

SHAMANIC DREAMING

by Chris Lüttichau, first published in Sacred Hoop Magazine

"Dreamer" is a term for the shaman in many indigenous cultures, and this shows us something about the importance of dreams in traditional shamanism. In the last 20 years or so shamanism has experienced a revival in the Western world, and many people now practise core shamanism based to a large extent on journeying, and the pioneering work of Michael Harner. Yet so far, shamanic dreaming hasn't played a major part of core shamanism in the western world. It isn't as easy to learn as journeying, but in the old days, learning the skill of the shaman wasn't supposed to be easy.

DREAMS AND SPIRITS

In a shamanic context the word "dreaming" can mean a number of things, including having a vision, going on a shamanic journey, or receiving information in a trance state. Here the word dream refers to the dreams you can have while sleeping. My own path into shamanism came through dreaming, and this article is based on some of my own experiences of working with shamanic dreaming for the last 25 years. In order to understand what shamanic dreaming is, we need to understand that human beings have not only a physical body, but also a dream or energy body, that can travel to other places independently, away from the physical body. In some native traditions they say that the human being has different souls, and that at least one of these souls can leave the physical body and go out on journeys to the realm of Spirit. In the same way as we can build up our physical body by exercising, there are ways to build up the dream body. Shamanic dreaming has to do with interacting with the spirits while dreaming. This can be in the form of visitations, where the spirit teachers or guardian animals come to you in nightly encounters and we can receive teachings and initiations. In other words, the spirits begin to train us in the dream state, and we may receive certain initiations along the way. This is one of the classical ways of being called onto the shamanic path.

In such dreams the spirits can gift us with information that is important to us, or to others. We may be given assignments, and in some cases we can also receive healing. One of the ways to begin to open up the doorway to shamanic dreaming is by asking our spirit teacher or guardian animals when we go to sleep to bring us a shamanic dream.

PROPHETIC DREAMS

In shamanic dreaming we don't necessarily interpret each dream and look for symbolic meaning. With reflective dreams this can be relevant,

but shamanic dreams can often be taken literally. For instance, in one such dream I was presented with a certain kind of shirt, and told to wear it. It was unlike any other shirt I had seen, and certainly not one that I could go and buy in my local shop. However, it was one of those times where you know it's no ordinary dream, and you can feel there's a deep significance to it. I woke up, turned on the light, wrote down the dream and made a drawing of the shirt. A couple of years went by, and I had forgotten about the dream and was participating in a ceremony amongst some native people. Towards the end of the ceremony the shaman got up, and walked over to me with a bundle. He said that the spirits had told him to give me a gift, and he presented me with a shirt that looked exactly like the one I had been given in the dream.

The shirt turned out to become very significant for me as time went by. In the old days such prophetic dreams were essential for survival. They would warn people about eminent dangers, for instance an approaching enemy. Knowing the significance of dreams, the people would act upon the dream, be prepared, and lives could be saved. Other dreams might give instructions about where to find game animals, or where to catch fish.

MAKING IT REAL

Another important belief is that things happen in the dream world before they happen in the physical world. In many shamanic cultures you consequently "act out" events from your dreams in the waking world thereby "bridging" them into this everyday reality. The reasons for doing so may not always be clear beforehand. I once dreamed that I went to a certain cafe with a certain person and had organic vanilla ice cream. Upon waking I knew that I should bridge the dream, and after some days I invited this person to go to the cafe. It turned out they had organic vanilla ice cream on the menu, just as I had seen in the dream. During our short time in the cafe the person I'd invited had an experience that shifted things for her on a personal level, and the visit turned out to be a profound spontaneous healing. The ice cream was good too.

In another dream I was visited by what seemed like a Mayan woman who healed with herbs. She said she wanted to work with me. Later I was instructed that I would receive some rain forest herbs and use them in my healing work. They have not yet come my way, but I know that they will one day when it is time to bridge the dream, and act upon it in this reality.

CONSCIOUS WHILE DREAMING

However, we don't need to wait passively for such dreams to come to us. An important aspect of shamanic dreaming is the ability to enter the dream state at will, and then to know that we are dreaming. This latter is known as "lucid dreaming" - a modern expression which describes an ancient shamanic skill. In this state the shaman can access useful information, ask for help and guidance in healing work, and be shown how to treat a person who is ill.

This manner of dreaming is an excellent source of sacred knowledge, and still has many uses for the shaman today. We can ask for teachings on just about any topic. For example, we can learn about the art of shape shifting - taking on the form of our guardian animal and moving through the different worlds.

ETHICAL INTENT

As with all shamanic work it is important that your intention is clear. Will the way you use your dreaming skills benefit people in some way, and is it done under the guidance of your spirit teacher? Our intention should be aligned with the highest wisdom of the spirits, and we need humility so that our ego can get out of the way and give space to Spirit.

Shamanic dreaming is different to modern lucid dreaming: in the latter there tends to be an emphasis on controlling your dreams, and the dominant attitude is that you can do whatever you fancy. In shamanic dreaming the spirits are in charge, not the humans.

This is a very important difference. It seems to be a cultural thing. In our culture people are encouraged to think "I", not "we". In many of the old shamanic cultures the welfare of the people had the highest priority. In the modern world people have for a long time tried to control nature, conquer mountains, dam rivers, drain marshlands, and generally control whatever they come across, and that attitude can also be transferred to the dream world. From my perspective there is a danger in that, and we can miss out on the sacredness and the true gifts of dreaming. I suspect that is part of the reason why some indigenous people consider Westerners their "little" brothers and sisters.

DREAMING AND DYING

Those who have had out of body experiences and lucid dreams will know that the feeling in these states is very real - much more real than a light trance or the feeling you have during most shamanic journeys where some of your consciousness is still in your physical body. When dreaming consciously your whole awareness is in the dream - it is as real as the physical world, and at the same time you know that you're dreaming. Such dreams are the closest we as humans in physical

bodies can come to experiencing what it is like being spirits, except for a near death experience. Shamanic dreaming is a lot safer.

However, the conscious dream can be a kind of training for dying. As a matter of fact, it is an amazing opportunity to prepare yourself for what eventually will happen to all of us - death, the transit from a physical body into an energy body. There are different ways to do so. One is to learn to cross consciously from being awake into the "dream state", and then ask to be taught what you should know in order to prepare yourself for being in the realm of spirit after you have died. In itself this dream state is very much like the state after death. You can move around in the spirit world, or in this world, in your energy body. You are not limited by physical existence, you can explore other realms and dimensions, meet spirit animals and teachers - the possibilities are endless. Crossing consciously from being awake to dreaming is also a way of training yourself how to cross consciously after you die, and move directly into the realm of your ancestors, or wherever else you are supposed to go. This skill is considered important in many spiritual disciplines.

GATHERING ENERGY

The ability to have shamanic dreams on a regular basis is advanced dreaming, and one of the things that is required is energy. If you feel exhausted when you go to bed, and collapse into sleep every night, you don't have sufficient energy for this kind of dreaming. In shamanic dreaming you find ways to build up your energy and there are many ways of sourcing as well as conserving energy so that you have the needed resources for conscious, nightly journeys into the world of Spirit. Eating well, exercising and meditating are some basic steps. Identifying the areas where you lose energy, and finding ways to stop the leaks, are some other ways that can give good results quickly. With more energy new doorways may open up. You can, for instance, learn to share the same dream with one or more people, meeting while dreaming, visiting people and places at will, travelling in your dream body. Here again, it is important to be guided by the highest wisdom of the spirits and your own integrity.

THE REAL WORLD

In the modern world we are taught that the physical world is the real world. Consequently, almost all of our attention is focused towards outer, often superficial, things. One of the results of this is that the energy that could be used for developing our abilities to perceive and understand the invisible world is not available. This is one of the reasons why native peoples often have much more highly developed

psychic abilities than people living in modern Western cultures. Traditionally, people who live close to the earth take time for solitude in nature, which quiets the mind, and opens the heart and psyche to the unseen. Their world is permeated by the mystery, and dreaming is part of it. I have found that it is best not to try to understand and explain everything about shamanic dreaming, but rather surrender into the mystery. Then it can become a blessing from the spirits, and the dream world becomes at least as real as the physical world.