

Shamanism



WHAT IS SHAMANISM?

Shamanism is one of the oldest traditions in our human heritage – we two leggeds have had some form of shamanic practice in each of our ancestral cultures on planet earth since time began. In early times, when our ancestors were unsure of what medicine plants to use, where to hunt for game, how to help a sick or injured clanmate heal, or how to work in harmony with the life-giving spirits of nature, a shaman would enter an altered state of consciousness, and journey in non-ordinary reality for information, and healing. Shamans served their community by working closely with helping spirits, and keeping their tribes or clans safe, healthy, happy and connected to the natural world.



HOW DOES SHAMANISM WORK?

A shamanic practitioner enters a waking, trancelike state of consciousness, and visits what we call non-ordinary reality. This can be achieved in several ways, and at the Shaman Circle, we'll be entering non-ordinary reality through listening to live shamanic drumming. At any time, you can return from a journey by simply opening your eyes, although there is generally an accepted way to enter and exit shamanic journeying, which we'll go over below.



HOW DO I JOURNEY?

You'll lay down or sit comfortably at the Shaman Circle, and you're encouraged to bring an eyepillow or bandanna to block out light, and enter a trance state more easily. After we've called in the directions, created sacred space, and gotten clear on our intentions, I'll start drumming, usually for a period of 10-15 minutes. The drumming has a monotonous, steady beat, usually 4-6 beats per second. This beat, sometimes described as the heartbeat of the earth, brings our brainwaves into a meditative, or theta, state. With your eyes closed, listening to the beat of the drum and still holding your intention, you'll begin to make a journey to the Lower, Middle, or Upper Worlds, meet with one of your spirit guides, power animals, or allies, and return with information or healing pertaining to your question or intention.



WHAT ARE THE LOWER, MIDDLE, AND UPPER WORLDS?

There is a universal cosmology of non-ordinary reality, which has been mapped independently by our ancestors from all over planet earth. The lower and upper worlds have nothing to do with religious ideas like heaven or hell, but instead represent different thematic landscapes. One can imagine the three shamanic worlds as part of the World Tree, with its branches rooted deeply in the earth (lower world), its trunk (middle world), and branches reaching into the sky nations (upper world). Through practice, we can skillfully navigate each of these worlds with the help of our spirit allies, or guides. The lower and upper world are full of compassionate helping spirits.



THE LOWER WORLD

Journeying to the lower world is a great first journey, and a wonderful foundation for shamanic practice. To reach the lower world, you visualize going DOWN through an opening in the earth, such as following a tree root, hole or tunnel, or an escalator or elevator...use whatever image instinctively comes to you, and make your descent. At some point, you'll become aware of experiencing one of the levels of the lower world. The lower world is not a dark place, full of rocks and dirt, but instead an infinite array of landscapes...you can find sunny meadows, starry skies, expansive deserts, or anything you can imagine. The lower world is traditionally a place to commune with power animals or spirit guides, although our allies can move easily between all worlds. All beings in the lower world are compassionate in nature.



THE MIDDLE WORLD

The middle world is a spiritual overlay of our waking reality. Middle world journeys are generally used to gain information about life in our waking world, and are great for learning from the plant people, the stone people, our animal brothers and sisters, or for journeying to the moon or the sun or the stars. We can find lost items like car keys, or visit our ancestors, or experience far away places reliably. NOTE: Middle world journeys are usually attempted after establishing a strong rapport with your power animals or helping spirits, who will help you in your life, and keep you safe in your journeywork. It is not recommended for beginners to practice middle world journeys, as there can be entities of non-compassionate intent. This is not a thing to be afraid of, but to ease into, once you've established a strong relationship with your allies.



THE UPPER WORLD

The upper world can be found by traveling UP. You might grow a pair of wings, climb up the world tree, get in a hot air balloon, take an airplane, or climb a beanstalk to get to the upper world. As you journey upwards, there is a sense of passing through a barrier or membrane that separates the middle and upper worlds. The planes of the upper world are infinite, and are generally home to our teachers: ascended masters, ancestors, or teachers in human form, although just like the lower world, any compassionate being can appear to you here. You might commune with the spirit of buddha, quan yin, or other deities here, or any of the ascended masters. As in the lower world, the upper world is filled with compassionate helping spirits.



WHAT IS A POWER ANIMAL OR ALLY?

A power animal or ally is a compassionate helping spirit who has come to you at this point in your life to offer assistance, healing, and wisdom. A good first journey is to meet your power animal. Like any other relationship, a connection with your power animals or allies will deepen and strengthen over time. A power animal can be anything – an otter, a dragon, a mouse, or a brontosaurus. Although we may want to find a ‘charismatic’ power animal like a lion or a hawk, never be disappointed with the animal who chooses to ally with you. There is medicine in all animals; they all have powerful teachings for us. The medicine of mouse is equal to the medicine of wolf, and all power animals are majestic and loving.



WHAT DO I DO WHEN I MEET A POWER ANIMAL?

Whether you’ve chosen to journey to the lower or upper world to start your shamanic journeying practice, when you encounter an animal or helping spirit, it’s a good idea to ask, ‘are you my power animal (or ally)?’ If the answer is ‘yes,’ and it feels right, you might start asking your power animal or ally questions like ‘What medicine do you have for me at this time? What teaching do you want to pass on to me?’ etc. If the answer is ‘yes’ but doesn’t feel right, thank the animal and keep moving through your journey looking for a power animal that feels right and resonant. If you encounter the animal another time, or two or three times, you are probably being delivered a message that this is, indeed, your ally. Generally, avoid insects or animals who show fangs. We can enjoy the medicine of several power animals.



HOW CAN I HONOR MY POWER ANIMAL?

Once you’ve established a rapport with your power animal or ally, you can journey to merge with your power animal, and feel the power of eagle flying through the air, of jaguar hunting, or of dolphin gliding through the waves. A good way to honor a new connection with a power animal is to learn all about it that you can, meditate on its meaning to you, and keep a representation of it in your space, like a photo or totem. Power animals love to be danced, where you bring its spirit into your body, and allow it to feel the magic of being flesh with you. Power animals can stay with us for our whole lives, or come to us for a specific part of our earthwalk. It’s a kindness to bring a gift with you when you next meet your power animal again, as a way to honor them, and offer thanks.



I MET MY POWER ANIMAL...NOW WHAT?

Once you’ve met a power animal or ally (they don’t always show up as animals, but sometimes as humans or ancestors or other guides), it’s a great idea to maintain your connection with them, journeying at least once a month. You can ask questions of your power animal, like ‘what is this situation showing up in my life to teach me? how can I heal and release this issue, or sorrow? how can I create a situation in my life? why do I feel blocked or resistant to this at this time?’ You can also ask power animals to take you on adventures in the worlds, and explore their infinitely varied landscapes. The only limit in journeywork is our imaginations.



HOW DO I COME BACK FROM A SHAMANIC JOURNEY?

After a period of drumming, I’ll stop the steady drumbeat, and start the ‘callback.’ This sounds like a series of seven strikes of the drum repeated four times, and then some very rapid drumming. When you hear the seven beats, it’s your signal to thank your power animal or helping spirit, and retrace your steps back into the room where you started. For example, if you crawled down a tree root to get to the lower world, where you and your power animal had an adventure or a healing, you’d want to retrace your steps and crawl back up the same root to get back home. When you visualize/see/imagine/sense yourself back in the room where you started, you can stretch and really feel being in your body. It’s good discipline, and considered important, to practice solid journeying habits like this one from the start.



WHAT DOES JOURNEYING LOOK OR FEEL LIKE?

Some people imagine that journeying has to look like watching a tv screen on the back of their eyelids. Not so! Often, we journey in unique ways to our own personality selves. You might experience a sense of a journey, like remembering a dream from last week, or feel a journey, sensing your footsteps down a path or smelling a flower, or experience a journey like a daydream. We can feel powerfully strong emotions, receive healing, and enjoy a profound sense of well-being while journeying. There is no right or wrong way to journey with good intentions in our hearts...the key is to be open and curious about whatever experience you have.



CAN EVERYONE JOURNEY?

Yes! Sometimes it takes a try or two or three, but don't be discouraged. Everyone on earth can learn to journey – this is part of our heritage, whether your ancestors come from the sunny equator or the icy vastness of the north. If you're experiencing trouble journeying, you might journey for someone else's question. It often increases our compassion to journey for someone else, and can add a 'boost' to our energies as we seek to connect with compassionate beings. Be patient, curious, and playful...journeying is fun!



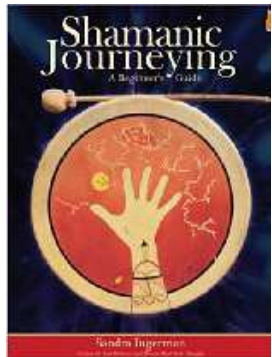
WHAT IF I'M MAKING IT UP?

I first heard this question on my first official shamanic journey, in a crowded bucky dome with Sandra Ingerman, lit by a single candle and the full moon. A hand popped up and a shy voice said, 'what if I'm making it up?' (twinkle) Sandra laughed, and said happily, 'it doesn't matter.' Every experience is a valid one, and with practice, we come to trust in our own skills, and in the amazing assistance and love from our compassionate helping spirits. So, in-joy what comes!



A NOTE ABOUT PHRASING SHAMANIC QUESTIONS:

There is some general protocol around framing our shamanic questions. Two things to avoid are a) giving your power away (questions like 'should I take this job') or b) time questions ('when will I find my life partner'). As beings with free will, it's important to keep our own power intact, and avoid 'should' questions. They can backfire – you might ask your ally about taking a job, and find it to be a total disaster. If you question your ally later, they might reply that you needed to learn about total disaster! Instead, questions can be posed as outcomes, 'what will my life be like if I take this job? if I don't?' Time questions can also be tricky, as spirit is infinite – 'soon' might mean ten or twelve lifetimes!



WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

To journey, all one really needs is a safe and sacred space (important!), basic knowledge of the cosmology of the shamanic worlds, an intention, a drumbeat (there are several great recordings) and a curious and loving spirit. This (very!) short overview is intended only to familiarize you with the act of entering a trance state, knowing that you can reach the lower and upper worlds to being journeying with your compassionate helping spirits, how to frame questions, how to honor your allies, and to begin to trust the experience you have. There are many, many, many nuances to journeying, and a lot is left out here - this is just getting your shamanic feet wet. I highly, highly recommend Sandra Ingerman's superb book, "Shamanic Journeying: A Beginner's Guide" that comes with my favorite drumming cd - it's a great place to start. Beyond reading about shamanism, or attending a course, the best way to answer questions you have (about shamanism or your life) is to 'journey about it!'

Happy healing...see you in circle!

Love, Anna