

Walking with the Sacred Pipe

Nicholas Breeze Wood



Above: the authors pipe laid out on his pipe alter cloth. There is a bowl made of red pipestone, a stem decorated with beadwork and silk ribbons and streamers, a rawhide rattle which is used for accompanying pipe songs, a beaded pipe tamper to loosen the smoking mix in the pipe bowl, a sea shell containing the smoking mix and a small candle alight in a metal bowl

The Native American Plains People's sacred pipe is a sacred tradition that needs to be approached with great respect.

It is a very sensitive subject to many Native American people, many of whom who do not think it should be available to non natives. In part this is because many native people were badly mistreated and killed for being pipe carriers in the 20th century, as the pipe - as well as many other sacred traditions were selected to be systematically destroyed by the US government. Because of this, there is some (justifiable) resentment by a lot of Native Americans against 'New Agers,' who they seen as 'stealing' their ancient traditions.

In publishing this article, I want to stress the importance of great respect, not only to the Sacred Powers (spirits), but also to Native American people themselves.

A pipe, traditionally, is not bought. It is made by someone for their own use, or given as a gift. One does not just go out and buy a pipe and call yourself a pipe carrier. Being a pipe carrier is a thing you grow into slowly, and you might even seek to run

away from the role at times. If a sacred pipe comes to you, it needs to be made into the pipe you personally work with, so do some craftwork to decorate the stem, to put a little of you into it. The bowl can, for instance, be rubbed with some of your sweat to act as a polish. These sorts of things help you connect with the pipe on a physical level.

A sacred pipe never belongs to you - it belongs to Spirit, and so you need to remember that, and offer it to Spirit, asking that you can walk with the pipe and do good things with it, for the benefit of all your relations.

A sacred pipe needs to be blessed and awakened before it is first used. This is a whole ceremony in itself, one which often involves another pipe carrier blowing the smoke from their pipe onto your pipe.

There are, however, other ways that this blessing can take place, and I would not rule out working with a sacred pipe by yourself before it is blessed in the traditional manner. But for it to be a sacred pipe, used in a circle for others to

smoke it in prayer, it really ought to be properly blessed.

A pipe ceremony must never be charged for, and part of the responsibility of working with a sacred pipe is that if someone asks you to do a pipe for them, you are obligated to do so.

Those asking for, or attending a pipe ceremony are also obligated to give a gift in return - even if it only a little tobacco or a bar of chocolate.

The herbs smoked in a pipe are never (with the exception of pure tobacco) mind altering. Many pipe carriers do not even use tobacco, as there are many traditional (non mind-altering) herbs which can be used instead.

There is a great deal of beautiful ceremonial symbolism in a pipe ceremony. Not only is there a sacred marriage between the female (bowl) and the male (stem), but the four elements (air - the smoke and human breath; earth - the pipe bowl; fire - the fire in the bowl; and water - the wooden stem and the herbs) are included as are four kingdoms (animal people, plant people, stone people and human people).

THE SACRED PIPE CEREMONY

When a pipe is filled, the Powers of the Four Winds are called upon, as is Grandfather Spirit above, and Grandmother Earth below, as well as other powers, such as the Creator of all, the ancestors, and specific spirit powers the pipe carrier is working with.

There are many traditional forms that a pipe ceremony can take, and the way the pipe is reverentially filled varies across tribal and personal traditions.

Below is laid out one simple pipe ceremony which has its origins with the writer Evelyn Eaton who learnt it from traditional Shoshone teachers, with whom she lived.

Begin by unwrapping the sacred pipe and placing it on a cloth on the floor (the pipe never touches the floor itself, except for when it is on a specially built earth altar outside).

Smudge the pipe bowl, stem, smoking mix and any other items you are using in the ceremony - including yourself.

Hold the bowl in your left hand and the stem in your right and lift them above your head, asking permission of the Powers to join and smoke the pipe.

If you get a sense that you should not join the pipe, thank the powers, and put the pipe away.

If you get a sense that it is alright for you to join and smoke the pipe, the stem can be gently pushed into the bowl in celebration of all of the people, and the ceremony has begun.

Now bring the pipe down to a lower level and take a pinch of the smoking mix.

Hold it above your head and thank the Sky

Powers - The Creator for your life, and for this day, and then ask the Sky Powers to bless this ceremony and help with the prayers.

Now take the same pinch of smoking mix, and lower it to the ground. Here you thank Grandmother Earth for everything you have - as everything you have comes from her, including your own body. Ask Grandmother Earth to help you with your prayers.

Now turn towards the South and thank the South Powers, asking them to help with the prayers.

Turn now to the West, North and East in turn, and thank them and ask those Powers to help you with the prayers you will make.

Now gently push the pinch of smoking mix into the bowl and take another pinch into your fingers.

This now puts you into the sacred centre point of all Creation, with

the above and below and four directions radiating out from you. When we perform any sacred ceremony we are always in the sacred centre of Creation.

With a second pinch of smoking mixture, repeat all you did with the first pinch, but before you put the pinch into the bowl, pause a moment and sense what other spirits might wish to be invited to help with your prayers, or make their own prayers.

These may be the ancestors, or spirits of the land where you are doing the ceremony, or perhaps a specific animal or plant spirit.

It is important to remember to only ask for help with the ceremony from those spirit powers who 'love you,' as not all spirits do so.

Once you have asked this extra power to help with the

*Lay yuah chey wa ceyelo
Canupa kei
Lay yuah chey wa ceyelo
Oyate ke Zani pikta
Oye wayelo*

*With this sacred pipe I go to the
centre of the world to pray.
I pray for the whole of creation,
that all creatures shall live
in good health, and that the
whole of creation be blessed*

Lakota pipe song

ceremony, push the pinch into the bowl.

Now repeat this whole process with two more pinches of smoking mix, ending each one with asking another spirit power who loves you to help with the ceremony.

Once you have done this the pipe is 'charged' or loaded and can be lit. Traditionally matches or lighters are not used to light the pipe, rather a glowing coal from a fire is used (more often than not in Plains culture a fire of dried sacred buffalo dung), but nowadays matches or a lighter are used as it's easier.

To avoid struggling to hold the pipe and lighting it, I have a small candle alight on the cloth before me, on which all the sacred items used in the ceremony are kept, and I simply light matches from that candle.

Hold the pipe stem to your mouth and light the mix in the bowl. You are not lighting it for you to smoke, as the Great Mystery has the first smoke of the pipe, and so, once it is lit you turn, the pipe is turned so that the stem's mouth piece end is pointing towards the sky.

Here you sit for a moment making prayers, or offering the pipe for the Mystery that is everything to smoke first. This is often a point of profound specialness as you sit before the incredible Mystery that is life and the Universe and realise you - as a mere two-legged with a short life - know absolutely nothing.



**Left: a very
finely beaded
pipe bag
Cheyenne
Nation
C1890**

Once this moment has passed, the pipe is turned round so that the stem is by your mouth, ready for you to smoke it.

The turning and holding of the pipe is done in a specific way. The stone bowl always remains in the left hand, and the stem always remains in the right had. Furthermore, if the pipe is rotated - symbolising you are offering the pipe to be smoked by the whole circle of creation - the stem is always rotated sun wise (clockwise).

The pipe may well have gone out by this time, so if it has, relight it again, and once lit, blow a little smoke up towards the sky, then more down towards the ground, then to each of the Powers of the Directions, starting at the South and moving sunwise to the East.

I say 'blow a little smoke' because the some in a sacred pipe never belongs to you, it belongs to Spirit; so you don't draw the smoke down into your lungs. Instead, you draw on it with your mouth, sucking the smoke only into your mouth and this causes the pipe to puff a little smoke out from its bowl.

Now is the time for you to make your prayers. Generally it is good to pray out loud, so that your prayers do not rattle around inside your head - but it's also OK to pray

quietly. When I do a pipe ceremony with people I normally acknowledge that by asking the spirits to hear all of the prayers said - those outloud and those made from the heart.

When you have made your prayers, sit still with the pipe for a little while to listen to the answer.

If you are smoking with others, the pipe is always passed sunwise to the person on your left - and always you hold the bowl in the left hand and the stem in the right.

People in the circle make their prayers, and smoke the pipe if they wish (not all in a pipe ceremony smoke the pipe, but each will hold it and say their prayers with it).

Once the pipe comes back to the pipe carrier, they need to smoke all the smoking mix which is in the bowl. Once this is done the pipe can be separated and the ceremony will be over.

To seperate a sacred pipe, you hold it above your head and thank the Creator, Grandmother Earth, each of the Powers of the Four Winds, and in the case of this ceremony where three more spirits are asked to help, each of these three special powers you called to.

Once you have done this, you need to acknowledge that you have done the ceremony for all beings in

Creation, by saying the phrase; "For all my relations", and separate the bowl and the stem. The pipe ceremony is now over.

I have been taught a good way for a circle to finish the ceremony is for each person in the circle to say 'for all my realtions' and the rest of the circle to acknowledge than by saying something like 'aho' which is a Lakote word of agreement. The phrase, 'for all my realtions' is passed sunwise, all around the ceremony, until the last person - the person to the right of the pipe carrier - has said it, and then the ceremony is over.

The last thing is to clean the stem and bowl, and remove the ashes, keeping them safe.

The pipe is then put away, and the ashes, with a little fresh smoking mix, are then taken outside and placed on the earth as a thankyou for allowing the ceremony to have taken place.

Then you eat, even if it only a token biscuit and a cup of tea.

Nicholas Breeze Wood is the editor of Sacred Hoop Magazine. He has carried a sacred pipe since 1987, having been taught the ceremony by Lakota and other Native American teachers.
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Right: Buffalo skull altar with a sacred pipe, within its bag, resting upon it