

SHAMANISM

by Chris Lüttichau, January 2001

Shamanism is an ancient spiritual path for awakening, raising consciousness, healing, divination and, in many cases, peace-making. All major healing systems have shamanism at their root, as do some of the major religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism still contains key shamanic principles.

The New Age Movement uses many time-proven shamanic methods. Concepts and techniques such as visualization, guided fantasy journeys, soul retrieval, time line travel and many others are borrowed from ancient shamanic practices. So, what is shamanism?

Fundamentally it's important to know that it's not a religion; it's a spiritual path. It holds no dogmas; instead it offers a path to awakening. The Shaman seeks his or her own personal and direct communion with the sacred and does not need an intermediary. Hence the word Shaman, which comes from the Tungus tribe in Siberia, and has been translated as 'the one who sees', 'the one who knows' and 'the one who sees in the dark'.

The Shaman sees and knows the essential truth about the nature of reality and the place of the human within that reality. Another key element that characterizes a shaman is that she/ he works under direct and conscious guidance of spirit teachers and other helpers, and if that factor isn't present, it's not shamanism.

The objective of shamanism is to bring healing, sacred teachings and spiritual guidance to the people. The shaman's job is to maintain balance and harmony within the circle of the people. From a shamanic perspective, if one person in the circle is out of balance, then the whole circle is weakened. This is a very different perspective to the philosophy of the modern world, which promotes individualism and competition. Shamanism is very much about community and circles of people working together in a respectful and beautiful way.

It is therefore vitally important to ensure that each member of the community is happy and healthy and expressing their talents. When disharmony occurs the shaman will go into an altered state of consciousness, or trance, in order to contact the spirit helpers

and bring back the healing that is needed to restore wholeness to the community. Hence the shaman is a person who can travel between the worlds and create a bridge between the spiritual world and the world of humans.

THE WORLD TREE

The spiritual realms in which the shaman travels and communicates are explained in the image of the world tree. Throughout many traditions and religions, reality has been perceived as a sacred tree. The crown of the tree is known as the Upper World, and is seen to be the realm of God, Great Spirit, guides, angels, and spiritual ancestors. The trunk of the tree is the Middle World, where humans, animals, trees, plants, and nature spirits live. Here there are two realms: the ordinary everyday physical reality where we live, and behind that the world of spirit. The roots of the tree are the Lower World where power animals live. The shaman can travel in all three worlds, and is traditionally known as the messenger between our world and the world of spirit. Her/ his principle duty is to ensure that there is balance and respect between the human and spiritual realms as well as in her/ his community.

POWER ANIMALS

Shamans have many methods and spiritual allies at their disposal for doing this sacred work. One of the main helpers is the Power Animal. Power animals are spirit beings in animal form that live in the lower world. The Lower World is a place of immense natural beauty with mountains, valleys, rivers, prairies and clean air. It is a landscape untouched by humans where the animals live in an undisturbed environment.

Power animals are only beneficial. They dearly want to connect with us and help us. Primarily they assist us with practical life problems and health matters. They come to help us heal, and give us their power and strength. Building an intimate relationship with your power animal enables you to become strong, healthy, confident and feel safe.

Forging a strong connection with them can also boost our immune system. If you don't have your power animal, then traditionally it is seen that you will be weak, more prone to illness and disease, and not centred in your power. You can feel an increase in your life force and vitality when the animal is with you; it's physically tangible. One of my teachers, a Native American shaman, said that we have been that animal in a past life, that's how close a link we have to them.

Often people will resemble their animal, for example in their behavioural characteristics: the way they walk, talk, turn their head, use their eyes, what they like to eat, etc. There can also be a strong physical resemblance. In one of my workshops a man kept encountering a seagull. He was very resistant to the bird as he wanted something much more grand. Everyone else could see that this was his animal as he so clearly looked like a gull. When I eventually said that the other name for seagull was "storm rider", he was finally able to accept his medicine!

Once you have found your animal, it is extremely helpful to begin to study it. The luckiest way is to observe it in nature, but you can also research it online, in books, and watch programmes about it. All this information will tell you a lot about your personality and who you are in essence.

It's also important to maintain a strong link with the animal. You can do this by wearing a pouch around your neck with something in it that connects you to the animal, for instance a stone with an image drawn on it. Dancing the spirit of the animal, allowing it to come into your body as you dance, is a great way to build up a powerful relationship. They love to be allowed to express themselves in a physical body.

Another traditional way of staying in tune is to have an altar in your home where you can put a carved figure of the animal. Many people also give food offerings through the fire to their guardian animal. In the shamanic way, we always give something back to the spirits who love and care for us so that it becomes a relationship built on mutual respect and giving. One of the fundamental principles of following a shamanic path is that we live in a prayerful way, honouring our spirit helpers and giving back to them the things that they like.

SPIRIT TEACHERS

The other main spirit relationship the shaman cultivates is with a spirit teacher. These beings of love and strength reside in the Upper World, which is a realm of light and high vibration. By providing us with teachings and guidance they enable us to see things from a much higher perspective. They lift our vision and allow us access to information that would normally be hidden to most humans.

The shaman journeys to the Upper World and receives spiritual guidance for his client or community. In Shamanism we become what's known as the "hollow bone"; we let spirit flow through us. In other words we empty our minds and become a clear channel for our spirit helpers and guides to work through. Thus it is not the shaman who is doing the work, but spirit. By bonding with your spirit teacher and visiting the Upper World regularly, you begin to receive some of that very high light energy which over time can raise your consciousness and your energetic vibration. You become capable of containing more and more light, which you can then use in your healing work. However, shamans do not become 'space cadets' as they are also firmly grounded in the lower and middle worlds. They use the entire world tree. Some religions are afraid of the Earth, of nature and the Lower World, but the shaman knows that in the darkness there are a lot of gifts and healing powers.

ALL LIFE IS ONE

From the position of having a strong relationship with your animal and teachers, you come to a place of knowing who you truly are. Once you know who you are, you then can "see" the truth that all life is sacred, and everything that is created is alive and has a soul. This is animism, and has its root in the Greek word anima, which means soul. Native people have always seen this. They relate to the world from their heart, not their head. Shamanic people see trees, plants, birds, rivers, lakes and stones as being their relations, part of their extended family, and so relate to them with respect and love. As a result native people don't usually mistreat the earth or any of her children. Human beings are not seen as being in any way superior to the hawk, deer, swallow or

stone, just as different manifestations of Father Sun, Mother Earth and God or Great Spirit. Shamans see/ know that all life is connected, and that whatever you do, good or bad, will come back to you. Everything works in cycles. That is one of the natural laws of the universe and shamans live by those laws. They have eyes that see the energetic web that connects all that exists, and they know in their heart that everything is interwoven. That's the web of life, the Circle Of Life. From a shamanic perspective we must respect and honour all beings because ultimately we are one.

SEPARATION - A MODERN DISEASE

In the modern world people don't live in harmony and balance with all their relations; these natural laws have been forgotten. Humans have forgotten who they are and have elevated themselves above the rest of creation.

We feel it is our right to exploit and hurt the earth, trees, animals, oceans, lakes and rivers. Thus we have become separate from the Circle Of Life; we have become isolated and live in an illusion of superiority and separation. From a shamanic perspective, this feeling of separation is a major cause of illness and trauma in our world today. Many therapists will testify to that. The results can be drug and alcohol addiction, dysfunction within the family, violence, child abuse and other very destructive behaviours.

At the core of all these problems lie feelings of being isolated and disconnected from our communities, our world and ourselves. We are social creatures and are inherently tribal. Modern Western living causes us huge problems. In his book 'Memories, Dreams, Reflections' the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung recalls visiting the Taos Pueblo in New Mexico. He talked with the Native American chief there, Mountain Lake. The chief told Jung that western people were mad, and when Jung asked why, he replied that they were mad because they think with their minds. Jung then asked how Native Americans think, and the chief responded by putting his hand over his heart. Here lies the fundamental wounding of the human. The heart knows we are all one organism, and desires surrender and union, the head is ruled by the ego that desires control and personal gratification. The shamanic path is the way of the heart.

A SHAMANIC REMEDY FOR TODAY

Shamanism, although an ancient spiritual system of wholeness and balance, is still highly relevant in our modern world. Many people feel lost, isolated and have a sense that a piece of them is missing. From a shamanic viewpoint separation can cause fragmentation of the soul. In other words due to the trauma of isolation part of the soul or essence can actually split off. When the soul leaves it takes with it the worst of the pain, and maybe all, or part of the memory of the trauma. This allows people to function in everyday life, and cope and feel ok. However there is always the sense that something is missing, that they are not complete. Soul loss can later lead to devastating consequences such as depression or chronic illness.

Soul retrieval is a key shamanic healing method. Shamans have the ability to search the world of spirit, find the person's lost soul part and bring it home. By bringing the lost piece back to the client, the shaman is retuning their lost power and restoring them to vitality and wholeness. They can then reconnect with themselves and with the Circle Of Life.

Usually a shaman will also help the client to find their power animal, thus adding more life force. A shaman can also assist a person in finding their true self, their path, and their place in the universe.

AWAKENING IN THE SACRED DREAM

Shamans work for the survival of the people, the hoop of all our relations and Mother Earth. They follow the original teachings on how to be a balanced human being, living in harmony with the universe. This is very different to how we live today. But in these times of change on our planet more and more people are waking up to the fact that the western way isn't working. It's killing our beautiful mother earth and leaving the human feeling disconnected and fragmented. The power animals and spirit teachers can guide us back to the path of wholeness, and show us how to live once more in community, in right relationship with all that surrounds us. By once again connecting to the world tree and opening up to the spirit realms we can begin to heal our hearts and minds. Shamanism teaches us how to remember who we truly are, to wake up to the truth that we are all one. Only then

are we no longer caught in the illusion or lies of *maya*, the distorted dream of life that teaches isolation and separation. Instead we are awakened in the sacred dream of life, connected to all the sacred beings that are our brothers and sisters. Then we can truly walk each step on our path in beauty.