

The Sweat Lodge Ceremony

In addition to the personal experience of Circle Members, this section is based on *The Native American Sweatlodge: History and Legends*, by Joseph Bruchac, and *Mother Earth Spirituality*, by Ed McGaa, Eagle Man.

The Sweat Lodge is a small dwelling used for a specific cleansing ceremony which is not unlike being reborn from the womb of Mother Earth. These are usually done before undertaking some other sort of significant ceremony, such as a fast (vision quest), a healing ceremony, or a wedding ceremony. But they are also often done just for themselves – experiencing a ‘Sweat’ provides a wonderful feeling of renewal for the body and the spirit.

In the days before contact, almost everyone had a lodge in their back yard. It was where we went to pray, and ceremonies were done often -- weekly, if not daily. And all that sweating was physically very good for us. It is a natural way to ward off disease and infection. Today, as more and more of our young people are learning to lead sweat lodge ceremonies, we are becoming strong again.



The frame of the sweat lodge is made from very flexible young trees, such as alders, woven together in a specific way. In the old days, it would have been covered with hides or birch bark or evergreen boughs. Today, lodges are usually covered with tarps or blankets. It should be dark and moist inside during the ceremony, but it is important to be able to breathe.

The floor of the sweatlodge is covered with cedar. Tobacco is wrapped in cloth, one for each colour of the seven directions (see page on Medicine Wheel Teaching for details), and hung from the lodge ceiling. A pit in the centre of the lodge holds the heated stones. We refer to each of these stones as Mishomis, or ‘Grandfather’ since they are much older than us, and we believe they have a spirit.¹ Often the antler from a deer or elk is used to move the Grandfathers into the proper place in the centre pit.

The Grandfathers which will be sacrificed for the Sweat Lodge Ceremony should be collected in a respectful way, with offerings of tobacco being made when asking for their permission to be taken. They are then placed in the Sacred Fire as it is being built by the Fire-Keeper. When

¹ We also believe that they hold a message locked within them eons ago that is especially for us at this time of the Sweat Lodge Ceremony.

Excerpt from Anishnabe 101 by The Circle of Turtle Lodge

they are ready, the Lodge Leader will see that a trail of cedar connects the lodge to the fire so that the energy of the fire restores life to those who enter the lodge.

The leader will enter the lodge and then invite the others to enter. No two leaders will run a ceremony in the same way. Each will learn their own way as they do their apprenticeship. The role of the lodge leader is to open the way for helpful Spirits to contact the participants. Exactly how the lodge leader will do this will be as unique to the individual as is each person's own relationship to the Creator. However, any cleansing or rebirth that occurs within the Sweat Lodge Ceremony is a result of the link between the participant and the Spirit world, not between the participant and the lodge leader.

When taking part in a Sweat Lodge Ceremony, it is appropriate to wear cotton clothing with no buttons or zippers which get too hot during the ceremony. Men can wear T-shirts & shorts, and women usually wear dresses or even, flannelette nightgowns, which work great. Avoid wearing anything too restrictive, and remember to take a towel. Leave all your jewelry outside (the temperature increase could make it burn your skin).

The ceremony consists of four 'rounds' during which the leader invites the Spirits of each of the four directions to join the participants in the lodge. After all the participants have entered the lodge, the leader instructs the Fire Keeper to bring in the Grandfathers. Depending on the style of the leader, all may be brought in at this time or only some, bringing in more between each of the rounds. Once in, the door is closed and the prayers begin.

Water is poured over the Grandfathers at the beginning of each round. The steam rises up from the pit in the centre and then moves down the sides of the lodge. For this reason, it is cooler to sit up close to the pit than back near the walls. Only as little as four cups of water are required, one for each round, but you will find that each one makes the lodge hotter than before. Often, the leader will open the door half way through the ceremony to give the participants a breath of fresh air.

Some leaders have songs to sing to each of the directions, others have prayers, and others begin a sharing circle with the participants. Undoubtedly, there are many other variations, and all of them are right based on their intent.

When the door of the lodge is closed, it is very dark, at least until your eyes adjust. Some lodge leaders demand total darkness, but it is not necessary. As one teacher advised, both light and dark are present in our lives, so we should honour both. Another teacher instructed participants to keep their eyes wide open, without blinking, and watch up in the centre of the ceiling of the lodge. That is where the Spirits can be seen.

When all the directions which have been summoned are thanked for coming, the leader may end the ceremony by calling out "All My Relations" and asking for the door to be opened. Participants leave, keeping to the other side of the joining line of cedar, and make tobacco offerings of thanksgiving to the fire.

