



## **The Sweat Lodge**

Many North American and Central American Indian tribes have traditionally used the sweat lodge for purification, cleansing and healing of mind, body, emotions and spirit.

Lakota elder Black Elk tells us: "The sweat lodge utilizes all powers of the universe: earth, and things that grow from the earth; water; fire; and air."

The sweat lodge symbolizes the womb of Grandmother Earth and the heated stones represent her body, which supports all life. The fire that is used to heat the rocks represents the perpetual light of the world, and is the source of all life and power. The water slowly releases the heat in the stones, which rises as steam and permeates the air to create a hot, humid atmosphere conducive to manifestation of the particular intent of the ceremony. Every tribal group has its own traditions. Overall, there is no right or wrong way to engage in a sweat lodge ceremony, other than to enter the lodge with an open mind and be prepared for cleansing of negative emotions, healing of physical ailments, clearing of mental concerns and/or releasing of spiritual blockages. Intent within integrity is the key to the

positive outcome of the ceremony.

**“Ceremony done without integrity serves fear and the ego. If done with integrity, it serves love, the earth, the people and Spirit.”** Elena Narkiya

Tribal customs vary in regard to admitting women on their moon into the sweat lodge. Many Native American tribes will not allow a woman to enter the lodge when she is on her moon. In contrast, the Toltecs, Incas, Mayans and a number of other tribal groups had no such restriction. It has been found that the sweat addresses special concerns of women, including alleviation of some of the cramping pain during menstruation and removal of excessive water caused by retention of sodium. Following childbirth, the sweat relieves aching muscles and cleanses the body.

A major side effect of a sweat is the cleansing of undesirable toxins from the body. Bacteria and viruses cannot survive at temperatures much higher than 98.6 degrees. The rise in temperature also stimulates the endocrine glands and facilitates the release of negative ions into the air, inducing relaxation and alertness.

There is normally no charge for participation in sweat lodge ceremonies, although voluntary donations may be requested to cover costs of expenses for upkeep of the lodge. Traditionally, participants bring medicine gifts and tobacco for the sweat lodge leader and fire people, as well as food to share following the ceremony.

After an opening cleansing ceremony and discussion with regard to the intent of the sweat lodge ceremony, participants gather outside the lodge in silence. One by one the sweat-keeper admits participants to the lodge, the ancient womb of Grandmother Earth, honoring “all my relations” as they enter and in most areas travel clockwise around the fire-pit until all are seated in the circle. As the hot stones are brought into the lodge, the rocks are welcomed with the words; welcome grandfather, sage or tobacco or copal or whatever medicines are available will be placed upon each grandfather as they are placed in the fire-pit. When all the stones for the first round are within the lodge, the door is closed and the sweat begins.

**This is a sacred time. It is a time of prayer, introspection, and healing.**

Water is poured on the stones as the sweat-keeper calls in the sacred energies desired for the intent of the sweat. Each participant offers personal prayers for self, others, and for releasing of pain and suffering. Between

rounds, more hot stones are brought in as the group chants, sings, prays, or whatever they are comfortable doing. At the conclusion of the sweat, participants leave the lodge in a sacred manner, again honoring "all my relations". A discussion follows in which each participant has the opportunity to express the insights gained from the ceremony. The group then enjoys a social gathering time and sharing of food and drink. With open heart-to-heart communication as the intent, the evening is concluded in beauty.

## **Understanding the sweat lodge ceremony**

### **Walk Sacred, a Cree Medicine Man**

These interpretations/meanings and rituals will vary depending on the Indian Nation and part of the country and the participant's personal perception and experience; this information is for general guidance only

**Sweat Lodge:** A Native American healing and religious ritual, used for purification, spiritual renewal, healing, and education. The lodge itself consists of a structure that generates hot moist air. A sweat lodge may be a small structure made from a frame of saplings, covered with skins, canvas or blanket. A depression is dug in the center into which hot rocks are positioned. Water is thrown on the rocks to create steam. A small flap opening is used to regulate the temperature. The sweat lodge ritual consists of songs, prayers, and other actions conducted in a tightly enclosed, hot environment.

Some Nations do not believe in women sweats, some just do men's sweats, others: women's sweats, men's sweats, and mixed sweats. (Since women have their "moon time" some indigenous people, like Cherokee, believe that is her purification period).

The purification ceremony is commonly referred to as the sweat lodge, but this is a misnomer, says William J. Walk Sacred, a Cree medicine man:

"When you come out of a purification lodge, you don't feel the same as when you come out of a sauna. The ceremony is a rebirthing process. There's something that happens in a spiritual sense that is powerful and uplifting."

The Indian word for the purification ceremony is oenikika, which means the breath of life. It is a process of renewal through the integration of the

spiritual and physical. Walk Sacred explains, "Just think of this as a marriage ceremony that takes place within yourself."

The ceremonial leader is the medicine man and in some cases a medicine woman; there are also those that run sweats that are simply people that walk in a good and respectful way. We will use the term he and medicine man but will also encompass women and all others that are helpers of the people. He is a representative of the spirits, who works within the invisible realm, in order for you to become aware of the healing process within yourself.

The lodge itself is made of branches, usually willow saplings, but varying according to what's available in the region. Blankets or tarps are used as coverings to hold in heat. The circular shape of the lodge is often described as being like a womb or a protective bubble.

The nature of the ceremony differs from tribe to tribe; Walk Sacred explains the many facets of preparing for a Cree ceremony:

*"When you want to begin, you find a medicine man, and you offer a pouch of tobacco. Tobacco represents a person's Spirit. Offering tobacco is how you ask the medicine man to work on your behalf in the spiritual world. It's not like a payment of money; this is his obligation. Once you have taken upon yourself the role of medicine man, it is incumbent upon you to do this healing work when someone comes to you with this offering. So, you bring tobacco to the medicine man. You also come to him with your specific desire. You tell him if it's a broken leg you want worked on, or if it's an alcohol or drug problem, or something in the non-physical world. You bring your request to the medicine man.*

*"At this point, he will give you your responsibilities; he will tell you how to set up the ceremony and what you need to do. You might have to prepare food. Once you ask for a ceremony, anyone who knows about it can come and request a specific healing within the ceremonial function. You never know how many people are going to be there, so you have to prepare food for 30 or 40 people, depending upon the size of the medicine man's lodge. You might be asked to prepare a specific type of food, like buffalo soup. The people who work in the spiritual world tell the medicine man what they need. This is an offering, and it represents the humbling of our spirit.*

*"Then the medicine man will give you specific amounts and colors of what we call tobacco ties. These are little pieces of cloth representing the six directions, white being north, yellow being south, red being east, black being west, above being blue, and the earth mother being green. He may tell you that you need 75 yellow ties and 50 blue ones. The colors represent who he is working with in the nonphysical world, and the number of ties represent a specific amount of prayers that are requested by the spirits in order for them to come in and work with you. You prepare a pouch with tobacco, and you direct your prayers into each one before closing them with a tie. Your prayers carry the gift of your heart to the spirits so they know what you're looking for and they can see the sincerity of the heart. That's where they look because they know the truth is there."*

The beginning of the ceremony is a time of prayer and contemplation. Walk Sacred explains,

*"The medicine man begins by setting up an altar. Usually, the altar has some type of antler to hold his pipe. Then he sends up sacred herbs in the four directions. There are four sacred herbs in the Native culture. One is sage, which purifies a room of negative energies. Another is sweet grass. A medicine man told me, 'This is what brings in the heavy guys.' Sweet grass brings in big, powerful beings from the other side to heal you. The third is cedar. Cedar is for purification. It sets up an atmosphere for the spirits to work. It's a sweetness they like and it's attractive to the energies of the invisible world. The fourth is tobacco, which has always been sacred to Native culture. It is used in ceremonies of smoking the pipe. It is used to bless the earth. Whenever we harvest herbs or cut barks off of trees, we always offer tobacco to the four directions and to the sky father and earth mother. And we plant tobacco as an honoring of that plant, tree, or substance that is giving its life, or part of its life, to help our life."*

Specific types of rocks, called grandfather rocks, are gathered and placed in a pile. Primarily lava stones from volcanoes are used, because ordinary river rocks could explode. A fire is built, and the stones are heated. When the stones are white hot, they are brought into the lodge.

*"We honor our relations as we enter the 'womb' and again as we leave," Walk Sacred continues. "We crawl around until we form a circle around the center. The center of the center is where a little pit is dug for the grandfather rocks. These are brought in, one at a time, and the first four*

*are placed in the north, south, east, and west directions. They they're sprinkled with a little sage and sweet grass and whatever the medicine man might be using. The medicine man offers prayers to each of the four directions, to honor his ancestors, and to honor those in the nonphysical as well as the physical worlds. This is a sacred time. It is a time of prayer, introspection, and healing.*

*"When the water hits the rock, it goes up in steam, fills the air, and unifies everyone within the 'womb.' Everything is united, as we say, all of my relations. At that moment we are connecting ourselves to the basic elements of life, and that brings out the greatest good in people. We are connecting to the movement that is all around us that we are part of, and never separate from.*

*"As we sit in the circle, we each go around, one at a time, and we offer prayers of thanksgiving and praise for the Almighty, the great spirits, the great mystery, the sky father, and the earth mother. The medicine man sits by the entrance, and is the first to offer his prayers. Each person then takes a turn. Eventually you come to the end and the medicine man blends all the prayers. It's kind of like weaving a tapestry. It's a mystical, magical process, an altered state that goes beyond the physical form. It takes you into the reality of the nonphysical world, where the real healing takes place."*

After the purification ceremony is the wopela, which, broadly interpreted, means giving thanks: This is not always done after a sweat but this information is included for your consideration. Many people develop and follow their own rituals, it is important to fast and ask for guidance in developing the ceremony and rituals you will use. It is important to call upon the spirits of your ancestors and ask for guidance. It is also important to follow teachings that will be given to you during your dreamtime. You will have many teachers in the physical world that will present themselves to you and not always in the sense of 'hi I am here to teach you something, some teachers are children and other people you will meet in your day to day life. Remember to listen to all that speak to you for they may even be the poorest of the poor but if you are listening with your heart there will be something important you may learn from them. I believe it is very important to remain a humble and respectful person toward all people we come into contact with. We are simply human beings and as such we have no power, the power comes from the Creator, we are simply the tools the

Creator uses to do the work on behalf of the people. You may run into people that say to you, 'I am a medicine man' or 'I am a pipe carrier'. I share these following words with you that were shared with me very early in my journey and I have always honored. Be very cautious of anyone who identifies him or herself to you in this way, because a true medicine person will never speak this way.

*"Now, we bring in the soup and foods and the gifts for the medicine man," continues Walk Sacred. "It might be a blanket, whatever your spirit leads you to bring the medicine man or to offer directly to the mystery. People sit around the medicine man in a circle. Once everyone is in, the windows are closed up. The medicine man's blanket is laid out on the floor, in the center of the lodge. On top of that is a mat of freshly cut, beautiful sage. The medicine man covers himself with a blanket, and goes into a prayerful state. He takes the prayer ties and sets them up in the north end of the center in a specific fashion. They are laid down on a special type of earth, on top of the sage, which carries the great aroma energy up to the Great Spirit. The prayers are carried up in a good way, so that the Great Spirit will receive them and hear the pitiful cries of his children. After the prayers, the candles are blown out, and it is pitch dark.*

*"There are specific songs that are sung for bringing in spirits, for talking to spirits, for constantly giving praise and gratitude, for constantly giving acknowledgment to the great mystery for all the gifts of life. This includes the pain and suffering as well as the good times, recognizing that all things flow from the one source, and all things return back to that one source. It's an acknowledgment. Very holy and sacred songs might be sung for an hour. It depends. It's all under the direction of the medicine man, although he might not speak a word. A lot of it is done telepathically, through the communication of energy waves.*

*"We go around to each individual, just like we did in the purification ceremony, and we give prayers and thanks and ask for specific healing. Now is the time to verbalize our requests."*

After everyone has given their prayers, the medicine man calls the spirits in. The medicine man is in the center. This isn't just the center of the lodge; it is the center of the universe. It represents the center of life. And that center exists within each of us. Honoring that center brings the nonphysical world into the physical one. So, the medicine man represents the spirit of the God

source, and by so doing, he creates an energy that allows the nonphysical world to interact with the physical world.

"Amazing things can happen. I saw this rattle come out of the air and it started pounding me on the chest, hitting me all over the chest and head. Then eagle feathers were all over my face. There was stomping on the floor that sounded as if it came from beings 20 feet high. And there were lights and colors."

While these experiences are phenomenal in that they shift our perception of reality, Walk Sacred reminds us that the essence of healing is in the work of each participant:

"The medicine man helps us remove the veils that prevent us from seeing life as it really is: unified and sacred. His approach is to help individuals resolve problems by the work they do themselves. They prepare food, make prayer ties, sing, chant, and drum. These remove blocks within the physical structure so that the person is receptive to impulses from the non-physical world."

Working with spiritual energies is a sacred and powerful process when performed for the right reasons by a good and honorable person. Unfortunately, the purification lodge has become trendy in recent years, and the right atmosphere is not always present. Native Americans, therefore, warn people to take certain precautions before entering into a purification ceremony: First, if a person is charging money, people need to think about the type of energy this will attract and the effects it will have on the people in the lodge. This is a Gift from the spiritual world that cannot be compensated for by material gifts. Someone who charges for the purification ceremony is not working in the traditional way of the pipe. Second, one must look into the character of the person leading the rite. White Deer of Autumn suggests,

*"Look into a medicine man's background the way you would approach finding any new doctor. Find out the person's track record. Who are they? What are their experiences? And understand your responsibilities of going into the ceremonial process. Then the blessings received will be beyond your wildest imagination."*

Today an increasing number of Natives are victims of cancer and other



diseases of the modern world. Native Americans tend not to rely solely on western medicine for help. However, White Deer of Autumn notes that since traditional medicine is best at curing diseases brought on by nature, and since new sicknesses are brought on by technology, some technological medicine may be required. Here White Deer of Autumn talks about his wife's quest for healing through a combination of old and new medicine:

*"When my wife found out that she had breast cancer, and a doctor, without any sensitivity, told her that she needed to have her breasts cut off, she immediately rejected this approach. She knew it was unnatural for her body to deal with radiation. Instead, my wife went through a process of cleansing through sweat lodges and meditation. She returned her body to a more natural form that brought her closer to the earth, and that healed her spirit, which had been hurt as a child through molestation, boarding school, and racism.*

*"My wife took chemotherapy at the end, and it did prolong her life for a few months. But she reacted horribly to the chemotherapy. Of course she would. She's a native woman, a natural woman. Putting something so unnatural into her body is going to cause her to react in that way.*

*"While taking chemotherapy, my wife continued to attend our ceremonies where she would sit in the center surrounded by loved ones. We would offer the pipe, and use rattles and drums and sing for her, trying to create peace and healing.*

*"She died just after Mother's Day. I will never forget how she invited the children onto her bed and asked for the pipe. The last act on this earth that she wanted to do was to smoke the pipe with her children. Even though the cancer destroyed her physical body, the healing of her Spirit allowed my wife to make a remarkable, wondrous transition into the next world."*