



Excerpt of

PATH OF THE SACRED PIPE

Journey of Love, Power, and Healing

By Jay Cleve, PhD

Chapter 4: Native American Spiritual Philosophy

Native Cosmology: Cycles, Rhythms, Immediacy, Flow

Tom Brown, Jr., world's foremost survivalist teacher and long-time apprentice to the Apache tracker and medicine man, Stalking Wolf, eloquently expresses the need for the beginners mind in approaching Native American spiritual philosophies:

The spiritual world is a world to which the seeker comes slowly—first with the faith of a child then with the patience and dedication of a sage. It requires one to let go of all beliefs, all prejudices, and all need for scientific methods of verification. One must abandon logical thinking and learn to deal in the abstract, learn to accept that each moment is an eternity and that each entity becomes, at once, a physical and spiritual teacher (1).

Consciousness and Our Cosmic Origins

The path of consciousness for humans is an unfolding of embodied spirit. If we think of consciousness as something we participate in rather than something we have, our whole perspective shifts; and we see the spiritual nature of ourselves and everything in the cosmos. Consciousness expresses itself and is embodied in the web of life, and the complexity of all of its manifestations. Each manifestation—stones, bears, birds, trees, humans—carries the light of its cosmic origin, the potential within the Mind of the Great

Mystery. Awakening to Spirit's presence through our moment-to-moment opportunities for connection within the web gives impetus and direction to our homeward yearnings—as we follow our path toward self-knowing (2).

According to some Native teachers, the individual soul is created as an extension of the Great Spirit, and is a reflection of the Creator's consciousness. The soul is light, which evolves and matures into the likeness of the Creator (3).

The ancient ritual of the Sacred Pipe requires a specific cosmological understanding—view of the cosmos—that continues into the present time. We can gain an understanding of the underlying cosmology of Native peoples by understanding the Medicine Wheel and analyzing the movements of the Pipe ritual.

Native's Personal Experience of the Cosmos

Since it flows directly from personal experience, Native spirituality is open to continual revelation from Spirit. Hence, Native theology is flexible and able to respond rapidly to changing circumstances without altering its fundamental characteristics. Revelation takes place during a person's own lucid dreams, visions, and prophetic experiences, through rituals like the Sacred Pipe, sweat lodge, vision quest, or sun dance. And since continuing revelation takes place within a mythic and ritual context, it maintains rather than disrupts spiritual continuity (4).

The classical dwelling of Plains people is the portable conical tipi, which expresses cosmological and metaphysical meanings. The tipi, sweat lodge, dream lodge, sun dance circle are understood as the universe or, microcosmically, as a human being. The central open fire of the tipi is the presence of the Great Mysterious, which is at the center of all existence; and the smoke hole at its peak is the place and path of liberation (5).

At the sun dance, the large, circular open frame lodge is ritually constructed in imitation of the world's creation with the sacred cottonwood at the center as the axis linking Sky and Earth. Dancers move from the circumference to the Tree at the center and back, always facing and concentrating upon the tree at the center. So the dancers are always gazing toward the sun, which is associated with the source of life.

The concept of the vertical axis explains the sacredness of the number seven, consistent with other world religions. In adding the vertical dimensions of Sky and Earth to the four horizontal ones of space, we have six dimensions, with the seventh as the point at the center where all the directions meet, and where the person or people gather.

To realize this symbol in its fullness we must conceive of three horizontal circles inscribed with crosses, all three pierced by the vertical axis of humanity itself. The human being is the intermediate between Sky and Earth, linking the two, with feet on the ground and the head at the center of the firmament. The middle disc, like the vertical axis, represents humanity; for in joining Sky and Earth, it is neither pure spirit nor gross matter, but a synthesis of both. The Crow tribes often paint three rings around the cottonwood tree at the center of the sun dance lodge—the circles representing the three “worlds” that constitute human beings: body, soul, and spirit.