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The Shamanism Magazine

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We hope you enjoy reading the article. Nicholas Breeze Wood (editor)

THE HOOP OF CREATION

NICHOLAS BREEZE WOOD explores the ancient traditions of 'the directions' that Native people worldwide have used to help them understand reality.

In recent years many of us have become increasing familiar with the term 'medicine', when used in the context of Native American culture. The word has no easy translation. We meet the terms 'medicine-people', 'good and bad-medicine', 'medicine-wheel', 'medicine-objects', 'medicine-names' and so forth. Medicine in these ways can perhaps best be thought of as a special, intangible quality of spiritual power - an understanding of reality which is very much a part of Native American perception.

The body of knowledge which holds this understanding of spiritual power has come to be known in recent years as 'medicine wheel' teachings, and there are many different traditions of these teachings, taught by many different teachers and tribal or neo-tribal societies.

When we think of the medicine wheel, it is perhaps more accurate to call it a medicine *hoop*, which is how the native people tended to think of it themselves. The original inhabitants of America did not develop the wheel as a tool of everyday life. Medicine hoops are often depicted as an equidistant cross set within a circle. The circle represents the physical circle of the Earth, and also the wide metaphorical circle of all Creation.

Everything in Creation can be envisaged as existing on this hoop and all parts are joined to all other parts around it, all things are thus connected.

CROSS OF THE FOUR WINDS

Imagine for a moment if you will, that you are standing in an open place, perhaps rolling grassland like the Great Plains of North America, or any high place.

You will see the circle of the horizon all around and you yourself stand at the very centre of it. There is a direction in front of you, behind you, to the left and right of you, and above and below you. This is true for all



things, at all times. We are always, paradoxically, both at the centre of the universe and also a part of the hoop of Creation.

As you stand there, in your open place, you can observe some qualities of the natural world in each of these six directions. From the East the sun, at the start of each day, brings golden yellow light, rebirth and renewal. In the South is the place where the sun travels in its journey each day. This journey helps all things to grow, it gives us the green of the plants and the red life blood of animals and people.

In the West is the place where the sun goes down, the place of endings and the blackness of night. To the North is the home of winter, the white of frost and snow. Above you is the blue of the sky, the home

of the stars and Grandfather Sun, whose light gives the spark of life, and below your feet is the green of Grandmother Earth, from whom all life is born.

These six directions represent the different aspects of the Creator, a being so powerful and unfathomable that one of the names given to it by Native American peoples is The Great Mystery.

The structure of the physical universe is reflected in the six directions. From them, one can deduce certain 'medicine qualities' and apply them to other aspects of life.

For instance, the south side of an object, such as a big rock, is the place where the sun's light shines most during the day (in the northern hemisphere of the earth). Here most plants grow better than on the north side which is shaded. From this observation, the south place can be thought of as the place of green life.

Plants need water in order to grow, so the south can also be thought of as the place of water as well. As human beings we have a place within us of water, our 'emotional' body, (whether 'flowing' or 'bottled-up') thus the south becomes the place of emotions as well.

Over many thousands of years of observing the world, native people have come to associate other medicine qualities with the south, as well as with the other directions. However, these qualities are to some degree cultural and depended on the body of knowledge developed within each tribal group. In other words, each group who used a medicine hoop of some sort as a means of understanding the world around them, developed different associations for the compass points according to how they saw the world.

This is not only true for the native people of America, but also true for other peoples such as the Tibetans.

EUROPEAN 'WHEEL' SYSTEMS

The system of the modern Western Tradition owes much to the ancient Hebraic system known as the *Quabalah*, although there are many correspondences from Greek, Roman and other sources.

Much of the modern system owes its present form to the secret magical orders of the earlier part of this century. Quabalah teachings were passed via various routes from these orders to other groups. One of these routes was through the writings and connections of Aleister Crowley, the founder of The Golden Dawn, to the early proponents of the modern witchcraft revival which became known as 'Wicca'.

As with all systems, there are some correspondences which are controversial, depending which school you belong to. For example, most modern pagans and witches ascribe the magical tool of the sword to air, and the wand to fire. Others however, work with these the other way round, i.e. the sword with fire and the wand with air. Of course, both could be - and probably are - correct.

As well as these older structures of knowledge, modern psychological interpretations have also overlaid these teachings, especially from the Jungian school of thought.

RICH VARIETY

There are, as we have seen, many traditions which could perhaps be termed 'medicine wheel' with variations on the placement of qualities and colours found all over the world; but the basic *ingredients* remain the same to all of them. This variation does not alter the validity and power of a six-fold model of reality, but it does underline the need to become familiar with a single tradition initially, to help you to avoid any possible confusion.

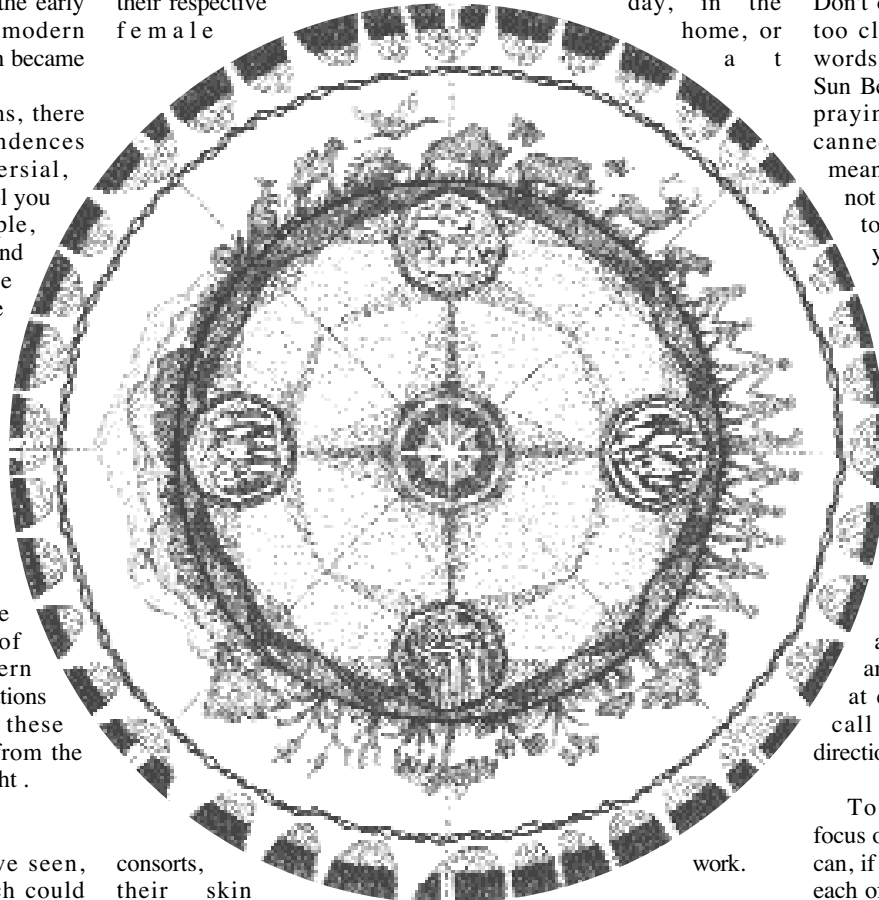
The Native American medicine hoop described on these pages was taught by Hyemyohsts Storm who ascribes it to the ancient Mayan people. In Native American inspired

shamanic practice, it is one of the most commonly used in the UK at this time.

SPIRITS OF THE DIRECTIONS

Within many traditions, the six directions are not just points of reference to help us understand the physical world, they are spirit powers with distinct identities.

Tibetan Buddhist traditions speak of there being guardians in the four directions. These guardians protect the Buddhist teachings. Four different Buddhas are also attributed to the directions. We find them sitting together with their respective
f e m a l e



consorts, their skin colour corresponding to the Tibetan system (see diagram). In Native American traditions, these guardians are seen in a slightly different way. According to the late Lakota holy man Frank Fools Crow, there are special helpers, akin to the archangels of the Christian traditions, to whom we can call and offer prayers of thanks, and from whom we can obtain help.

These 'angels' are part of the Great Mystery, and are addressed in Native American ceremonies such as the sweat lodge, or pipe ceremony.¹

As with any knowledge, real understanding does not

come unless it is put into practice. So here are a few ways you might like to explore and deepen your experience with the six powers.

To bring the aid of the six powers into a situation or space, they can be 'called in'. This is not an invocation of any dubious spirit beings, or forces, but a *welcoming* of the presence of the Great Mystery in all its different aspects. This calling in 'centres' us, as well as helping us to prepare the physical space in a sacred manner.

If you wish, you can call in the directions at the start of a day, in the home, or a t

new way. Speak from your heart, and with a sense of humour; if your tongue trips up, or you lose your thread, be honest and human. It is always preferable to polished rhetoric!

A simple form of words you could use might go something like this:

"O South Powers, this little one (your name) speaks to you. Thank you for your help today, I ask you to help me with the things I wish to do and keep my family and those I love safe and well. For all my relations!"

Don't copy this form of words too closely - find your own words. The medicine teacher Sun Bear used to say to people praying in ceremony - "no canned prayers." By this he meant "come from the heart not the head." It is customary to face each direction as you address it. Some people feel a need to be accurate and carry a compass, but this is not essential and it is also good to try and get a body sense of the compass points by practice. If you wish to be less obvious in your calling in, you can simply make a hand movement, transcribing a circle and a movement to the sky and to the earth; stopping at each point of the six to call to the appropriate direction.

To help further with the focus of this whole process, you can, if you wish, offer smoke to each of the directions. Smoke is a reminder of the breath that sustains our lives and carries all our prayers; the smoke can be in the form of an incense stick, smudge or burning tobacco³.

PHYSICAL SPACE

A way of having a more permanent sacred space is to build a physical medicine wheel on the ground. This can be done in your garden or anywhere else you feel moved to build one. This can be done most simply by placing four stones, one for each of the cardinal points of the compass, in a circle. An additional two stones can then be placed in the centre for the above

and below points⁴.

Often medicine wheels are made of many more stones than this, the aspects of reality being separated into finer component parts. But beginning with six will help you find out about the process of making a wheel and you can add more or create other more elaborate wheels as your knowledge develops.

A stone medicine wheel creates a place of healing and beauty on the Earth Mother, and can be used as permanent site of prayer and other ceremony. Any place which you wish to use for such a sacred activity should be asked beforehand.

To do this, ask out loud, and wait to get a sense of any resistance or reluctance. Pay attention to the ways that the Earth Mother speaks to you. A bird may suddenly start to sing beautifully, or the sun come from over the rooftops, to show agreement. On the other hand you may experience a feeling of unease, or a thorn bush may tangle in your clothing, suggesting that either this is the wrong place, or the wrong time for your activity.

When using any stones remember they too are parts of the sacred hoop of all things. In the medicine wheel traditions, they are living people, and it is always basic politeness to ask them whether they wish to take part in the ceremony. If any seem reluctant, (they may be difficult to pick up or feel unpleasant to touch) then thank them and return them to their usual resting place.

It is also good to leave gifts in return for anything moved. Tobacco is a traditional gift, or some seeds, or chocolate, or maybe the gift of a song, or a few hairs from your head. Smudge the whole area, yourself and the stones, and maybe sing a song, or drum for a while to centre yourself and bring the area into readiness. Then begin to place your stones.

A small medicine wheel in your garden, or laid out (usually on a cloth) indoors is a beautiful focus of prayer and contemplation and a few minutes spent with it each day can help one to keep balance and a sense of proportion in the business of everyday living.

OTHER WAYS OF WORKING

Once you have begun to get a feel for working with the six directions, there are many other ways you can celebrate and include them in your

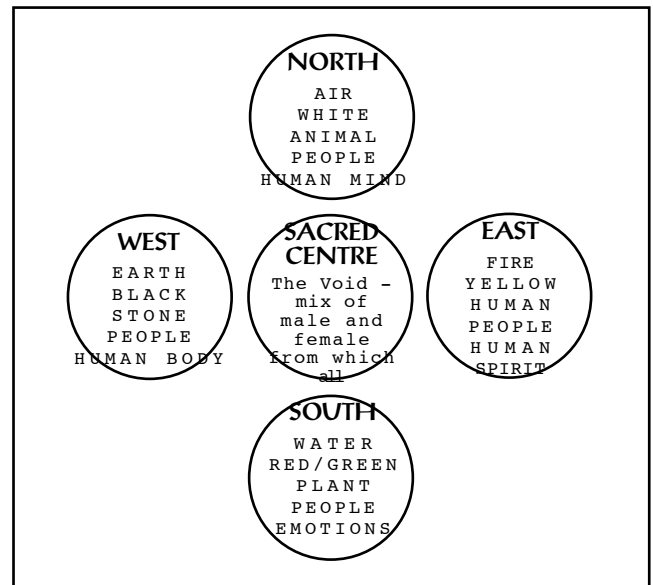
life. For instance, if you are making an object, you can include colours which represent them. In the Tibetan traditions, prayer flags are often in the five colours (the four directions and the centre colour).

If you are working with the Native American traditions, you could include coloured glass beads, or cloth, or even simply four feathers. I have red, black white and yellow glass beads on my car key ring, and smaller ones with the addition of blue and green in the leather 'medicine bag' I wear around my neck on occasions. Even on a mundane level such things serve to help remind us of the directions, and hence our place of belonging within the whole of creation.

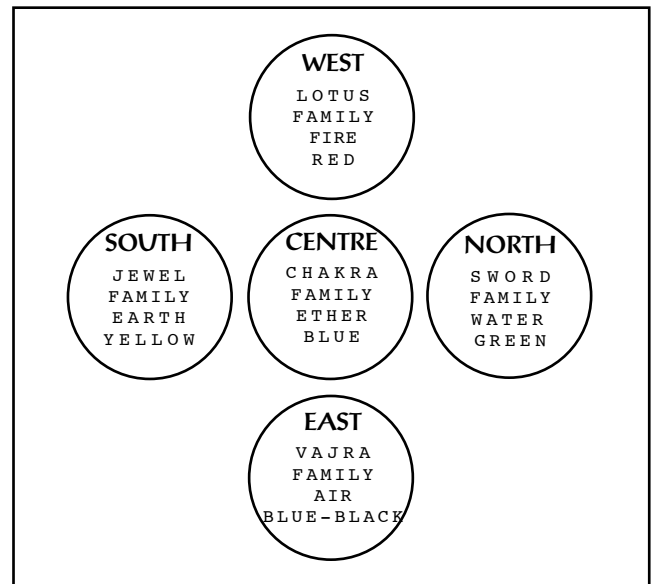
Another tradition you might like to consider, is the offering of food or drink to the directions. This can take many forms, both elaborate and simple. The one I use most that is perhaps the simplest, is a Tibetan tradition. When you have a drink - wine or beer or fruit juice - dip your finger into it, then shake or flick it to send drops of the liquid towards a direction. Start with the above, and then repeat for the below, and each of the four directions. This is a way of thanking Creation, and remembering your place within the Everything.

*Illustrations © Jan Wood
We wishes to thank Julie Pembridge for help with this article.*

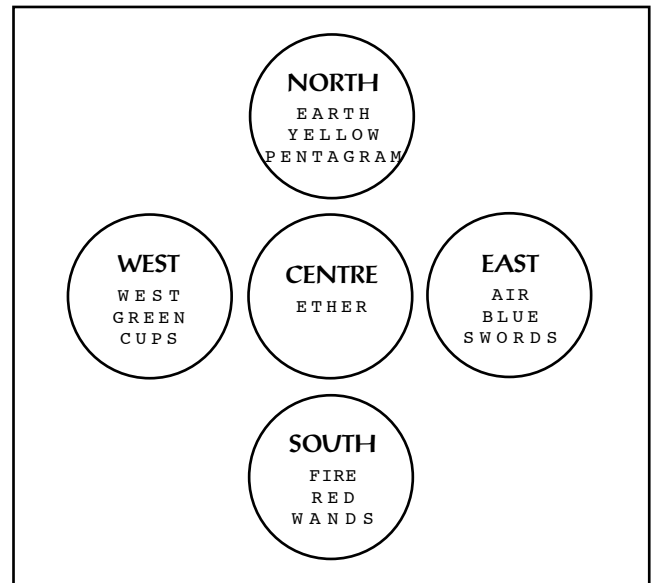
- Notes:*
 1 : For details of pipe traditions, see Sacred Hoop Issue 4.
 2 : There are many other orders for calling-in the powers. They can be called in in the way of the '20 count' (also known as the 'Earth count' or 'Children's count'). This system is a teaching given by Hyemyohsts Storm where the Powers of the Universe are divided into 20 component parts, and laid out in a specific order. The first four are the four directions. I was taught by a Lakota teacher (Ed McGaa) to call in the above and below first, and then to call in the four directions in a clockwise manner, doing so that the last direction to be called in is the most important one to the calling at that specific time; i.e. if the calling in was for a healing; an emotional healing calling-in would go West, North, East and finally South (the place of the emotions), whereas a physical healing would go North, East, South and finally West (the place of the body).
 3 : Smudge is Native American incense. See Sacred Hoop Issue 1.
 4 : In the very centre of many medicine wheels, a forked stick is



THE MAYAN WHEEL OF THE DIRECTIONS



THE TIBETAN WHEEL OF THE DIRECTIONS
(North is normally put in the place where we would show East.)



THE WESTERN TRADITIONS WHEEL OF THE