

# THE KAYAK AND THE EMPTY MIND

Chris Luttichau

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A streamlined formation of kayaks moves quietly on the big lake. The rhythmic song of paddles has been going for a couple of hours and the paddlers have entered a light trance state. In the distance you can hear the trumpeting call of cranes, and on the southern shore a moose has walked into the water and is eating the green reeds. The water is so crystal clear here that you can see a pike swimming a meter under the surface. If we are lucky, Petri, our wilderness guide, will catch one and we'll cook it tonight under the stars.

We are kayaking on one of the big lakes in the Finnish wilderness. We are in the home of bear, wolf, lynx, eagle, osprey, moose, crane and many other wild animals. The kayakers have come from many different places, the USA, UK, Ireland, Chile and Holland. All have come to learn about shamanism, kayaking and living in the wilderness.

It all began for me some years ago during an eight-day hiking trip in the Lapland *taiga*, the ancient land of the Sami people. Petri Leinonen, who is a Finnish wilderness guide and kayaking instructor, and I talked then about offering kayaking trips combined with shamanic consciousness-raising training in the Finnish wilderness. Both of us had been kayaking for some years and had found it to be an amazing shamanic vehicle for journeying into nature and into ourselves.

## INVITS AND KAYAKS

The kayak has its origin with the Inuit or Eskimo who live in the far North, the land of snow and ice. The Inuit are an indigenous people who live in the Arctic and whose spirituality is based on animism and shamanism. Their consciousness has been forged by the powers that surround them. Made from the dance of these elements they are a people who hold the wisdom and clarity of the ice, the power of the storm and the abundance and danger of the ocean. The spirit of the kayak has been birthed through a people who were merged and in balance with their difficult and beautiful surroundings. Physically and energetically it holds that same piercing, pointed, clarity and wisdom that came from its creators. It comes from a culture based on hunting, where Kayaks were an essential tool for survival. Hunting was a dangerous endeavour, but



the people needed to eat, and Mother Ocean provided them with all they needed. They took her gifts with respect, gratitude and prayer. They lived in balance with the land and the sea. It is good to remember the people who made the kayak and say a prayer of gratitude when we are on the



*Historically, the kayak was essential to the Inuit people of Arctic Canada, America and Russia. With it, and armed only with hand held harpoons, they could hunt the large game which came into the cold waters of their home, such as this whale, here being cut up after a hunt in the late 19th century.*



orienteeing and wilderness cooking are also a major part of the experience. All these things bring us close to our ancestral native roots. We, possibly for the first time in our lives, form a deep relationship to all the elements: the earth, the fire, the wind and not least, the water. Petri and I wanted to share all of this with people who had never experienced the wilderness or sat in a kayak. We soon began to offer ten-day trips called 'The Kayak And The Empty Mind'.

water. Their spirits sing their ancient songs and help us move with focus and direction.

**THE EMPTY MIND**

Now the focus is not on hunting seals, but on hunting ourselves, our spirit. This is what the kayak will help us with. One of its qualities is that it moves quietly and stealthily, like a stalking panther, enabling the kayaker to get close to the prey. For us the prey will be all the distortions that keep us apart and separate us from our true self and our Earth Mother. She is our ultimate goal.

For me shamanism is all about becoming one with nature, coming back home to the Mother Earth and awakening to the truth that we are all connected, that we are all a part of the web of life. We have mostly forgotten who we are, the wilderness reminds us of our essence and heals our soul.

Wilderness areas on our planet are dwindling at an alarming rate as the wants and needs of an ever increasing human population grow. We are quickly devouring the last places where we can meet our mother in her virgin form. The vast majority of people now live urban lives where they are increasingly cut off from her.

The purpose of these trips would be to come back to her; to open a doorway in our busy Western lives and minds to connect and merge with her beauty and power in a very real and present way. Combining the ancient art of kayaking with shamanic tools forms a powerful prescription for remembering.

Learning forgotten skills including primitive fire making, handling knives and hatchets,

For a couple of years now each summer, out of mosquito season, we have taken a group of people on an



*19th century Inuit-made wooden model of a typical kayak*

outer and inner adventure on beautiful, clean Finnish lakes. In many traditional shamanic cultures, such as Siberia, North America and





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the Celtic world, a lake represents our spirit. Similarly the kayak is more than a fibreglass vessel, it is an image of the sacred self that carries us across waters of life. When we paddle in our kayaks on pure, clean lakes we are really on a quest to find our spirit. Kayaking across the lakes becomes like our journey through life, with the aim of opening up to the empty mind and quietly slipping into the world of spirit.

That's how the old people saw it. All my native teachers used this ancient symbolic language.

#### **IN THE BASE CAMP**

Our first two days of this trip are spent in a base camp in the woods by the lake where

participants learn all the basic kayaking skills needed for paddling safely during the trip into the wilderness. My teachers taught me that there needs to be a strong emphasis in any shamanic training on grounding and safety for the people. This is always the first thing.

The base camp itself has a big wooden shelter built like a wooden tipi that's open to one side. In the middle is a fire place that is surrounded by benches covered by reindeer skin. There we cook our meals and make tea and coffee over an open fire. Those who want can sleep in the lodge, otherwise

there are tents and *kotas* which are the Sami version of the tipi. The people at first are both nervous and excited. There is a sense of anticipation at what is to come. Generally everyone comes with a deep spiritual calling to return to the Mother and there is a thirst for her that transcends any fear or doubt. The land and water spirits hold us, and people settle gradually into a deeper, earthier rhythm.

In the evenings people get initiated into the Finnish wood-heated sauna, followed by a dip in the soothing lake water. All the senses are being awakened and a deep cleansing is happening in preparation for our journey. The heat of a sauna, that has been fired by wood instead of electricity, is very soft and you can stay there for hours. There is a gentle strength in this preparation. We feel held and nurtured by all the powers. At midnight it's still light - we are in the land of the midnight sun. Very quickly we are dropping our normal everyday consciousness and entering the

place where the stillness and mystery can emerge.

There is something enchanting about being in such a clear, bright place where it doesn't get dark at night. The light that dominates the land at this time of year, calls to our spirit. People share a sense of lightness and hope. These energies come from the sacred dance between the light and the earth, our Mother and Father. We feel them gently whispering us back into the magic.

#### **THE JOURNEY BEGINS**

After two days people are ready to push off into the shining, glittering lake. This is a journey into the wild place within and the people who come on these trips are hungry for connection. I see it almost like putting a plug back into a socket - connections are made and the current begins to flow. It is all there, waiting, Spirit is very patient. In the West we have become unplugged, but the spark is always there at the centre.

We paddle in certain formations that tribal people have used through the ages, and we paddle in silence. I teach meditations and consciousness techniques that my teachers have taught me for emptying the mind and coming into the stillness. We learn to listen to the song of the paddle and let it guide us out of the mind and into the heart of the lake, the land and our body. What a feeling when the mind, that ceaseless chatter suddenly stops and the silence takes over. That's when we begin to merge with the kayak, the water, the mighty pines and all the relations that encircle us.

As we paddle we are surrounded by wildlife. We watch ospreys fishing, young falcons learning to fly, cranes circling around us, moose wading into the lake and pikes swimming underneath us. Seeing bear, wolf, lynx and wolverine is only for the lucky few. They are there, you can feel their spirit, but they prefer to watch us from a distance rather than be seen.

Today although we don't use kayaks for hunting, they still gift us with the ability to move swiftly and silently across the water. We paddle effortlessly without disturbing the



surroundings. The kayak physically sits very low in the water so that it is almost as if we are a part of that element. The animals do not perceive us as different from the water, we are not a threat. It's similar to when riding a horse, the free animals see only horse and so are not afraid to come close.

I have kayaked close to ospreys hunting for fish, flocks of cranes have flown low over me, seals and otters have been drawn by their curiosity and come very close, and the loon has come so near that I could look him in the eye.

Through the mists and rain and sun we silently paddle, the ancient forests which frame our waterway hum and pulse with the presence of spirits watching this strange band of travellers. I can palpably feel their curiosity. Here man is the visitor and we move respectfully and gracefully through their realm.

Today many feel superior to the natural world, like it is under our command and there for our use and pleasure. The old teachings tell us that we are just a part, a little piece in this jigsaw that is creation. Out here in the vastness we experience that truth.

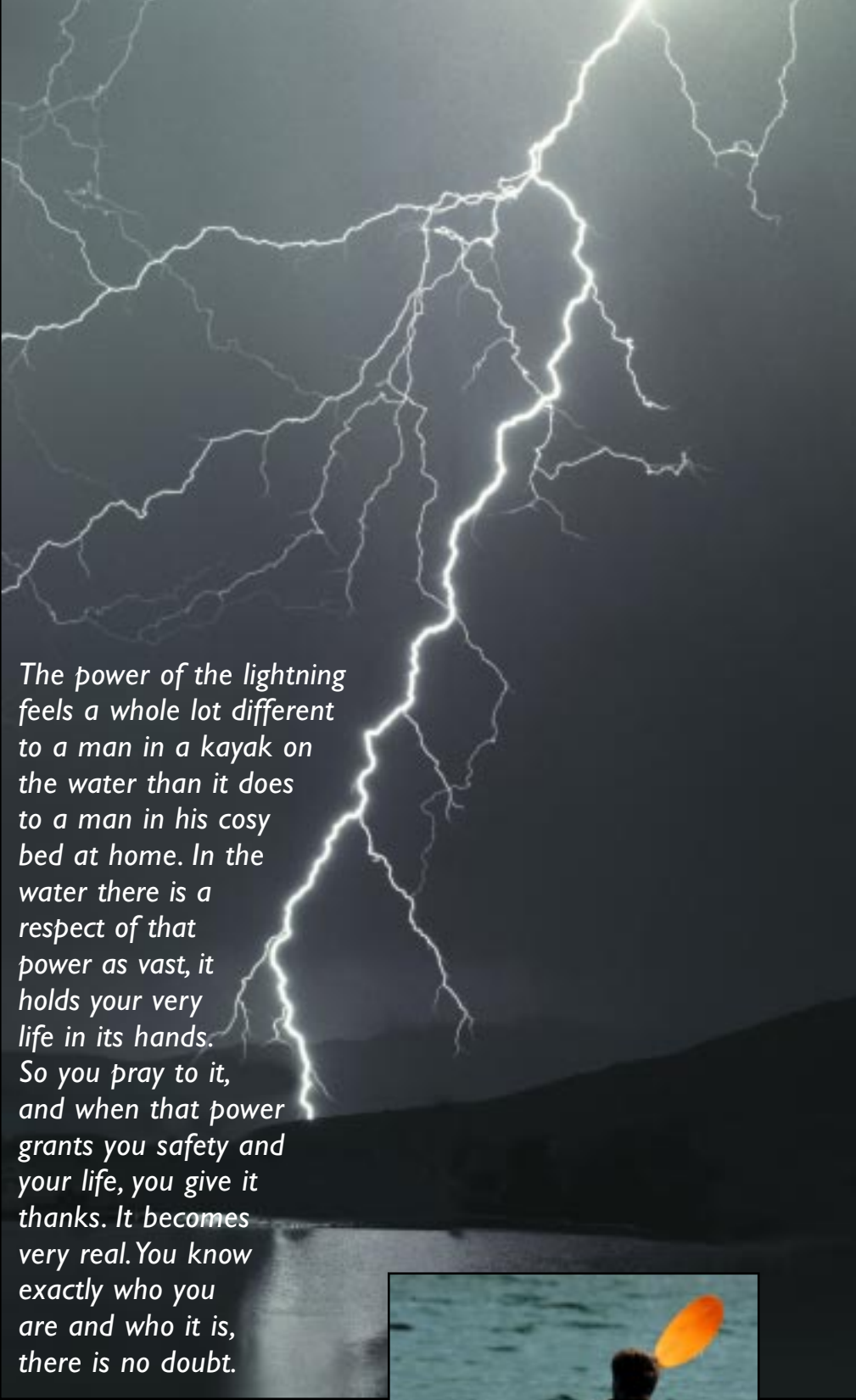
#### **POWER AND DANGER**

How quickly the winds can come and the storms roll in. We have been on the calm clear water when suddenly the weather changes and the forces of nature decide to bring us teachings about our life and who we are. Then there is nowhere else to be but in the body. Something takes over from a deep place within, which I call the body mind. From that deep place we instinctively do what is needed to reach safety.

Wild animals live from that instinctual power, they always know what to do. It is still within us, buried in our cells. Danger brings a rawness and vitality to our life. It activates that cellular instinctual knowing. In the separateness and shield of our mainly urban living we have lost much of the gift of that force. My teachers taught me that a little danger is sometimes a good thing, it can awaken powers within which are dormant.

The power of the lightning feels a whole lot different to a man in a kayak on the water, than it does to a man in his cosy bed at home. In the water there is a respect of that power as vast, it holds your very life in its hands. So you pray to it, and when that power grants you safety and your life, you give it thanks. It becomes very real. You know exactly who you are and who it is, there is no doubt. Animals know exactly who they are, as do the plants, trees, insects and the lightening. We humans are the only ones who have forgotten.

Each day we paddle to a new destination and put up our camp. There is something incredibly freeing to the spirit in



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not having a set base. The mind wants order, routine and a big part of the trip is breaking down those mind structures which keep us trapped in isolation.

We also learn huge lessons about working as a tribe, pulling together when needed, but allowing space for the blossoming of self-responsibility. For some this trip is a huge step towards claiming their personal power. Some have never put up a tent before, or left the city, or spent any time in nature. Immense feelings of self-respect come when people face and overcome challenges and fears as a group and on their own.



#### **A CHANCE FOR VISION QUEST**

In the middle of the trip we stay in one spot for a couple of nights, and have a vision quest. We do a short version, one night and one day. The vision quest was traditionally done in the wilderness, and the untouched



land here provides a rare opportunity that is not to be missed.

The people go out to pray and fast for twenty-four hours, away from other human beings. We pray to Mother Earth for guidance on our lives. In the wilderness we meet her in her purest form. Going up on a hilltop in the ancient forest for our quest is like entering an ancient temple. Close to the earth, we come back to her heart beat. We can let go and be filled with awe and wonder when we stand facing creation. The stillness enters and we can hear her loving words telling us what is needed to bring us into balance and back to her bosom.

### LEARNING FROM NATURE

We work constantly throughout the adventure with shamanic teachings and tools, about how to contain and preserve our energy levels. The old ones watched the animals, like the hawks riding and rising on the thermal air current, for teachings on how to be in harmony with the elements. They always looked for the path of least resistance. With the right rhythm we move as easily through the water as an eagle riding the air spirals. The kayak soon becomes more than a vehicle it becomes an extension of our body, it is a part of us.

Once in the flow and merged with the kayak and all that surrounds, a deep sense of peace and joy spreads through the body and the paddling becomes almost effortless. It is my experience that when we can totally let go of resistance and surrender into the flow of life, everything becomes light, easy and right.

Athletes sometimes experience this as a state they call the 'zone'. It happens when the 'little' mind surrenders and a higher consciousness takes over. A doorway opens and we can break free of limitations and the tethers that bind us, and enter a blissful state where anything and everything is possible. We are finally in the Mystery, we've finally come home...

Many years ago in the US I was with my teacher at that time, an old wise Native American man. We were

watching a falcon flying swiftly up in the sky. I classified the bird as a prairie falcon and said so. My teacher responded in a very firm voice, saying: "Chris, be careful! Modern people name things, put them into categories, and then think they understand them. It's the opposite. By doing so they cut themselves off from them, and they will never know them."

That was a great teaching and it has been with me ever since. I can still hear those wise words very clearly.

It's the same with the great wilderness lakes and the water. When people first come on the kayaking trips they often think they know what water is. That's a big mistake from the perspective of the old ones. Water is a mystery, and only when you let go of your preconceived ideas and open yourself up to the unknown, can you begin to meet the spirit of the water.

As the paddle moves in mesmerising circles and you watch drops of water run off the blade and hit the surface of the lake, you begin to enter the beauty. My teachers called it 'the shimmering'; it's when a gateway suddenly opens and you see the power behind the form.

Through prayer, the water spirit can heal, cleanse and purify you as you paddle. She can take away your worries, and remove negativity from your energy shield and physical body. All this she does through her love for us.

When we make camp in the evening there is still plenty of energy left for a blazing campfire, preparing delicious food and then stories or walks to explore the land. Very quickly we've become a tribe,

bonded by our journey and the spirits.

### A WALK INTO THE MYSTERY

One night we were camping on a big island and we decided to go for a shamanic walk. Walking in this old way also enables us to let go of the mind and let a force that is beyond the ordinary self, take over. We walked at night. The sun had set a few hours before and yet there was still enough light to see.

It was a walk in the twilight, up high, rocky ridges, and down into pine covered valleys. As we were walking, the speed picked up as it often does when shamanic walking really works, and suddenly something else took over.

The terrain was uneven with rocks, bushes and branches on the earth, but everybody moved sure-footedly at a high speed, almost running, without much effort. The group was no longer a number of individuals; it had become one unit, one organism, like a flock of birds that moves in harmony; one mind, one heart.

There were no ordinary thoughts, just a strong powerful feeling of being alive and part of the forest, breathing with it, dancing with it, entering a world where we were an integral part of something much bigger than our small selves. Days of kayaking had helped us empty our minds and enabled us to have this ecstatic experience of a separate reality. The old shamans knew these ways, and today the wilderness can offer us an opportunity to find our way back to the source of the old wisdom and teachings.

I give thanks to the spirit of the kayak and all the wise ones who brought her to us. I give thanks to my Mother, always there... waiting.

Chris Luttichau has been trained by native teachers for over 20 years. He founded Northern Drum Shamanic Centre in 1998 with the aim of delivering the large and diverse body of sacred earth based teachings. He believes that the time is right now for this ancient knowledge to be spread throughout the world.

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The next kayaking trip will be Jul 28 - Aug 6  
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