

SACRED

HOYOOP

YOUR PRACTICAL GUIDE TO A SHAMANIC LIFESTYLE

COMING INTO THE SACRED CIRCLE

How to create meaningful ceremony for yourself

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Working with the ancient Spirits of the Trees of the forest

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To Sweat or not to Sweat

The ethics and safety of
the Sweatlodge ceremony

by Anna Gahlin and Annie Spencer



"The Sweat Lodge has many functions. It cleans and heals the body. It heals the mind, bringing clarity. It is a testing place, offering a rite of passage where a participant can show endurance, strength and courage. And finally it is a holy place where Native Americans can renew their connection to the cosmos and God".

'Introduction to The Native American
Sweat Lodge' by Joseph Bruchac

The history of the Sweat Lodge, sauna, steam bath is as old as the history of humankind. Archaeological evidence, old customs and folklore point to the practice of sweating all over the world. Only last year archaeologist Tim Laurie discovered what he believes to be the sites of sixty four 'prehistoric steam baths' in the Yorkshire Dales dating from the Bronze Age, somewhere between 1500 BCE and 1000 BCE.

It is a Lodge of many names and titles: *Purification Lodge, Rainbow Lodge, Stone Lodge, Grandfather Lodge*. In the Americas there are two main types of sweat bath. For the one that is commonly practised with Europeans, stones are heated on a fire outside. When hot, they are carried into the lodge, which is closed; and water is then poured onto the stones. Another method is to make a fire, or heat stones but use no water. This 'direct fire' sweat is found among some of the Inuit in the Arctic and among the Pima in California. In Mexico, the *Temescal* was often a combination of the two methods. The Mayan and Aztec built elaborate stone

structures to house their sweat baths. In Mayan villages to this day most families will build their own stone and adobe sweat hut behind the home.

There has been much repression of these ancient ways and what we recognise as a traditional structure comes from the Lakota, people who in some cases were invited by other native nations to help them reclaim ceremonies that had been all but lost. For a detailed description of a traditional Lakota sweat lodge ceremony see Ed McGaa's book 'Mother Earth Spirituality'.

We need to understand why many Lakota express strong views

about Western use of this ceremony. They have been holding a traditional form while we in the West are trying to make our own form. Perhaps this is an inevitable clash between the traditionalist and the innovator. To add to the problem, we are the descendants

While the steam cleanses every pore of the body, participants have the opportunity to release what they no longer need and make prayers for themselves and others. It is also a place to dream, remembering that all dreams are to be honoured, realised and given life. According to

Grandmother Twylah Nitsch, Seneca Elder: "Ideas come to us from Great Mystery. Dreams are a gift to us from Mother Earth".

Everything was done in ceremony. For example, before a hunt it was customary to sweat in order to dream in the animals' spirit and at the same time to cleanse the body so that the animals would not catch human scent. The sweat might also mark a rite of passage.

Powerful healing has been accomplished through sweat lodge. Even if it were used as a simple cleansing, all the elements involved would be honoured and thanked. Ceremony is an integral part of everyday life for indigenous peoples. Indigeneity (a word coined by the renowned teacher of the Mayan tradition, Martin Prechtel) is reclaimable by us all once we set our intent.

Intent is everything in ceremony. Not only would you consider why you want to participate in a sweat lodge, you should also consider the motivation of the person who is to run the sweat. As Bob Nitsch, a Seneca teacher, points out: "The important thing is to observe the sweat lodge leader and make out their true intent and this may or may not be expressed on the surface. Check out whether your intent matches the intent of the lodge leader."

The next thing to consider is your own physical wellbeing. We thought it might be useful to explore the contra indication list that is put out



of their persecutors. It is therefore important for us to learn and honour the complex history of this ceremony.

So what is a sweat lodge ceremony? Jamie Sams, best known as co-creator of the Medicine cards, says: "The term sweat lodge has been used for a long time and doesn't truly express the purpose of this ceremony. The purpose is to purify the body, mind, and spirit so that a new sense of self may be present on the path. Sweating is one of the things you do in the lodge but is not the reason that you enter the ceremony of the lodge".

by the German medical profession for the use of saunas. After discussion with a doctor we learnt that it could be dangerous to participate in a sweat lodge if you have any kind of heart disease. If you suffer from epilepsy it could bring on a fit. These are two important health considerations. There is a long list of other conditions that might worsen. These include:

- *Emphysema.*
- *Kidney or bladder infection.*
- *Rheumatic fever.*
- *Blocked or hardened arterie.*
- *Eardrum damage.*
- *Thyroid malfunction.*
- *Stomach or intestinal ulcers (these could rupture).*
- *Feeling too cold; not noticing any temperature change; failing to sweat.*
- *Infectious diseases (may spread)*
- *Diabetes: the chemical balance of a diabetic could possibly be disturbed by heavy sweating.*
- *Hypoglycaemia: here the fasting would be the main problem.*

For these conditions and others such as asthma and abnormally high or low blood pressure, the individual concerned needs to make an informed decision for her or himself.

Pregnant women do not knowingly participate in sweat lodge. In this powerful ceremony shared with others we cannot know the effect on the unborn child.

Then we come to the issue of women's monthly periods commonly called *M o o n t i m e*.

Traditionally, the energies of women on their Moon are considered to be too strong for other participants to feel comfortable with: it is believed that they might upset the alchemical balance of the lodge.

We find their energy a valuable asset to the lodge and are unwilling to enforce strict rule around this though we understand and honour the teachings of the Lakota Inipi Ceremony. We leave it up to individuals to decide for themselves.

It is possible that if your period is due around the time that you sweat, you will start bleeding in the lodge. This we view as a valuable giveaway to Mother Earth. Again, it is important to honour the custom of an individual lodge leader.

Having considered the practicalities we turn once more to the central ethos of the Sweat Lodge. Different nations have their own stories to describe this. Here is one story: the shape of the lodge represents the Turtle who, in one of the many Native American creation myths, was the creature who offered her back for the first humans to dwell on when they came down from the Stars. Thus she represents Mother Earth in her nurturing aspect.

While different traditions may give the lodge different forms, as Joseph Bruchac says: "Once the lodge has been covered, no matter what the covering may be, that lodge becomes a living being ... Within the lodge, you are within the body of something alive and powerful and in the darkness within

the ability to respond to a given situation." It is important to exercise self-discipline, and to observe not only our desires but also our intuition. At the same time, having chosen a lodge leader, we should be willing to follow their instructions knowing that they are responsible for the wellbeing of all participants.

It is important for British lodge leaders to have the integrity to decide for ourselves whether or not each one of us has enough experience of ceremony to lead a ceremonial sweat. This is very different from a sweat bath with chanting taken by a group of friends.

We were prompted to write this article by the widow of someone who died on leaving a sweat lodge two years ago. His autopsy stated that the sweat lodge was a direct cause of his death. In writing this, we want to honour the power and danger that is always latent behind a ceremony. Once you call to Spirit there is no going back.

We turn again to Joseph Bruchac for the last word: "Humility and self awareness are more important than bravery or boasting. Within the sweat lodge you are not proving yourself to anyone other than yourself..and what you do is between yourself and the Creator."



FURTHER READING:
The Native American Sweat Lodge: History and Legends. Joseph Bruchac published by The Crossing Press ISBN 0-89594-636-X.
Mother Earth Spirituality. Ed McGaa, Harper and Row ISBN 0-06-250596-3.
The Sacred Path Cards and Book. Jamie Sams, Harper Collins ISBN 0-06-250762-1.

that skin of power, you pray for health and life."

All ceremony is powerful and there is always the element of the unknown. We are calling Spirit and cannot know what Spirit will bring. Ceremonialists are not psychotherapists and are not there to look after the wounded child. Every participant has a responsibility to check out whether this is the appropriate ceremony for her/himself. Jamie Sams: "responsibility means respond-ability:

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PHOTOS:
 Page 18 ~ Top : Anna Gablin removes items from the earth altar outside of a lodge after a ceremony. Bottom : Covered lodge on the morning after the ceremony when the sacred fire has gone out.
 Page 19 & 20: Removing the covering of a lodge showing how it is constructed.