

# SHAMANISM

## SHAMANISM AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Shamanism is our ancient roots wherever we live and whatever sort of culture we have grown up in. It is our spiritual heritage. Look back far enough in time and all of us come from shamanistic cultures.

Long before such historically recent concepts as organised religion, humans sought understanding and knowledge of the wider Universe using a variety of experiential ways and tools which are just as applicable today as ever. These practices are still in use in a surprisingly large number of places in the world and many shamans of indigenous cultures are now teaching Westerners.

The shamanic journey, trance-dance, the vision quest, the purifying ceremony of the sweatlodge, these are ancient but eternally relevant ways to contact the timeless reality that exists parallel to and just out of sight of the world we so mistakenly call the 'real world'. It is here in the everyday that we experience the reflections of who we are, of our actions, our deepest beliefs, our 'dreams', but it is in the non-manifest world of the spirit that the hidden causal interactions take place. Hidden, that is, until we begin to open the doors and 'see'. And that is the ultimate purpose of the path of shamanism. The struggle to make sense of life in the third dimensional space suit we call a body is as important

today as at anytime. One could almost say even more so now that in the 'developed' part of the world we are polluting our home planet and upsetting the balance of nature and our atmosphere as never before. We desperately need a path that can bring us back into contact and communion with the primal elemental forces of life and can show us a way to come back into alignment with the forces that shape and hold our world in balance. This is the way of the shaman, 'one who walks with one foot in the everyday world and one foot in the spirit world'.

The revival in the West of shamanistic ways since the 1960s is reflected in the proliferation of alternative psycho-spiritual books, workshops and courses which has flourished into, in effect, a vast grass-roots university. Although most of these are not shamanism per se, they are nevertheless largely shamanistic in their approach in that they reflect the ways and understandings of the ancient cultures.

This movement towards self-development and spiritual awareness, and potentially a more community

oriented way of living, represents a step forward for those cultures which have been the most predatory towards others and towards the earth in the recent past centuries.

Shamanism, 'good medicine', is like tapping into a vast fund of ancient timeless knowledge which can be practised anywhere under any conditions. It is about helping us humans to heal the effects of past traumas, to live in an inner state of balance and harmony while dealing with the challenges and vicissitudes of life, to develop the best in ourselves no matter what comes our way, and it is about the quality of how we relate to each other and to the earth. All this is as important now as it ever has been or will be.

## SHAMAN

My favourite description of a shaman is someone who walks with one foot in the everyday world and one foot in the spirit world. It sums up so adroitly the union of living with spirit connection but firmly in the ordinary world as an ordinary person. All things, to the shaman, are energy in form - temporary form as everything changes all the time. It is worth remembering that diesel oil was once living beings that died and became fossilised in rock strata.

Shamanism is the oldest psycho-spiritual practise of the people of Planet Earth. It goes back probably 40,000 - 50,000 years, although human history is constantly proving to be longer than previously thought, so who knows, it could be more like 200,000 years. The word shaman comes from the Tungus reindeer herders of the Lake Baikal region of Russia and has been applied to indigenous healing practices from all over.

## 'THE WORLD IS AS YOU DREAM IT'

How we live our everyday life depends on how we 'see', understand, frame, or 'dream' our world internally. In other words, the stories we tell ourselves of how it is, the mythology we hold of ourselves, the vision we have of life, will largely determine the life we experience. As we see the world, so we 'make it up' for ourselves. When we see a beneficent world of loving helpful people, places, happenings, 'spirits', so it is likely to arrange itself for us. When we 'see' a world of enemies and fearsome possibilities aggressing against us, so we influence its manifestation and our experience of it. When we 'see' a world run by a terrifying god-figure with hell and damnation at the end of the road if we do not do and believe as we are told, we tend to manifest a world that supports that view. A culture lives by its mythologies, the stories people tell themselves of how it is and how it works. In the words of Casteneda's don Juan, we are taught to agree to the way the consensus sees reality. From the moment we are born a deep process of hypnosis begins as we are taught - with live or die emotional pressure - how we are to see and feel the world in order to be an accepted member of society. This process is politely called bringing up, education, religion, growing up, maturing etc, and we have to learn to agree with the consensus for our very survival. All of life's goodies are given to those who fit in, who become acculturated, 'normal', and those who dare to see otherwise and do not conform are deemed mentally unstable and put away - 'for their own good', or at best they become society's outsiders and get a very small share of the goodies.

So how do we set about tackling the 'dream' we have imbibed from our family and culture? In Toltec teaching the first step is called 'Erasing Personal History'! This is said with humour because obviously it is not literally possible. What it means is to erase the effects of one's personal history on the present, to heal past trauma. This is both an emotional and a mental issue - to heal the emotional wounds we all pick up along the way, and to heal the mental beliefs and concepts that no longer serve us in our evolution. This in our culture is the realm of psychotherapy, hypnotherapy and all such disciplines, and it is very much a part of the shamanic path. This is the stuff of the RED ROAD, the healing path of the heart and mind.

Along with the Red Road it is necessary to walk the BLUE ROAD, the path of opening up to multi-dimensional reality, to the spirit powers that guide our world, that keep the balance of the Universe, the ultimate justice of all that happens on Planet Earth. Walking the two roads together helps us to evolve and grow. Neither road on its own brings fulfillment as why go through all the pain of the Red Road if not to evolve spiritually and to walk the Blue Road without healing the wounded child within leaves the old traumas festering away.

## THE RED ROAD AND THE BLUE ROAD.

The south-north axis of the Medicine Wheel is the Red Road and is the arena of our emotional-mental everyday selves. The north represents our functioning adult persona and the south is the emotional inner child. At any moment

it is worth looking at who is boss. Health is a nice balance between the two but when the emotional child gets upset and runs over the adult, we can lose balance and all hell can break loose, whereas when the adult dominates and the child doesn't get a look in, our emotions become stultified and frozen and we lose life energy.

Facing South we see the element of water - the oceans, the rivers, the rain - all that flows - and inside ourselves we have water and also blood which carries nutrients around the body. When we face the South of ourselves, we face our emotions and our past. This is the medicine of Little Mouse, the 'close-to' place. Our emotions are formed out of everything that has happened before the moment of 'now'. The first 'enemy' we all have to work with is emotional fear. This means shyness, inhibition, fear of not being acceptable, fear of ridicule, fear of emotional insecurity, fear of rejection, fear of being put-down, laughed at, made to feel small, belittled, derided, made to feel like a dimwit, donkey, ass, goose, dolt, booby, imbecile, nincompoop, oaf, lout, blockhead, bonehead, clodhopper, greenhorn, ignoramus.... etc. I am going on a bit because this is the fear that is stultifying, dispiriting, emotionally crippling and extraordinarily destructive in many lives. It is important to recognise that it only hurts someone because of low self-esteem. A person who truly values themselves will have no problem with this and realise it is a reflection of the other person's issues. Unfortunately low-self-esteem tends to be the norm for Western people.

The 'ally' as taught by the medicine wheel is 'Trust and Innocence'. This

means the ability to trust, to have faith in the Universe, to trust in existence, in Creation, and one's personal right to exist. This means embracing fundamental self-esteem and self love as one's right. To live with trust and innocence is to live as a rightful part of Creation, of the Creator. To hold at the level of one's deepest being that one is integral with Creation, with All-That-Is, and thus is utterly entitled to be, to express, to act in the world, to have a life of one's own, to be free of the internal bondage of other people's beliefs and dogmas, to live one's own choices and take responsibility for one's self.

## EXERCISE.

Stop for a moment and take your consciousness inside. Feel your being as part of all creation, breathe deeply and feel your weight on the chair or floor. Say to yourself 'I AM', and know you are an equal part of existence and that existence is you. You are connected to everything, a part of everything; you are not, have never been and cannot be separate from All-That-Is. Remember that All-That-Is values you as a part of Itself, which is All-That-Is. All-That-Is loves all parts of Its Self, and that includes you. You are a loved and wanted part of Creation.

The NORTH of the wheel is the place of the element of air - the winds - and for us this is the place of mind, of thinking and calculating, rationalising, working out. This is the place of 'knowing'. The mind looks to the future to work out what's next and how to create the kind of future we want - unless our self-esteem and sense of worth is screwed up in which case we are likely to subliminally be working

to create a lousy future because our inner hidden dialogue says is that is what we are worth!

The 'enemy' of the North place is usually called the enemy of 'clarity'. There is a lovely piece in one of Casteneda's works -The Teachings of don Juan, I think, when don Juan talks about the first enemy as fear and the second as clarity - 'the moment when a man thinks he knows and understands is a dangerous moment because that is the moment he closes his mind' - is the gist of what he says. When teaching this wheel I have found misunderstandings creeping in as to the advantages as well as disadvantages of 'clarity', so I have chosen to rename it 'BULLSHIT' so there is no question or doubt about the meaning whatsoever! The 'ally' is knowledge and with it, the quality of wisdom. Knowledge is that which one truly knows. Not from belief, conjecture, conditioning, training, wishful thinking, brainwashing, not from anywhere outside oneself, but from inside. And tested by repeated experience. Our life is only experience anyway - that is all we have - all our life happens inside. Not outside - only the effects happen outside for us to see and respond to. Life itself is an internal experience, and knowledge can only be found inside. Other people's knowledge can be found in books but it is not your knowledge until you actually know it and experience it as living truth for yourself.

## MINI-EXERCISE.

Take a piece of paper and draw a line vertically down the middle. On the left side write down ideas you used to hold as THE TRUTH but no longer do. eg: God, politics, your worth as a person,

what life is really about, what kind of movies are worth watching. On the right side write down what is true for you now in the same areas.

## How have you changed?

### THE BLUE ROAD.

The West of the wheel is the place of the element of Earth and the physical Earth Herself. We place our body here and as the physical only knows the moment of now, so the time of the West is the Present. It is the 'Looks Within' place and our personal work is the struggle between life and death, The ultimate death is called by the medicine wheel teachers - 'death-death' - but there are many 'mini-deaths' to be died along the way. Every pattern we change is a death of something old which makes way for something new. Every dispiriting pattern we fail to change is a nail in our energy body which reduces and deadens our available life force. From an everyday point of view, the negative pattern of the West, the tendency towards 'death' which we struggle with, is most easily labelled 'inertia', and the ally we have at our disposal to assist us in this great work is 'introspection' - the willingness to look deep within ourselves, warts and all.

### MINI-EXERCISE.

Take a moment and settle down quietly. Ask yourself how much of myself am I living and how much is remaining dead or unexpressed? On a scale of one to ten, very quickly let your innerself illuminate a number.

Take a piece of paper and write down what you feel brings you most alive and into feelings of loving life.

Then write down what brings you the opposite feelings, into inertia and deadness. Compare.

The East of the wheel is the place of the element of fire, of the non-physical energy of spirit, of timelessness, of imagination and inspiration. It is the 'Sees Far' place, where we can take an overview of things. The quality of the East is power but the issue of whether that power becomes an ally or enemy is a monumentally important one. Well-used power brings with it a feeling of illumination and a sense of lightness and lovingness with others. Power used to dominate and control leaves no loving space and only heaviness. The inner aspect of ourselves is the magical child, that part we connect with in play and fun, in dance and celebration. This part has no future and no past, no bonds and no allegiances for gain, it is ourselves when free and fully in-spirit. The magical child can only use power for the good of all, and wouldn't know a manipulation if it fell over one!

### MINI-EXERCISE.

Feel the magical child inside you. An easy way is to remember moments from childhood when you played just for the fun of playing, and there were no agendas, no one to impress, no one to please, just games to be played and fun to be enjoyed. Call such a moment to mind and seek inside yourself for the feelings, the enthusiasm, the love of life. Open your eyes and bring these feelings back with you and hold them inside with you for as long as possible.

Personal growth works most effectively when one works with both the Red and the Blue Roads, psychotherapy

and spirituality at the same time, to call in guidance and help from the 'spirit worlds' to hold us while we go through the often painful and always humbling task of healing our personal history, past wounding and traumas, misalignments, inherited personal and cultural phoney belief systems. Earth life is like living in a magical mirror system in which our inner is constantly reflected in the outer. The Universe's feedback system - karma - is constantly at work reflecting to us what we need to work on. In that way the Blue Road gives us the material for walking the Red Road. Out of multi-dimensional reality comes the 'food' for attention in everyday reality. Life's challenges to our misalignments and faulty belief systems are constantly put before us and how we deal with them is reflected back. Everyday life is full of 'petty tyrants' - awkward people with other agendas (I'm sure you've noticed!). It's easy to think of them as enemies and nuisances but if you consider them friends whose job it is to stir you to grow and change, it can make them (and life) a whole lot easier to deal with. They are Universal Agents(!) whose task it is to push you in the direction of self awareness and knowledge. And, of course, you occupy that role for others too. There have always been therapists, it is only new as a profession. In a tribal village, multi-generational setting they were auntie, granny, uncle, wise family friend, elder and shaman. Most currently used methods are directly inherited from shamans of old and some have been adapted most successfully to assist with today's unique wounds and traumas. I feel the gift of a shamanistic approach gives us in keeping the spiritual ever in mind when endeavouring to assist in the

healing the emotional-mental schisms, reminding us that we and our 'stuff' are only part of a much bigger picture and that an individual's life contract - life aims (which may not be at all obvious at a local level) are very relevant to the whole picture. We come to Earth to learn about life in 3D, to experience challenge and get feedback and thus grow and develop our totality. With challenge, life has purpose. 'Good' and 'evil' and really misnomers because what is considered good by one is evil to another. 'God' is always on both sides in a war! All evil things done on the planet are done for someone's concept of good, however misguided. Far better is to think of it as good which benefits all and 'good' as seen from the perspective of one little damaged ego. Personal growth is to see the bigger (and bigger still) picture and to learn to act for the greater good as part of All-That-Is.

#### Further reading:

As above plus - Storm, Hyemeyohsts. Lightningbolt. Harper Collins 1997. Doore, Gary. The Shaman's Path. Shambhala 1991. Walsh, Roger N. The Spirit of Shamanism. Jeremy Tarcher. 1990.

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