CORE SHAMANISM AND DAILY LIFE

Susan Mokelke, 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 Mokelke

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, which led to his pioneering work originating, researching, and developing “core shamanism.”

As Michael Harner writes in his latest book, Cave and Cosmos, 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.

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. The Foundation’s mission is to preserve, study, and teach 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 biological and spiritual design; thus, the widespread ability of people to successfully journey and access these hidden worlds after even one weekend.

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.

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?” 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. In the most advanced training, the Three Year Program, 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.

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. 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. 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.” 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.


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 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


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.


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.


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.


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).

Susan Mokelke, J.D., is a shamanic practitioner who received her training from the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. She is the President of the FSS and a member of the faculty. Susan has written several articles on shamanism, including “Effective Core Shamanic Drumming Circles” and “Ethical Considerations in Shamanic Healing.” Susan can be reached at info@shamanism.org.

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