

Sweat Lodge Ceremony

by Man Found Standing

The Sweat Lodge Ceremony is a very old cleansing sweating practice that is shared by many different cultures around the world. It is also a traditional ceremony shared by the Native Americans from the Northern Alaskan Eskimos to the Southern Mayan Indians. Every tribe has its own traditions on how they uniquely perform this Ceremony. The purpose is a ritual for healing (by sweating out an illness), physical cleansing, and to assist one in reaching a higher spiritual awareness. The ceremony also assists to turn our minds and hearts to our ancestors, one another, and for all of God's creations. There is much symbolism in the Sweat Lodge Ceremony including representation of the prayer circle, healing circle, womb, universe, all of creation, the Creator's living spirit, living sacrifice, rebirth, and so forth.

The New Haven Native American Church Sweat Lodge Ceremony is typically a four round healing ceremony. It is accompanied by traditional songs, prayers, drumming, and so forth. Because of the high temperatures that arise in the Sweat Lodge, the safety of all individuals in attendance is paramount. The rise in body temperature can increase heart rate and be taxing physically and mentally. Participants are allowed to freely exit the Sweat Lodge at any time. All attendees should ensure they are hydrated and are maintaining proper electrolyte levels. Women that are pregnant or on their menstrual or moon cycle do not participate in this Ceremony.

Medicine People wishing to facilitate the Sweat Lodge Ceremony are required to have hands on special training so they can safely perform, watch over, and properly respond to emergency situations during the Ceremony. Normally this training is undertaken over a period of four years.

Construction

The Sweat Lodge Ceremony is performed in a carefully built place of worship made of natural materials. Special care is taken to ensure that no material used will off-gas under normal or extreme temperatures. The construction materials will vary depending on if a permanent or temporary structure is built. The entrance faces east and is small so all participants enter on their hands and knees in the similitude of humility before the Creator.

In the center of the Sweat Lodge a pit is dug where the heated stones are placed. The earth extracted from the pit is put outside of the lodge on the north side of the entrance in a straight line towards the fire pit. All stones that become unusable due to breakage are also placed along this line. This line represents the "Straightness of the Way" and is a symbol of the Word of God. Participants should take great care in not stepping over (or breaking) this line.

The fire pit is for heating the stones and is directly east of the Sweat Lodge at a safe distance. The fire should be properly built and vigilantly watched over by the Fire Keeper. Normally the fire pit is prepared hours before the Ceremony to insure the stones used are well heated.

Preparation

Here is a list of items to consider.

- Each participant should wear clothing that is comfortable and modest.
- All metal should be removed prior to entering the Sweat Lodge.
- Alcohol should be avoided for twenty-four hours before Ceremony.
- Drink plenty of water before the Ceremony.
- Avoid eating a few hours before the Ceremony.
- Respect the sacred space and prepare yourself by being mindful and contemplative.
- Keep all electronics in your vehicle.
- Two large towels and some drinking water are recommended. One towel and the water can be taken into the lodge with you. You will want to have one towel after the Ceremony to dry off with.

- A change of comfortable but warm clothing, such as a sweat outfit, to prevent a chill is highly suggested to change into after the Ceremony.
- For night Ceremonies, a flash light is recommended.

Each participant is smudged before they enter the lodge. All participants should remove their shoes, unless those shoes are specifically consecrated to be only worn during the Sweat Lodge Ceremony, before entering the Holy Space.

Ceremony

The Ceremony consists of at least four rounds each lasting about twenty minutes with a ten to fifteen minute break between rounds. As the participants enter they say, “Mitakuye Oyasin” pronounced Mah-tah-kee-o-ah-sin or “all my relations” which is a prayer for all things on the planet with which we share kinship. The participants move in a clockwise motion and sit in a circle around the open pit.

The Water Pourer Medicine Person then explains to new participants what they should expect during the Ceremony and proper safety. They also explain that anyone is free to leave at any time, but if they leave they are to exit the Sweat Lodge in a clockwise motion and to say “Mitakuye Oyasin” or “all my relations” before exiting.

After the explanation and answering any questions, normally a prayer is said and the Sacred Pipe is passed around the group. The Water Pourer then calls for the Fire Keeper to bring in the first round of hot stones.

Round One: special care is taken as the stones are taken from the fire and placed in the Sweat Lodge pit. The stones are energized by the fire and are extremely hot with most, if not all, having a red glow. The stones represent all of the Creator’s creations and we see all of creation as equal and our brothers and sisters. A small offering of cedar, sage, tobacco, sweet grass, or other appropriate plant is placed on them and care is taken not to create too much residual smoke. This is a Holy Offering and assists all participants to have balance and focus.

Once the stones are placed the door flap is closed and complete darkness ensues. The Water Pourer then pours water on the rocks making them steam and the Sweat Lodge to heat up. The Sweat Lodge Song for the Ancestors is sung by the participants and the Water Pourer says a prayer for round one, the West Point on the Medicine Wheel. The participants then share what their intent or purpose for being a participant at the Sweat Lodge Ceremony. After all has shared their intended purpose, other songs and sharing may continue.

When the Water Pourer feels the round is complete, usually after about twenty minute, the flap is open and Round One is concluded and a short, ten to fifteen minute, break is allowed.

Round Two: when the break is over and the participants are once again seated around the pit, the Water Pourer calls for more stones. Once the stones are placed and a small offering given, the door flap is closed and water is poured on the stones. The Sweat Lodge Song for the Heavenly Beings is sung by the participants and the Water Pourer says a prayer for round two, the North Point on the Medicine Wheel. Further singing, praying, and sharing may continue until the round is concluded.

Round Three: is for the Sees Far People, which some call the Holy Ghost, and is the East Point on the Medicine Wheel. The song for round three is sung and prayers, singing, and sharing may continue until the round is concluded. For most participants this round seems to be the most difficult physically and mentally. Participants know they still have another round to go and the “sacrifice” may seem too great to continue. The Water Pourer is mindful of the participants and assists when needed.

Round Four: when the break is over and the participants are seated, the Water Pourer calls for all the remaining stones. The round begins and the Sweat Lodge Song for the South Looks Within Medicine Wheel Point is

sung. The Water Pourer prays for the participants and asks the Creator for assist to Look Within. Further singing, prayers, and sharing may continue until the round is complete.

Concluding

When the Ceremony is concluded the participants will change clothing and a time of fellowship, feasting, and sharing is to follow. This is a social but respectful time for participants to contemplate and share. Everything shared in the Sweat Lodge and after should be respected and confidences should be kept.