Deity</b>	The universe as a whole is divine. Not a personal God who loves or judges, but the infinite totality of existence itself understood as sacred.
<b>Sacred text</b>	No single text. Spinoza's Ethics; the Upanishads; Emerson's essays; Wordsworth's poetry.
<b>Followers</b>	No formal membership. Millions hold pantheist views, including many scientists, artists, and spiritual-but-not-religious people.

### What Is Pantheism?

Pantheism takes the word 'God' -- or the sacred, the divine, the ultimate -- and says: this IS the universe. Not that God created the universe, not that God dwells within the universe, but that God and the universe are literally the same thing. Every atom, every galaxy, every living being, every moment of time is part of the divine. There is nothing that is not God.

The word comes from Greek: pan (all) + theos (god). All is God. This sounds like a simple equation but it has profound consequences: it means the sacred is not somewhere else. It is not in a heaven above. It is here, now, in this breath, in this body, in this morning light. Pantheism is the philosophical equivalent of what mystics across traditions have always reported: the boundary between self and cosmos dissolves and everything is revealed as one.

### Pantheism's Great Voices

- **Baruch Spinoza -- Ethics (1677):** The philosopher who gave pantheism its most rigorous philosophical expression. Spinoza argued that there is only one substance in the universe -- which he called God or Nature (Deus sive Natura) -- and that everything that exists is a mode or expression of this one substance. The universe and God are not two things; they are one thing seen from two perspectives.

• **Ralph Waldo Emerson -- Nature (1836); The Over-Soul (1841):** American Transcendentalist who described the 'Over-Soul' -- the universal consciousness that underlies all individual minds. 'I am part or parcel of God.' Nature is the face of God. Solitude in nature is communion with the divine.

• **Walt Whitman -- Leaves of Grass (1855):** 'I am large, I contain multitudes.' 'I am the acme of things accomplished, and I am the encloser of things to be.' Whitman's poetry is pure pantheism -- the self expanding to contain all things, all things recognized as sacred.

• **Albert Einstein -- Various writings and letters:** 'I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with the fates and actions of human beings.' Einstein's sense of cosmic religious feeling was essentially pantheistic.

• **Upanishadic Tradition -- Chandogya Upanishad; Brihadaranyaka Upanishad:** Tat tvam asi -- Thou art That. The individual Atman and universal Brahman are identical. This is the Indian philosophical expression of pantheism, developed independently of the Western tradition.

**Connection to The Living Way** Pantheism provides The Living Way with its most direct philosophical home. The teaching that the divine lives within you -- that you ARE the divine in human form -- is pantheism in practice. When Hali Sarah writes that the universal energy runs through us and that praising the self is praising the source, that is Spinoza's insight expressed in a lived spiritual practice. Einstein's 'Spinoza's God' and the Upanishads' 'Thou art That' are both saying exactly what The Living Way says every morning.

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## 6. Panentheism -- God Contains the Universe

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### PANENTHEISM

*Philosophical Theology | Global*

<b>Type</b>	Philosophical theology; a middle position between theism and pantheism
<b>Origin</b>	Term coined by philosopher Karl Krause in 1828. Developed by Alfred North Whitehead (Process Philosophy) and Charles Hartshorne.
<b>Key claim</b>	The universe is IN God, but God is more than the universe. God contains all that exists but also has a dimension that transcends it.
<b>Deity</b>	A personal or transpersonal God who is both immanent (in everything) and transcendent (beyond everything). God feels and responds to the world.
<b>Sacred text</b>	No single text. Whitehead's <i>Process and Reality</i> (1929); found within many mainstream religious traditions as a theological position.
<b>Followers</b>	Not a distinct religion but a theological position held by many process theologians, progressive Christians, Jewish mystics (Kabbalah), and Sufi Muslims.

### What Is Panentheism?

Panentheism is the position that sits between classical theism (God above and separate from the world) and pantheism (God identical with the world). The word means 'all-in-God' (pan = all, en = in, theos = God). The world is in God -- God contains all of creation as a body might contain its cells -- but God is not exhausted by the world. God has a dimension of being that goes beyond what currently exists.

Think of it this way: in pantheism, God = the universe, nothing more. In panentheism, God = the universe + more. The universe is inside God like a child inside a womb -- real, alive, part of the mother, but the mother is more than the child alone.

Crucially, panentheism understands God as relational and responsive -- a God who experiences the universe, who is affected by what happens in it, who grows and changes as creation grows and changes. This is a radical departure from the classical all-knowing, unchanging, impassible God of traditional theology.

### Panentheism in Different Traditions

- **Process Theology (Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne):** God has two 'natures': the primordial nature (eternal, unlimited potential) and the consequent nature (temporal, responsive to events in the world). God lures the world toward beauty and harmony but does not coerce it. Every moment of experience -- including God's -- is a creative event.
- **Kabbalah (Jewish Mysticism):** The Ein Sof (the Infinite, the limitless God) contracts (tzimtzum) to make space for creation within Godself. The sefirot (divine emanations) are both inside God and the structure of creation. The world is a kind of inner life of God. The mystic's task is to restore the unity of the divine sparks scattered through creation.
- **Sufism (Islamic Mysticism):** Wahdat al-wujud ('unity of being') -- the mystical teaching that all existence is one and that God is the only true being, with the world being God's self-manifestation. The mystic Rumi's poetry expresses this: everything is the beloved, everything is the divine wine, everything is the ocean.
- **Deep Ecology:** The philosophical movement that extends moral consideration to all living things and to ecosystems as wholes. The earth is not a resource inside which we live but a living system of which we are part. Panentheism provides the theological grounding for this view.

**Connection to The Living Way** Panentheism adds something to The Living Way that pure pantheism doesn't: the sense that the divine is both fully present in us AND points toward something more -- toward an infinite that exceeds what we can currently experience or understand. When Hali Sarah writes about 'the field of infinite possibilities' and about deities as real energies we can honor without worshipping, that is panentheistic. The deities are real aspects of the divine wholeness that contains us.

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## 7. Vitalism -- Life Force Is Real

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### VITALISM

*Philosophy of Life | Global / Cross-Cultural*

<b>Type</b>	Philosophical and scientific position; also a basis for many healing traditions
<b>Origin</b>	Ancient in all cultures (prana, qi, pneuma, mana, orenda). Systematized in Western philosophy by Aristotle's concept of 'psyche' and in 18th-19th century Romantic science.
<b>Key claim</b>	Living organisms are fundamentally different from non-living matter. Life is animated by a non-physical force, energy, or principle that cannot be reduced to chemistry and physics alone.
<b>Deity</b>	Not necessarily any deity. Life force itself is the sacred principle.
<b>Sacred text</b>	Ancient: Vedas (prana), Taoist texts (qi), Hippocratic medicine (pneuma). Modern: Hans Driesch's <i>The Science and Philosophy of the Organism</i> (1907-8).
<b>Followers</b>	Not a religion with formal membership. Present in Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Reiki, homeopathy, and most energy healing traditions.

### What Is Vitalism?

Vitalism is the idea that life cannot be fully explained by physics and chemistry alone -- that living beings are animated by something more than the sum of their molecules. Different traditions have given this 'something more' different names: prana in Sanskrit, qi or chi in Chinese, pneuma in Greek, mana in Polynesian, orenda in Iroquois, and many others. But the underlying intuition is strikingly consistent across cultures and across history: living things carry a force, an energy, a principle of vitality that distinguishes them from dead matter.

Modern mainstream biology is largely anti-vitalist -- it holds that life CAN be fully explained by the laws of chemistry and physics, that there is no special 'life force' beyond organized complexity. This is still contested at the edges of science, where quantum biology, bioelectricity, and the science of consciousness push against the boundaries of purely mechanical explanation.

### Vitalism Across Traditions

- **Ayurveda (Indian) -- Prana:** The life force that flows through the body's nadis (channels) and is regulated through breath (pranayama), diet, herbs, and lifestyle. Health = prana flowing freely. Disease = prana blocked, deficient, or excessive.
- **Traditional Chinese Medicine -- Qi (Chi):** The fundamental substance and force of all life. Flows through meridians. Balanced by yin and yang principles. Regulated through acupuncture, herbs, qigong, tai chi, and dietary practices.
- **Reiki -- Ki / Universal Life Energy:** The universal life energy that the Reiki practitioner channels through their hands for healing. Not generated by the practitioner -- drawn from the infinite field of universal energy that permeates all existence.
- **Homeopathy -- Vital Force:** Samuel Hahnemann's system (1796) was explicitly vitalist: health is the harmonious action of the 'vital force' that animates the organism. Illness is a derangement of this vital force; remedies stimulate it to heal.
- **Anthroposophy (Rudolf Steiner) -- Etheric Body:** Steiner described four bodies: the physical, etheric (life force), astral (soul), and ego. The etheric body is the vitalist principle -- the formative force that organizes matter into living form.

## Vitalism & Modern Science

Classical vitalism was largely displaced by molecular biology in the 20th century -- the discovery of DNA and the mechanisms of cellular life seemed to explain life without needing any special force. But the picture is more complex now. Fields like bioelectricity (Michael Levin's work at Tufts showing that electrical fields guide biological form), quantum effects in photosynthesis and bird navigation, and the hard problem of consciousness all point to dimensions of life that purely mechanical models struggle to capture. Vitalism may be wrong in its classical form and right in its intuition.

**Connection to The Living Way** Vitalism is the philosophical backbone of The Living Way's energy practices. When we run the heaven-earth current, work with chakras, practice pranayama, or use Reiki, we are working with the vitalist reality of life force. The Living Way aligns with Traditional Chinese Medicine's qi and Ayurveda's prana as its primary frameworks for understanding and working with this force. We do not need to resolve the scientific debate to experience the results.

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## 8. The Bengali Patua Tradition -- Sacred Scrolls & Singing Stories

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### BENGALI PATUA

*Living Folk-Sacred Tradition | West Bengal & Bangladesh*

<b>Type</b>	Living hereditary tradition of sacred scroll painting and story-singing
<b>Origin</b>	West Bengal and Bangladesh, India. Ancient roots; documented continuously from at least the medieval period. The tradition predates the modern nation-states.
<b>Key figures</b>	The Patua -- a hereditary caste/community of artist-storytellers. Both Hindu and Muslim Patua families practice the tradition.
<b>What they make</b>	Pata (scrolls) -- long, accordion-folded painted narratives depicting sacred stories from Hindu mythology, Islamic tradition, folk tales, and contemporary events. Each scroll is both art and scripture.
<b>What they do</b>	The Chitrakar (picture-maker) unrolls the scroll panel by panel while singing the story it depicts -- a total art form combining painting, poetry, music, and sacred narrative.
<b>Sacred to whom?</b>	To everyone. Patua artists have historically served both Hindu and Muslim communities, painting stories from both traditions without belonging exclusively to either.

### The World of the Patua

Imagine a traveler arriving at a village in Bengal. On their back they carry a long rolled scroll -- their chitrakar, their picture-story. They unroll it in the village square, panel by panel, and as each panel is revealed they begin to sing. The painting and the song tell the same story simultaneously -- the visual and the musical moving together. The villagers gather. Some have heard the story before; some are hearing it for the first time. Either way, the scroll is the scripture and the song is the prayer.

This is the world of the Patua -- the Bengali scroll-painter storytellers who have carried the sacred stories of the subcontinent from village to village for centuries. They are artists, musicians, historians, spiritual counselors, and community memory keepers all at once.

### What Makes the Patua Tradition Unique

### **No walls between traditions**

This is the Patua's most extraordinary quality. Patua families are both Hindu and Muslim, and both communities' artists paint stories from both traditions without apparent contradiction. A Muslim Patua paints Durga defeating Mahisha. A Hindu Patua paints the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey (though respectfully, without depicting the Prophet's face, following Islamic convention). The sacred stories of humanity belong to humanity -- not to any one group.

### **The scroll as living scripture**

Unlike a fixed sacred text, the pata (scroll) is a living object that the artist makes, owns, carries, sings, and eventually replaces. It is not preserved behind glass in a library -- it is used, worn, loved, and renewed. The sacred lives in the making and the singing, not in the object alone.

### **Story as the vehicle of truth**

The Patua do not argue theology. They tell stories. The Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the life of the Prophet, the story of Manasa the snake goddess, contemporary stories of disaster and social justice -- all are told in the same visual and musical language, treating each as equally worth singing.

### **Social function and healing**

Traditionally, the Patua were called to villages after calamities -- floods, epidemics, conflict -- to tell the story of what happened and weave it into the larger fabric of meaning that the community shared. The scroll and song were healing technologies. This continues in contemporary Patua work, which now addresses AIDS awareness, COVID, climate change, and social violence.

### **Continuity with change**

The Patua tradition is ancient but not frozen. Contemporary Patua artists paint on subjects including female infanticide, communal violence, environmental destruction, and pandemic -- applying the ancient visual language to the crises of the present. The tradition lives because it breathes.

## **The Pata -- What the Scroll Contains**

A traditional pata (scroll) is made of multiple sheets of paper glued together and then accordion-folded into panels, each panel roughly the size of a large book page. The Patua artist prepares natural pigments -- turmeric yellow, indigo blue, vermillion red, carbon black, chalk white -- and paints each panel with figures in a distinctive flat, bold style: large eyes, stylized bodies, vivid colors, no attempt at photographic realism. The style communicates immediately and powerfully across language barriers.

Famous subjects of traditional pata include: the Ramayana (especially the battle of Lanka and Rama's victory), the birth and life of Krishna, the goddess Manasa and the story of Behula and Lakhindar (a

love story involving snakebite, death, and resurrection), the Mahabharata war, and stories of local folk deities. Modern pata often address contemporary social themes in the same visual language.

## The Song -- Patua Sangit

Every pata has a corresponding song (gaan or sangit) that the artist sings as they unroll the scroll. These songs are in the Bengali folk music tradition -- modal, repetitive, hypnotic, composed to carry a narrative clearly even to listeners who cannot read. The artist composes their own songs for their own scrolls, though traditional melodies and structures are followed. The song is what makes the scroll come alive: painting alone is silent; with the song, the images begin to move.

*"We paint what we see and sing what we paint. The scroll is our book and the song is how we read it aloud."*

*-- Traditional Patua artist, West Bengal*

## The Patua Today

The Bengali Patua tradition nearly disappeared in the late 20th century as television and mass media replaced the village storyteller. It has experienced a remarkable revival since the 1990s through the work of cultural organizations, art schools, and individual artists who recognized its value as both art and living spiritual practice.

Today's Patua artists sell their work in galleries, exhibit internationally, and collaborate with NGOs, hospitals, and schools. The Pingla village of Naya in West Bengal has become a center of the tradition, with entire families of Patua artists working in adjacent homes that double as studios and galleries. The work is simultaneously ancient and urgently contemporary.

Most significantly: in a country (and world) increasingly torn by religious conflict between Hindus and Muslims, the Patua tradition stands as quiet, persistent, beautiful evidence that the sacred stories of both traditions can live together in the same hands, on the same scroll, in the same song.

**Patua & Word Meaning** The word 'Patua' comes from Sanskrit 'patta' meaning a leaf, cloth, or scroll -- specifically a painted cloth used in storytelling. The Patua artists are also called 'Chitrakar' -- 'chitra' (picture, image) + 'kar' (maker). A Patua is therefore literally a scroll-painter. 'Pata' is the scroll itself. In Brazil, 'patua' (patuá) refers to a protective amulet -- a small cloth bag containing herbs, stones, and prayers, worn for spiritual protection. The word traveled with the African diaspora and the syncretism of Candomblé. In both contexts -- Bengal and Brazil -- the word carries the sense of sacred making: something handmade that carries spiritual power.

**Connection to The Living Way** The Bengali Patua tradition is the most direct ancestor of the spirit of The Living Way among all six traditions in this guide. Its refusal to put walls between sacred traditions, its use of beauty (visual art and song) as the vehicle of truth, its rootedness in community healing, its contemporary relevance -- all of these are core to what The Living Way is building. The Patua shows us that a path can honor Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, and folk traditions simultaneously without collapsing into incoherence. It does so through art, story, and song -- the oldest human technologies for carrying the sacred across generations.

# PART THREE: COMPARISON & CONNECTION

## 9. Side-by-Side Master Comparison Table

Question	Naturalism	Animism	Pantheism	Panentheism	Vitalism	Patua
Is there a God?	No -- only nature	Not one god -- many spirits	Gods are everywhere	God contains universe	Life force is sacred	All sacred, essentially agnostic -- no single answer
Is the world alive?	Physically yes -- spiritually no	Yes, everything has a spirit	Yes, spirits are everywhere	Yes, God as part of world	Yes -- animated by life force	Yes, treated as alive through story
What is sacred?	Nature, life, consciousness	All essences, spirits	Everything in the universe	Everything + the divine	Life itself, the body	Sacred traditions, rituals
Where is the divine?	Nowhere supernatural	Everywhere, in everything	Everywhere, in everything	Everywhere, in everything -- and beyond	Everywhere, in everything	In the scroll, the song, the story, the listener
What is the human?	A highly complex animal	A being among many beings	A being among many beings	A being among many beings	A being among many beings	A being among many beings
Origin	Ancient Greece; Enlightenment	Pre-historic; oldest	Pre-historic; oldest	Pre-historic; oldest	Pre-historic; oldest	Pre-historic; oldest
Afterlife	None -- consciousness ends	Essence of spirit, reincarnation	Reincarnation, rebirth	Reincarnation, rebirth	Reincarnation, rebirth	Reincarnation, rebirth
Sacred practice	Science; nature immersion	Prayer, offerings, rituals	Prayer, offerings, rituals	Prayer, offerings, rituals	Prayer, offerings, rituals	Prayer, offerings, rituals
Relationship to science	Identical -- science	Pre-dates science; compatible	Pre-dates science; compatible	Pre-dates science; compatible	Pre-dates science; compatible	Pre-dates science; compatible
Has formal membership?	No	Traditional: hereditary	Traditional: hereditary	Traditional: hereditary	Traditional: hereditary	Traditional: hereditary

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## 10. Where They Agree -- The Shared Core

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Despite their significant differences, all six traditions converge on a set of foundational orientations that distinguish them sharply from the dominant Abrahamic framework of a transcendent creator God:

- The sacred is HERE -- in the world, in the body, in the living present -- not in a separate supernatural realm to be accessed only after death or through priestly intermediaries.
- The world deserves reverence. Whether it is called God (pantheism), spirit (animism), life force (vitalism), or simply nature (naturalism), the physical world is not mere backdrop for human drama -- it is sacred in itself.
- Human beings are continuous with, not separate from, the rest of existence. We are not fallen creatures awaiting rescue. We are expressions of the same reality that makes the stars, the soil, and the sparrow.
- Direct experience is the primary authority. Not scripture alone, not institutional hierarchy -- the lived encounter with the sacred in nature, in energy, in relationship, in story.
- Multiplicity is real. No single story captures all of truth. The Patua's practice of honoring many traditions simultaneously is the most explicit version of what all these traditions imply.

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## 11. Where They Diverge -- The Key Differences

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- **The supernatural:** Naturalism rejects it entirely. Animism, vitalism, and the Patua tradition work freely with it. Pantheism and panentheism redefine it rather than accept or reject it.
  - **Personal vs. impersonal sacred:** Animism has the most personal sacred -- individual spirits with personalities and preferences. Naturalism has the most impersonal -- no personhood beyond the physical. Pantheism tends toward an impersonal absolute; panentheism toward a relational personal God.
  - **The role of science:** Naturalism is the most science-aligned. Vitalism is the most in tension with mainstream science. The others are largely science-compatible while adding dimensions science doesn't address.
  - **Human uniqueness:** Animism most radically decenters the human -- we are one being among many, not the crown of creation. Pantheism and panentheism often maintain a special role for consciousness. Naturalism situates humans firmly within the animal kingdom.
  - **Practices and community:** The Patua tradition has the most concrete, embodied community practice -- the scroll, the song, the family lineage, the village performance. Naturalism has the least structured practice. The others fall between.
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## 12. Each Tradition & Science -- Friends or Enemies?

Tradition	Relationship to Modern Science	Areas of Tension
<b>Naturalism</b>	Identical -- naturalism IS the scientific worldview applied broadly	Naturalism accepts all scientific findings
<b>Animism</b>	Pre-scientific but not anti-scientific. Compatible on a spiritual level as both relate to the natural world	Animism is not scientifically verifiable
<b>Pantheism</b>	Highly compatible -- Einstein was a pantheist. Science reveals the divine nature of the universe	Philosophical, not empirical
<b>Panentheism</b>	Compatible -- Process theology embraces evolution and quantum physics	God transcends the world through its process
<b>Vitalism</b>	Most in tension. Classical vitalism was displaced by molecular biology and genetics	Quantum biology is still being researched
<b>Patua</b>	Not concerned with scientific validation -- different worldviews	Not significantly different from scientific worldviews

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## 13. How Each Tradition Relates to The Living Way

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### The Living Way & Naturalism

The Living Way shares naturalism's reverence for the earth as sacred in itself, its grounding of practice in direct experience, and its freedom from a punishing external deity. It goes beyond naturalism in working with subtle energy (chakras, prana, qi) that naturalism would not accept as real. The Living Way is not naturalist but is deeply nature-reverent.

### The Living Way & Animism

The deepest ancestor. The Living Way's earth stewardship, offerings to animals, plant meditation, energy of place, and sending energy ahead into spaces are all animist practices. The understanding that the earth is alive and that we are in relationship with -- not just on top of -- the living world is animism's core gift to The Living Way.

### The Living Way & Pantheism

The Living Way's central teaching -- that the divine lives within you and that caring for yourself is an act of reverence -- is pantheism in practice. You are not separate from the divine and working to get back to it. You ARE it, in one of its infinite forms. Spinoza's 'Deus sive Natura' and the Upanishads' 'Thou art That' are The Living Way's philosophical spine.

### The Living Way & Panentheism

Panentheism gives The Living Way the capacity to honor deities (as real aspects of the divine totality that contains us) without reducing the divine to any one form. It also gives the sense of infinite possibility -- the field of infinite possibilities that Hali Sarah describes is the panentheist's 'more than' -- the divine exceeding what currently exists.

### The Living Way & Vitalism

The Living Way's entire energy practice rests on vitalist foundations. Prana, qi, chakras, meridians, Reiki, qigong, pranayama -- all of these are vitalist technologies. The Living Way works with life force as real, present, and trainable. This is the philosophical basis for every practice in the Body as Temple section.

## The Living Way & Bengali Patua

The Patua is the spirit of The Living Way made visible. No walls between traditions. All sacred stories honored. Beauty as the vehicle of truth. Art and song as healing. Community storytelling as sacred practice. If The Living Way had an ancestor it would point to most proudly, it might be the traveling scroll-singer arriving at a village, unrolling their pata, and beginning to sing a story that belongs to everyone.

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## 14. Could Any of These Name Our Path?

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After this deep dive, here is an honest assessment of each tradition as a potential name or home for The Living Way:

- **Naturalism:** Too limiting. The Living Way works with subtle energy, chakras, and spirit that naturalism would exclude. Calling the path 'Naturalist' would immediately create a false picture.
- **Animism:** Close in spirit but carries cultural weight. 'Animism' belongs primarily to indigenous traditions and using it as the name for a new path risks cultural appropriation. Better to honor animism as an influence.
- **Pantheism:** Philosophically the best fit for The Living Way's core theology. But 'Pantheism' sounds more like a philosophical position than a lived spiritual path. 'I am a Pantheist' doesn't have the same warmth as 'I am a Buddhist.'
- **Panentheism:** Even more accurate philosophically but even less accessible as a name. Most people have never heard the word.
- **Vitalism:** Names the energy practice perfectly but misses the earth, the story, the community, and the broader philosophy.
- **Patua-inspired naming?:** The most interesting possibility. A name that carries the Patua spirit -- inter-traditional, story-centered, beauty-as-truth -- without claiming to BE the Patua tradition. Words like 'Chitrakar' (picture-maker), 'Pata' (the living scroll), or 'Sangit' (the sacred song) could inspire something original. A path called 'Pataism' or 'Chitrisim' would carry the Patua's multi-traditional spirit in its DNA.

**A Thought on Naming** The right name for The Living Way will probably not come from any of these six traditions directly. It will be coined -- a new word that carries the energy of what this path actually is. The Patua tradition is a reminder that the most powerful sacred things are often not named at all -- they are simply done, sung, painted, and lived. The name will arrive when the practice is clear enough to name itself.

## APPENDIX

### A. Key Thinkers & Their Works

#### NATURALISM

- **Ursula Goodenough -- The Sacred Depths of Nature (1998):** The most beautiful case for religious naturalism. A cell biologist finds the sacred in the deep story of life.
- **Carl Sagan -- Cosmos (1980); Pale Blue Dot (1994):** Profound reverence for the cosmos without supernatural framing.
- **John Dewey -- A Common Faith (1934):** Naturalistic humanism. Religious experience without supernatural religion.

#### ANIMISM

- **Graham Harvey -- Animism: Respecting the Living World (2005):** The definitive contemporary academic treatment. Reframes animism as sophisticated relational ontology, not 'primitive religion.'
- **Robin Wall Kimmerer -- Braiding Sweetgrass (2013):** Potawatomi botanist weaving indigenous animist wisdom with Western science. One of the most important ecological and spiritual books of the 21st century.

#### PANTHEISM

- **Baruch Spinoza -- Ethics (1677):** The philosophical foundation of pantheism. Dense but world-changing.
- **Ralph Waldo Emerson -- Nature (1836); Essays: First Series (1841):** American Transcendentalist pantheism in accessible, beautiful prose.

#### PANENTHEISM

- **Alfred North Whitehead -- Process and Reality (1929):** Difficult but foundational. The universe as process; God as the creative advance into novelty.
- **Matthew Fox -- Original Blessing (1983):** Process theology meets Christian mysticism. Creation as blessing.

#### VITALISM

- **Mantak Chia -- Awaken Healing Energy Through the Tao (1983):** Practical Taoist vitalism. The Inner Smile. Microcosmic orbit.

- **Michael Levin -- Research on bioelectricity at Tufts University (2010-present):** Cutting-edge science on how electrical fields guide biological form. The closest thing to scientific vitalism in mainstream biology.

## BENGALI PATUA

- **Minu Chitrakar -- Contemporary Patua master, Naya village, West Bengal:** One of the most celebrated living Patua artists. Her work addresses contemporary social issues in the traditional scroll format.
- **David Szanton & Others -- Pata Chitra (various academic studies):** Academic documentation of the Patua tradition's history and practice.

## B. Glossary

Term	Definition
<b>Animism</b>	The worldview that all things -- animals, plants, rivers, rocks -- possess spirit, consciousness, or personhood.
<b>Chitrakar</b>	Sanskrit/Bengali: 'picture-maker.' The Patua artist-storyteller who paints pata scrolls and sings their stories.
<b>Deus sive Natura</b>	Latin: 'God or Nature.' Spinoza's equation of God and the natural universe -- the foundation of philosophical naturalism.
<b>Dreamtime</b>	The dimension of reality in Aboriginal Australian spirituality in which ancestral beings created and continue to inhabit the world.
<b>Ein Sof</b>	Hebrew: 'The Infinite.' In Kabbalah, the limitless aspect of God that contracts to make space for creation.
<b>Kami</b>	Japanese: spirits or sacred presences that inhabit natural places, objects, and phenomena in Shinto.
<b>Methodological Naturalism</b>	The working assumption of science that only natural causes are used to explain phenomena -- without reference to the supernatural.
<b>New Animism</b>	Contemporary academic and spiritual reframing of animism as a sophisticated relational ontology, not a primitive belief system.
<b>Panentheism</b>	The theological position that the universe is IN God but God exceeds the universe. Pan (all) + en (in).
<b>Pantheism</b>	The philosophical position that God and the universe are identical. Pan (all) + theos (God). God IS nature.
<b>Pata / Pata Chitra</b>	Bengali/Sanskrit: the accordion-folded painted scroll of the Patua tradition. 'Pata chitra' = scroll picture.
<b>Patua</b>	The hereditary community of Bengali scroll painters and storytellers. Also the name for a protective amulet.
<b>Process Theology</b>	Panentheist theology based on Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. God is dipolar: primordial nature and consequent nature.
<b>Religious Naturalism</b>	The position that the natural world itself deserves the reverence traditionally given to God -- without supernatural claims.
<b>Songlines</b>	Sacred routes across the Australian landscape corresponding to the journeys of Aboriginal ancestral beings.
<b>Tzimtzum</b>	Hebrew: 'contraction.' The Kabbalistic teaching that God contracted to make space for creation within the infinite.
<b>Vitalism</b>	The philosophical position that living organisms are animated by a non-physical life force (prana, qi, pirit).
<b>Wahdat al-wujud</b>	Arabic: 'unity of being.' Sufi mystical teaching that all existence is one and God is the only true being.

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*The world is alive. The sacred is here. The story belongs to everyone.*

*Personal Reading Series • April 2026*