

THE THREE SOILS OF ZIRAAT  
By Firos Holterman and Wali Via  
2021

*“Work of the earth, work of cultivation, the work of the greening of our hearts and of the planet”*

Pir Zia, during the blessing of a new Farmer (1)

The Meaning of Ziraat

What does Ziraat stand for today? Asking different people, one gets different answers. During an extensive exchange with Ziraat friends from all over the globe, one prerequisite emerged as paramount: being open to varied perspectives and approaches.

The etymologic meaning of the word Ziraat is equally open to discussion. In one of Pir Zia’s articles he states that it may be derived from the bridge leading from here to the hereafter (Arabic *sirat*). In Persian and Turkish, Ziraat means agriculture. In Hebrew Ziraat would be closely affiliated with the word seed. The wazifa Ya Zari offers an etymological key, “who makes creation flourish”, or “the Creator who brings forth creation by sowing and letting it grow”. (2)

An Unfinished Work

In the writing of Murshida Green (3), we find how at the Summer School of 1927 she asked Murshid to say more about Ziraat and how he told her that he had different priorities, at that time. In the same book, we learn that Ziraat was in the planning stages, with her help, shortly before Murshid died. We will never know what would have come out of the Ziraat impulse if Murshid would have lived longer than his 45 years.

For Goethe and the classical tradition, the final meaning of a piece of art was handed over to the viewer/hearer/sensor to be finished. Similarly, Ziraat had just been conceived by Murshid and was unfinished. In our Sufi tradition we acknowledge the continuation of the work of a master by the master’s successors as an uninterrupted sustained whole. It is the silsila that guarantees authenticity. We also honor the individual experiences of Sufi practitioners as being a personalized meaning.

The largely unknown The Meaning of Ziraat by Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan (4) was, and is, a real manifesto, giving a clear further development to Ziraat. The revival of Ziraat by Pir Vilayat is just as much part of Ziraat as the work of Murshid. The further developments of Ziraat, as indicated by Pir Zia recently, makes our Activity even more meaningful for understanding Ziraat in our time. (5)

## The Three-Soil Framework

In the Three-Soil framework we discern between Inner Soil, Ecological Soil, and Social Soil. The interplay between the three helps creation flourish.

This threefold approach originated from the publications of Satish Kumar, an Indian philosopher (6). In the Anthroposophical background of biodynamic agriculture, the concept of “Dreigliederung”, threefolding, is a common theory to make a “Gestalt” understandable. Our trinity of Love, Harmony, and Beauty offers the same threefold approach. Beauty doesn’t exist without Love, and vice versa. Without seeing the Beloved, the Lover would not fall in love. Without being seen, the Beloved would not be so lovely. Without Harmony the water dividing Lover and Beloved would be too deep.

The Inner Soil can be conceived as inner development, or the making of the Farmer, the Ecological Soil as the Earth (the Farm), and the Social Soil as the work to be done (Farming). Farmer, Farm, and Farming.

If we understand Ziraat in this light, we have to consider that inner development is only possible in conjunction with the Earth, and our outer work, done well, is only possible because of our inner work. Farm and Farmer don’t exist without each other. It is the communion and communication between the two that makes our work fruitful. It is the “Social Soil”, our work, that connects Farmer and Farm; like in a love affair, it is the lovemaking. Farming brings Farmer and Farm, Lover and Beloved together. So, we discover that Farmer, Farm, and Farming are one, just like Love, Harmony, and Beauty are three faces of the One.

### Inner Soil – The Farmer

*“The uncultivated mind is a barren desert where the soul is starved for the food it hungers after. Every effort that one makes to turn this desert into fertile soil is action done in the right direction.”* Ziraat Lesson Two: Cultivating the Mind. Hazrat Inayat Khan

*“The heart may be likened to soil”* says Murshid. *“The heart is just like a fertile soil or a barren desert, it shows love or lack of love, productive faculty or destructiveness”*. Humans play an essential role in life on Earth. If one turns within and develops a willingness to let the soil of the heart be cultivated one will be able to realize one’s purpose in life.

Ziraat guides us on the way of understanding natural processes that guide our inner life. A main entry to this is the greeting of the elements and the elemental breaths. These practices help us discover the workings of the elements within us. They help us to observe and experience the different qualities and influences of Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Ether, and to acknowledge the elements as the 5 archangels of creation. The basis for these discoveries lies in our willingness to go through these baptisms of the elements. In the interplay of the elements we discover the cyclical metamorphoses in our lives and emotions. With gratitude we pay homage to the

elements at the beginning and end of the Ziraat Lodge. Furthermore, the cycles and rhythms of our lives are symbolized in the Ziraat Lodge and become alive and full of wonder.

A next step in Ziraat is to investigate the different tasks we have during the development of our souls. In order to become fertile soil, our beings need to be worked. The impressions of the previous cycles of our lives have to be plowed, exposed, examined, and composted. Then follows the process symbolized by harrowing, sowing, reaping, threshing, and garnering, each representing new Ziraat initiatory stage.

After experiencing these stages, we are ready to assume the role of Farmer, with a restored and unified human/nature relationship. The Farmer would be called a Caliph in Islam, and the Crown of Creation in Christianity.

Hazrat Inayat Khan said, *“In every scripture it is mentioned that the human being is the ideal of creation. In the Quran it is said, ‘We have made the human being the Caliph of the whole creation’, in other words, the master of creation.”* (8). Mastery is to be understood as being able to read the Holy Book of Nature, not as subduing nature.

The danger of focusing on the human being as the crown of creation has led, and still leads, to the highest form of arrogance, spiritual hubris. Justified by the misrepresentation of high ideals, humans use their power to reach megalomania goals by propagating or ordering horrific atrocities. Examples are many. The goal is not to put the human being in the center, but creation.

The Ziraat vision is a great reservoir of hope. In its compactness it contains a tremendous power. It is like a seed in which the future of humankind is guaranteed. When we let this seed sprout inside us, we participate in the development of a next step of human life on earth. In Murshid’s words, *“Thou changest my flesh into fertile soil; Thou turnest my blood into streams of water; Thou kneadest my clay, I know, to make a new universe.”*

### Ecological Soil – The Farm

*“What is the length of the Farm? As long as time.  
What is the breadth of the Farm? As broad as space.”*

From the Ziraat Dialogue

Sufis call God the One. The One embraces everything at the same time, male and female, transcendent and immanent. The manifestation of the One includes the human, animal, plant, and mineral realms, and the seen and unseen beings. Nature, or Life, can be seen as a spiritual ecology.

*“There is one Holy Book, the sacred manuscript of nature, the only scripture which can enlighten the reader.”* The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sufi Thought of Hazrat Inayat Khan

When our senses are keen, and our minds clear and open, we are able to receive the teachings that Nature has to offer us. Through attuning to the patterns, forms, and rhythms of Nature we develop the ability to be and act in the world in a way that is compassionate and honors our purpose. Nature helps the Farmer realize one's true relationship and role within the One.

*"The whole beauty of creation – the dogs have seen it, the cats have seen it, the peacocks and other birds have seen it and in their way they have been delighted, they have enjoyed it, they have danced and rejoiced over it. They have admired it in their own way, but the human being, besides admiring, sees beyond, his sight penetrates all he sees, and he touches God, the Creator. It is not only praising God, but it is knowing and understanding God which gives the greatest satisfaction to the Deity, because that is the purpose of the creation of man: that he may understand and know. And it is only by seeing the sublimity of nature's beauty, by being impressed by it, by understanding it, by knowing its language, by hearing its voice, that this can be done."* Hazrat Inayat Khan

In Murshid's times the abundance of nature with its many-fold species of minerals, plants, and animals was more accessible to the public than it is today. And certainly, there was a greater familiarity and relationship with agriculture, as during Murshid's time 40% of the European population was involved in farming, where today it is only 2%.

#### The Nature Meditations

In 1921 Murshid dictated his Nature Meditations during extensive walks with one of his mureeds in the countryside around Wissous (today transformed into the airport of Orly). He called these meditations the cream of the Message. In each sentence the reader experiences the One, "in Whom we live and move and have our being", as Murshid quoted Jesus Christ. The sayings inspire in us the glory of nature, the glory of God. "*Nature does not teach the glory of God; it need not teach this, as nature itself is the glory of God*". Hazrat Inayat Khan

Pir Vilayat in his introduction to Nature Meditations states:

*"Obviously man's need for oneness with nature is not fulfilled simply by hiking or camping in nature, but by penetrating into the consciousness of the trees and the flowers, of the planet and the atoms, experiencing what it would be like to be that flower or tree and getting into the spirit of the wind on a landscape or of a musical note: in fact, switching to a totally different focus of consciousness, turning into a transfigured world which, as the Sufis say, 'transpires through that which appears'. This means a whole other dimension of life and re-establishing a bond with nature which has been so often violated; and it requires a sacred tryst between man and nature, his promise to respect her and to sanctify his relationship with her in the name of God."*

In 2020 and 2021, Pir Zia took up the task of elaborating on the Nature Meditations and in an interview he expressed the desire to incorporate them into the Ziraat teachings.

## Humanity's role in Creation

The Farmer renounces the notion that one has absolute control and power over the Farm, and accepts the role of bondsman, as it is called in the Ziraat Papers, acknowledging that God is the Owner of the Farm.

*"The Qur'an tells how, 'God made the human being God's representative on earth, God's chief in whose care the universe was given.'" Hazrat Inayat Khan*

In the caliphate it is God who holds the office. The caliph is an assistant or agent of God. The caliph has no rights of ownership and is selected or chosen to do a job in the name of God, or in Ziraat terms the Owner of the Farm. That is why in the Ziraat Papers it is stated, *"We invoke the Presence of the Owner of the Farm"*.

Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan elucidates the problem of modern-day agriculture and offers a basis for the solution.

*"Going overboard in the industrial drive, humans lost their grip of the sensitivity of this live being, the earth. Raped, hard-driven, over-exploited, abused, Mother Earth yields denatured produce on the conveyor belt. The price we pay for artificial fertilizers, pesticides and pollutants has been widespread and alarming. As a result of the warning of the better informed few, an age-old observance has now been raised into a modern concept; in ecology, a new consciousness is arising. It is this consciousness that Ziraat embodies."*

Pir Zia adds,

*"Paradise is revealed in a shift of consciousness. A shift from the profane to the sacred. Seeing the soul in everything and nurturing the soil and serving it, seeing the interrelatedness between things, instead of imposing a will that is unmindful of the balance of all beings."*

Wendell Berry states that *"eating is an agricultural act"*, and it might be added eating is a spiritual act. The Farmer of Ziraat will naturally take responsibility for the food the Farmer consumes and any crops that the Farmer grows. Ziraat offers a habitat for those who feel this responsibility and no longer delegate it to a diminishing group of farmers, politicians, and industrialists. A growing number may want to practice agriculture themselves. Others may want to reduce or eliminate meat consumption as a way of taking responsibility. Pir Zia, both gardens and maintains a vegetarian diet.

In the Ziraat Papers it is postulated, *"It is the manner in which that task is accomplished, and the object gained which is called Ziraat."* So, it is not just achieving ecological goals, but also the manner in how we reach them that is our aim. And here friendliness and kinship are keywords of our Inayatiyya and Ziraat.

## The Social Soil - Farming

*“What is the Farmer’s religion? The Farmer’s work. Hazrat Inayat Khan’s Ziraat Papers*

Farming begins when the Farmer puts ideals into action. There is no end to the work that needs to be done. Each Farmer’s activity is naturally unique according to the Farmer’s environment, inspiration, and personality. For some their Farming may be actual physical farming or gardening. For others it may be raising children with a sensitivity to the natural world and fostering the value of compassionate stewardship of the Earth. Others may turn their efforts to addressing aspects of the eco-crisis such as saving particular species or addressing climate change. The possibilities are endless. The following sections may be of particular interest to those who have chosen physical agriculture as their work, in its wide-array of forms, but one must keep in mind Wendell Berry’s famous quote, *“eating is an agricultural act”*, so no one is left uninvolved in these critical issues. We are all subject to the atrocities that have been unleashed by destructive agricultural practices. Other forms of action in the world, as suggested above, can be expounded upon in further writing contributions.

The consciousness of how alienation from our bodies, from the life of the earth, and from a healthy practice of regenerative agricultural techniques is leading humanity into an existential catastrophe that has grown immensely since Murshid gave the impulse for Ziraat. That he was aware of the neglect of agricultural soil in his days becomes clear in a note in Theo van Hoorn’s Recollections of Inayat Kahn and Western Sufism (10), *“that the Ziraat may have been inspired by a 1919 proposal from a Mr. King that the Sufi Order establish a research department to study agriculture, once an art but about to become an art again.”* In his book Farmers of Forty Centuries or Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea, and Japan, professor F.H. King describes the incredible art of building up fertile soil in the age-old Chinese traditional way and compares these practices with Western agricultural methods that disrespect the need for nourishing and protecting the soil. (11)

In the eighties Pir Vilayat, aware of the impending ecological crisis, broke the secrecy around Ziraat and made it available to the public. In his lecture *“The Meaning of Ziraat”*, he announces the far-reaching scope that Ziraat has in his vision:

*“While freemasons have been celebrating the rituals of building the temple, the edifice which forms the cornerstone of present-day civilization with its emphasis on industry, Hazrat Inayat Khan foresaw that the day will come when humans will fall back on a still deeper juncture, upon which all life is built, agriculture.”*

This crucial quote is an announcement of the birth of a new worldwide civilization with a new attitude toward spirituality and with a new direction of impact, farming. Why did Pir Vilayat ascribe a key role to agriculture for this coming era? If we look at the numbers with current knowledge and with climate change and impending catastrophe in mind, we see that this is in fact a critical sector that, if transformed, would have a very significant impact on reversing global warming. Food and agricultural production, including deforestation to clear land,

processing, packaging, transportation, and waste, account for an estimated 43-57% of human-caused greenhouse gas emissions, according to the UN Conference on Trade and Development.

The Ziraat Farmer is challenged to put into practice his/her realization of the oneness of all life. Pir Zia invites us to *“translate our abstract ideas into day-to-day action.”* In the Ziraat Papers we learn about two principles of sound regenerative agriculture.

1. *“Good seed is more precious than pearls.”* Pir Zia has taken a clear stand against the genetic manipulation of seeds and its disastrous effects. In modern agriculture the farmer is on the way to losing completely any control over the availability and selection of seed. International conglomerates take over the ownership of seed varieties by patenting genetic material, making it illegal for farmers to grow their own seed. The information contained within these genes has taken Nature eons to develop and carries within it the wisdom that comes from experiencing and adapting to a myriad of climate cycles and weather patterns. At a company’s whim, they can discontinue the propagation of their “owned” varieties with the result that those varieties, along with their genetic wisdom, is lost forever. At breakneck speed thousands of varieties worldwide of different food plants are being lost.

After pursuing the domination of Earth, Water, Fire, and Air, now commercial science is attacking the world of Ether, through genetic engineering. Within the seed, the plant retires after a cycle of growth into the unseen world by reconnecting with the archetypal patterns which are meant for it. There the experience of the past cycle is stored and the planning of a new cycle is taken up. Murshid describes this process in *The Soul Whence and Whither*. We don’t know what happens to the soul of the plant, when science changes its fundamental pattern of being, though we certainly risk to unravel the basis of our life on Earth. In Ziraat agriculture respect for the great mysteries of birth, death, and the worlds unseen are reinstalled.

2. *“Fertile soil is more valuable than gold.”* Today, at a breathtaking rate, land is being sacrificed for industrial development, yet the realization is breaking through that good soil is of the utmost value. To make way for development, so called dirt is removed before building activities can start. Murshid is telling us, that this “dirt” is more valuable than anything else. What is this fertile soil? What do we know about it? As a matter of fact, very little. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the science of the soil lost its importance. It has been said that we now know more about the stars than the soil beneath our feet. Sadly, it has come to the point where modern agriculture can grow tomatoes on glass fiber and hydroponically with no soil at all.

## The Path Forward

Alienation of human beings from the planet and the suffering and pain of living beings may be the biggest problem of the day. The remedies are clear:

1. Communication with all of Nature's realms.

*"The plants perceive and feel that which comes from us. A loving person may attend to plants and rear them and water them with love and sympathy, and they flourish; but in the hands of another it may not be so. If we only watched plants closely we should see how much they feel our presence and our love. They flourish according to our love; the more love we give, the more fragrance, the more sweetness. Man is always working on farms and in gardens, thinking of them as material things, looking to see how plants can be improved by material means; if he could only believe it, there is a still higher means of helping them to grow, a spiritual means: the use of love and sympathy."* Hazrat Inayat Kahn

2. Recognizing the interconnectedness of all life.

Pir Zia uses the word "organicity" to describe how the various parts of an organism work together to bring health and vitality to the organism. If one part of the whole is ailing, the entire body is affected. This concept is one of the fundamentals of biodynamic farming and employed on many organic farms as well. In this case, the farm is viewed as a living being, with the various part of the farm (the soil, plants, animals, and humans) as among the "organs" of the farm, each serving a particular purpose, contributing to the health and dynamic balance of the whole. Ziraat likewise, recognizes the organicity and interdependence of Nature's realms, in the manifestation of the One.

3. Applying the principles of cooperation, of organicity, within our human interactions, out of love.

For instance, within the field of agriculture developing a social field between food producers, processors, distributors, and eaters.

4. Making wholesome food a birthright for all.

*"Humanity's struggle for supply seems to be greater than that of any other living being in the lower creation. But what makes it so? It is not God; it is the human being, who is selfish and unfair to kin, and absorbed in self-interests in life. In spite of all the famines, the world still has sufficient supplies; but imagine the amount of food that has been sunk in the sea, and for how many years the earth, in which humanity's food is prepared, was neglected by human beings busy killing one another! If the result is hunger and greater strife, is God to be blamed? It is humanity who deserves all the blame."* Hazrat Inayat Kahn

*"The solution to this problem is that every community should provide adequately for the five principal needs of every individual: food, clothes, a roof, education,*

*and medicine. It is intolerable to think that many are dying without food and clothes. If humanity would open its eyes to the most critical moment that has ever come to the world, the solution of this problem would become its first task."*  
Hazrat Inayat Khan

### Conclusion

In the "Sufi Quarterly" of 1923, we read that, "Murshida Green was appointed as secretary of Ziraat with the title of Dar as Salam"(15). This beautiful title translates to threshold to peace. The condition of peace is a state where polarization is harmonized. Perhaps this title offers a clue to the meaning of Ziraat.

Ziraat continues to be developed by Murshid's successors and Ziraat is experienced by Ziraat practitioners in a multitude of ways, all enriching the meaning of Ziraat. This collective exploration will lead to a bountiful harvest, for all three soils, the inner soil (the Farmer), the ecological soil (the Farm), and the social soil (Farming), and in the words of Pir Vilayat, "*make a beautiful world of beautiful people*".