



THE FOUNDATION FOR SHAMANIC STUDIES

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CORE SHAMANISM AND DAILY LIFE¹

Susan Mokolke, J.D.

I am often asked if there is an article that explains what core shamanism is and how it can be used in everyday life. This article is intended as an introduction to the subject, with references to sources on the Foundation's website and to the work of Michael Harner, who originated, researched, and developed it. His classic book, The Way of the Shaman, remains the premiere text on contemporary shamanism.

—Susan Mokolke

Shamanism might be considered the world's oldest spiritual practice. Over tens of thousands of years our ancient ancestors used shamanic methods to contact sources of wisdom and power – not just to benefit themselves, but to bring healing, knowledge, and practical wisdom to their peoples. The word “shaman” (pronounced SHAH-mahn) comes from a Siberian tribal word, and it indicates a person who is able, in an altered state, to leave his or her body and travel to other realms to interact with spirits.

For Westerners, our shamanic traditions and practices were lost centuries ago due to religious and political oppression. In much of contemporary society, those who can personally interact with the spiritual dimensions are often considered naïve at best, or delusional in worst cases. In terms of indigenous shamanic practices, they survived only in remote jungles in places like the Amazon of South America or in the harsh climate of the

Siberian subarctic – and many of these are disappearing after contact with outsiders.

Fortunately for shamanism in the West, beginning in the fifties, anthropologist Michael Harner took a different path,² which led to his pioneering work originating, researching, and developing “core shamanism.”

As Michael Harner writes in his latest book, *Cave and Cosmos*,³ core shamanism consists of the universal, near-universal, and common features of shamanism, together with journeys to other worlds, a distinguishing feature of shamanism. Training in core shamanism is particularly suited to contemporary society and includes teaching students to alter their consciousness through classic shamanic non-drug techniques such as repetitive drumming, so that they can discover their own hidden spiritual resources, transform their lives, and learn how to help others.⁴

In 1979, Michael and Sandra Harner established the Center for Shamanic Studies, the precursor to the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, which took over the function of the Center in the mid-eighties.⁵ The Foundation's mission is to preserve, study, and teach shamanic knowledge for the welfare of the Planet and its inhabitants. Since then, many thousands of students have been through Foundation weekend and residential trainings and are practicing the methods for personal use and for healing⁶ in their communities. I received my shamanic

training through the Foundation and it has transformed my life.

Training in core shamanism involves learning the “shamanic journey,”⁷ where one travels to hidden worlds in an altered state of consciousness, the “shamanic state of consciousness,”⁸ to make direct contact with helping spirits.⁹ Using rhythmic percussion sound, typically drums and rattles, most students are able to access these hidden worlds in a surprisingly short time. Then, things really start to happen.

The Foundation for Shamanic Studies is dedicated to the preservation, study, and teaching of shamanic knowledge for the welfare of the Planet and its inhabitants. In addition to offering training in core shamanism, the Foundation works to preserve the knowledge of indigenous shamans through its Living Treasures of Shamanism program and has provided scholarships to members of over 60 Native American tribes. The Foundation also maintains a great archive of shamanic knowledge found nowhere else in the world, the Shamanic Knowledge Conservatory, containing the shamanic journeys of thousands of contemporary Westerners, as well files on indigenous shamanism in over 400 cultures, books, articles, and audio and video tapes.

www.shamanism.org

Humans have been using shamanic methods for healing and problem-solving for many thousands of years across all inhabited continents and in a wide variety of cultures—not because these people were naive or ignorant, but because they worked. It has been our experience in the Foundation that the shamanic state of consciousness is part of our biological¹⁰ and spiritual design; thus, the widespread ability of people to successfully journey and access these hidden worlds after even one weekend.¹¹

While the basic methods of shamanism are relatively easy to learn, the effective practice of shamanism requires discipline and practice. The shamanic healer must be a “master of both realities,” able to alter consciousness, travel to the spirits, and return fully to ordinary consciousness—at will and as needed.¹²

Though training does provide structure and clarification about methodology, no amount of training alone makes a person a shaman. True shamanic power comes from the helping spirits. If you make strong connections with these spirits, then they may give you the power to help others and to ease pain and suffering.

“How do you know if somebody’s a shaman?” Dr. Harner asks. “It’s simple. Do they journey to other worlds? And do they perform miracles?”¹³ When a person starts to perform miracles of healing, consistently getting good results, then that person might be named a shaman by his or her community.

The Foundation’s training programs build upon one another, taking a student through progressively advanced shamanic healing methods and practices. The teachings emphasize that the power of shamanic healing is to be used ethically and for healing

purposes.¹⁴ In the most advanced training, the Three Year Program,¹⁵ students undergo a series of advanced initiations in shamanism, where they learn how to connect more deeply with their own helping spirits, thus gaining power and knowledge. Most are forever changed by the partnerships with the spirits that are formed through these trainings.



*Healing Eagle Drum by Joy Markgraf.
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What might a person who practices shamanism do on a daily basis? First, many become shamanic healers and work to heal individuals suffering from physical, emotional, and spiritual illnesses.¹⁶ Others use shamanic methods to heal in their communities, bringing the power of the helping spirits to issues such as violence, conflict, or environmental pollution. Some use shamanic methods in a more personal way, to help improve their own lives, to be more at peace, resolve troubled relationships or past suffering—to bring freedom, creativity, and joy into their lives.

The beauty of core shamanism is that it can be done almost anywhere, whenever it is needed. No special settings or tools are required, nor are particular rituals necessary.¹⁷ The connection with the helping spirits is what is important—and anyone who has experienced this for herself knows that it is the partnership with the benevolent spirits, entered into with the intent to heal, which is the thing that is sacred. When the spirits are asked for assistance by a person who is motivated purely out of a desire to help ease pain and suffering—a sacred intention—amazing power and healing flows.

Michael Harner has often said that there are no gurus in shamanism and he has steadfastly refused that role. It is the helping spirits who are the real teachers.¹⁸ The shamanic way teaches us that each of us can have our own autonomous relationship with the helping spirits – loving, wise, and transcendent spiritual beings. We can find answers for ourselves, not as a matter of belief, but through direct experience. We have been there, we have met these beings, they have helped us and others when we have asked it of them.

We do not believe or imagine this, we know because we have experienced it. Carl Jung once said, when asked if he believed in God: “I know. I don’t need to believe. I know.”¹⁹ The same might be said about the helping spirits by those on the shamanic path.

Visiting the spirit realms and being in direct relationship with enlightened beings changes you. Your perspective broadens and deepens. Your heart opens and you become more compassionate, and are drawn in your own way to help ease suffering. You begin to perceive the cycle of life and death differently—fear and uncertainty are replaced by

understanding of the bigger picture and a sense of your place in it.

The realms of the compassionate spirits are outside of time, beyond the opposites, whole. When you are there working with the spirits, you too partake of this wholeness —of the ecstatic union described by the mystics. You know, as shamans throughout the ages have known, that everything is one, whole, complete, alive—and you forever carry this knowing in your heart. ☸

NOTES

1. This article would not be possible without the work of Dr. Michael Harner, who pioneered the return of shamanism and the shamanic journey to the West. He originated, researched, and developed core shamanism after decades of experiential work. Without his curiosity, intellect, and genius for implementation, I might never have known the power and beauty of the realms of the spirits, and I am deeply grateful for his wisdom, wit, and teaching.

2. About Michael Harner:
<http://www.shamanism.org/fssinfo/harnerbio.html>.

3. Harner, Michael, *Cave and Cosmos: Shamanic Encounters with Another Reality*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2013.

4. About core shamanism and the Foundation for Shamanic Studies workshops and training programs:
<http://www.shamanism.org/workshops/index.php>.

5. The Foundation for Shamanic Studies (www.shamanism.org) is a non-profit public charitable and educational organization. *The Foundation is dedicated to the preservation, study, and teaching of shamanic knowledge for the welfare of the Planet and its inhabitants*. In addition to offering training in core

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- ♦ A woman calls upon her personal helping spirit before surgery and feels calm and relaxed beforehand, and recovers quickly afterwards, with minimal pain.
- ♦ A shamanic practitioner uses her spiritual connections to locate a lost dog.
- ♦ A person undertakes a series of shamanic journeys to discover and clarify her life's work.
- ♦ Before going into a difficult meeting, a woman who is very sensitive to conflict connects with her helping spirit, asking for serenity, objectivity, and wisdom; she is able to respond more clearly during the meeting without being defensive, and the level of tension among the participants decreases.
- ♦ A man is able to obtain emotional closure with his deceased mother, after meeting her in the shamanic realm.
- ♦ By using advice received in a shamanic journey, a man is able to resolve a business conflict that had been going on for several months.
- ♦ An original song, with music and lyrics, is sought and received in a shamanic journey.

shamanism, the Foundation works to preserve the knowledge of indigenous shamans through its Living Treasures of Shamanism program and has provided scholarships to members of over 60 Native American tribes. The Foundation also maintains a great archive of shamanic knowledge found nowhere else in the world, the Shamanic Knowledge Conservatory, containing the shamanic journeys of thousands of contemporary Westerners, as well files on indigenous shamanism in over 400 cultures, books, articles, and audio and video tapes. More about the Foundation's work:
<http://www.shamanism.org/fssinfo/fsswork.html>

6. Harner, M. & Harner S., "Core Practices in the Shamanic Treatment of Illness." *Shamanism*, Vol. 13, Nos. 1 & 2 (Fall/Winter 2000): 19 – 30. A recent version, "Core Shamanism and Healing: Information for Physicians

and Health Professionals," can be found in Appendix D of Michael Harner's *Cave and Cosmos: Shamanic Encounters with Another Reality*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2013.

7. The shamanic journey is undertaken at will by a person in an altered state of consciousness "to contact and utilize an ordinarily hidden reality in order to acquire knowledge, power, and to help other persons." Harner, Michael, *The Way of the Shaman*. New York: HarperCollins, 1980, 1990, Third Edition, p. 20.

8. The "shamanic state of consciousness" or SSC, which the shaman must enter to access the realms of the spirits, is distinguished from the "ordinary state of consciousness" of everyday reality. Harner, Michael, *The Way of the Shaman*. New York: HarperCollins, 1980, 1990, Third Edition, p. xix.

9. Shamans everywhere work with spirits, beings that appear in human, animal, plant, and other forms. These spirits are found in the hidden realities accessed when in the shamanic state of consciousness. They are known by many names, such as guardian spirits, power animals, tutelary spirits, helping spirits, and totems. They are a fundamental source of a shaman's power and knowledge.

Harner, Michael, *The Way of the Shaman*. New York: HarperCollins, 1980, 1990, Third Edition, p. 42.

10. It has been found that listening to a rhythmic beat, such as a drumbeat, at 3 – 7 beats per second (4 - 8 Hertz) for 13 - 15 minutes, causes the human brain to “entrain” or synchronize with the beat in the theta EEG brain wave range. In the theta range, people experience such things as loss of sense of time, ceremonial or ritualistic content, vivid imagery of people, animals and landscapes, sounds, sensations of flying, altered states of consciousness, and out of body experiences. Maxfield, M., “The Journey of the Drum.” *ReVision* 16, no. 4, (Spring 1994): 157-163.

11. The Basic Workshop, *The Way of the Shaman*, Shamanic Journeying, Power, and Healing: http://www.shamanism.org/workshops/calendar.php?Wkshp_ID=10.

12. Harner, Michael, *The Way of the Shaman*. New York: HarperCollins, 1980, 1990, Third Edition, pp. 44-46.

13. “Shamanic Healing: We Are Not Alone,” An Interview of Michael Harner by Bonnie Horrigan. Published in ©*Shamanism*, Spring/Summer 1997, Vol. 10, No. 1. Read online: <http://www.shamanism.org/articles/article01.html>.

14. Mokolke, S., “Ethical Considerations in Shamanic Healing.” *Shamanism Annual*, Vol. 21

(December 2008): 34 – 36. Online: <http://www.shamanism.org/articles/ethics.html>.

15. The *Three-Year Program of Advanced Initiations in Shamanism and Shamanic Healing*: http://www.shamanism.org/workshops/calendar.php?Wkshp_ID=22.

16. “Shamanic Healing: We Are Not Alone,” An Interview of Michael Harner by Bonnie Horrigan. Published in ©*Shamanism*, Spring/Summer 1997, Vol. 10, No. 1. Read online: <http://www.shamanism.org/articles/article01.html>.

17. Those who master the discipline of accessing the SSC, coming and going at will, can very quickly connect with their helping spirits. This is particularly useful in contemporary society, where one may be called upon suddenly to offer healing or help in an urban environment or in less than ideal conditions. Most contemporary shamanic practitioners develop their own ways of setting a sacred space and calling in the spirits, ways that they have been taught by the spirits themselves.

18. Often stated by Michael Harner in the Basic Workshop, *The Way of the Shaman*®. See also “Science, Spirits, and Core Shamanism,” published in ©*Shamanism*, Spring/Summer 1999, Vol. 12, No. 1. Read online: <http://www.shamanism.org/articles/article10.html>.

19. Interview of Carl Jung with the BBC's John Freeman (1959). See the interview on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQ8aV8YndwQ> (quote can be heard about 5:15 minutes in).

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