



# WALKING WITH THE SACRED PIPE

Nicholas Breeze Wood explains the Native American Pipe Ceremony

*Above: ready for a ceremony, the author's pipe is on the cloth he uses as an altar, together with a pipe tamper, a rawhide rattle to accompany pipe songs, a small white shell with the smoking mix inside, an eagle feather, and a small candle which he uses to light matches*

The Native American sacred pipe needs to be approached with great respect. Pipes are a very sensitive subject to many Native Americans, and there has been a long history of repression shown towards Native Americans regarding sacred traditions. Many people were badly mistreated, even killed, for being pipe carriers in the 20th century, as the pipe, as well as many other sacred traditions were systematically destroyed by the US government. Pipes and associated medicine bundles were often stolen by collectors or stolen and destroyed by Christian missionaries, who saw them as signs of devil worship.'

Many ceremonies were forbidden under law, and people who attended were prosecuted and persecuted. This is, in part, why the rule about not taking photographs of ceremonies came about - it was dangerous to have your face appear in a photograph, it meant you could be identified.

It was only in 1978 that the 'American Indian Religious Freedom Act' came into operation, giving Native Americans the legal right to practice their spirituality.

Before this change in the law, the sacred pipe became a symbol of Native American identity; and because of all this, there is (justifiable) resentment by some Native people against new-agers, people, whom they often call 'plastic medicine people', who they see as 'stealing' their sacred traditions, although the view of medicine people is generally that the pipe is for all humanity.

In publishing this article, I want to stress the importance of great respect, not only to the Sacred Powers, but also to the Native American people themselves.

## HAVING A PIPE COME TO YOU

Traditionally a sacred pipe is not bought, instead it is made by someone for their own use, or given as a gift. Nowadays however people often buy them themselves, especially in the West, although I know some people who have waited - and still wait - patiently for decades for a pipe to come to them in a sacred manner.

If you feel drawn to the pipe, I would urge you to sit for at least a

few years, so you can let the urge mature within you, test it, to see if the urge stands the test of time. Being a pipe keeper is a thing one grows into slowly.

If eventually, a pipe comes to you, or you buy your own, it will need to be made personal, you will need to bond with it. I always suggest people do some craft work to decorate the stem, and put a little of you into the bowl too, rub some of your sweat into it, to act as a polish.

Some pipes are large, for passing around a circle to be smoked by many people, while others are small, personal pipes.

I would always encourage someone new to the sacred pipe to only use a pipe for themselves - at least for a while. It takes time to 'feel' your way into them, and it would be inadvisable to start your path by holding ceremonies for lots of people, so work by yourself for a while, before you work with others.

## WALKING WITH THE PIPE

A sacred pipe never belongs to you



- it belongs to Spirit - and you need to remember that, and offer it to Spirit when you first get it, asking that you are shown how to walk with it, and do good things with it, for all your relations.

A pipe should be blessed and awakened before it is first used, and this is a whole ceremony in itself. Generally this involves another pipe carrier blowing the smoke from their pipe on to your pipe, and praying over it, asking for a blessed road for you and your new pipe.

There are, however, other ways that a pipe can be blessed. The Oglala medicine person Ed MaGaa taught me one way which involves placing the pipe in the crook between two branches in a tree overnight. If the pipe is still in the tree the next morning, it can be considered to be blessed by the powers of Creation and you can begin to work with it - but I would still advise a traditional blessing by another pipe carrier if the opportunity comes along.

A pipe ceremony must never be charged for, and part of the responsibility of working with the pipe is that if someone asks you to do a ceremony for them, you are obliged to do so, unless you have a mighty good reason why you can't.

Although a pipe ceremony is never charged for, those asking for, or attending a pipe ceremony, are obligated to give a gift in return for it - even if the gift is only small, such as a little tobacco, or a bar of chocolate.

The herbs smoked in a pipe are never - with the exception of tobacco - mind altering. Some pipe keepers do not use tobacco at all, or they mix it with other smoking herbs - commonly called kinnickinnic. Traditional plants in kinnickinnic include the bark of the red dogwood (which Americans call red willow), bearberry leaves (a small shrub in the genus *Arctostaphylos*), and deertongue (*Dichanthelium clandestinum* - a type of grass).

There are sacred rules that come with a pipe. A pipe should be kept away from alcohol, and no alcohol should be drunk for twenty four hours before a pipe ceremony is held. A pipe should never be stepped over, and should always be shown great physical respect. A

pipe which is joined - ie has the bowl and stem put together - should never be photographed. Truth must always be said across a pipe, in fact a common expression is 'across my pipe', which means I swear across my sacred pipe I am telling the truth.

Grandfather Wallace Black Elk told me once that there were only three ways to walk with a sacred pipe. You can walk in front of it - and if you do that you are dead. You can walk beside it - which is the path of arrogance, and often leads eventually to walking in front of it. Or, you can walk behind it - which is the correct road of humility. This is reflected in the saying 'the sacred pipe goes before all'.

When a pipe is packed away the bowl should be packed with sage to act as protection and to keep it pure. Pipes are traditionally put into a special leather bag - a pipebag - and these are often made from deerskin and beautifully decorated with beadwork. This pipebag is often put inside a soft cloth external bag - perhaps made from a blanket - to give it additional protection. Important old sacred pipes, such as the White Buffalo Calf Pipe, kept by Arvol Looking Horse, or other pipes belonging to ancestral medicine people can sometimes be offered fine cloth, and may become quite large bundles over time, as new cloth is added. Ancient pipes may only be very rarely taken out of their bundles and smoked.

**There were only three ways to walk with a sacred pipe...**

**In front of it - and if you do that you are dead.**

**Beside it - which is the path of arrogance.**

**Or, behind it - which is the correct road of humility**

**Grandfather Wallace Black Elk**

### CALLING TO THE SPIRITS

There is a great deal of beautiful ceremonial symbolism in a pipe ceremony. Not only is there a sacred marriage between the female bowl (everything that is 'yin' in the universe), and the male stem (everything that is 'yang' in the universe), but it also includes the four elements: earth (the stone bowl), air (the smoker's breath and the smoke), fire (the fire in the bowl) and water (the plants burnt and the wood of the stem).

And four kingdoms: stone kingdom, plant kingdom, animal kingdom (the decoration on the stem - which often has fur, feathers or horse hair as part of it) and the human kingdom.

When a pipe is filled, the Powers of the Four Winds are called upon, as are the Above powers and Earth below, as well as other powers.

*Below: the author's pipe bowl and stem, on top of its beaded pipebag*



A pipe ceremony should never be performed lightly, it is always good to remember the part of the White Buffalo Calf Woman story about how the man with bad intent was enveloped in mist and reduced to a pile of bones.

Many people, both Native and non native, will tell you they feel jumpy before they do a ceremony, they feel the spirits are close, they feel the power of the pipe, and this can be unsettling. The traditional structure of the ceremony, and the singing of sacred songs, is all part of helping the pipe keeper grounded.

### THE FILLING OF THE PIPE

There are many traditional forms a pipe ceremony can take, and the way the pipe is reverentially 'filled' varies across traditions.

The form of pipe ceremony I often use - a 'four fill' ceremony - comes from the Shoshone people, via the writer Evelyn Eaton; but when I am moved to, I use other 'fills.' When one is doing a pipe ceremony one has to be fluid and open to the moment.

I begin by unwrapping my pipe and placing it on a cloth, which I put on the floor in front of me. A pipe never directly touches the floor,

except for when it is on a specially built outdoors earth altar, such as in front of a sweat lodge, or when the bowl is placed on the earth over night, to spiritually clean it.

I have been using the same piece of cloth for pipe ceremonies for the last 30 years, so it is - for me - an essential part of my 'kit.'

I also have a small white shell as part of my 'kit.' I was taught the importance of doing a 'balanced' pipe ceremony by Ed MaGaa.

By this he meant having a balance of male and female energy in the ceremony. He taught me that when I do a pipe ceremony I should invite White Buffalo Calf Woman. I was to do this, he said, by taking the smoking mix from the hand of a woman, who would be White Buffalo Calf Woman.

If a woman was doing the pipe ceremony, she would take the mix from a man's hand, and he would be White Buffalo Calf Woman. Because this is not always possible or practical, over the years I have got into the habit of taking the smoking mix from a white sea shell, and for me, this is the hand of White Buffalo Calf Woman.

I smudge the pipe's bowl, and

stem, the smoking mix, and the other items I will use in the ceremony - such as the shell, a pipe tamper, my rattle, used to sing with, my box of matches, a dried gourd I collect the ashes in - and of course myself.

I sing a pipe song at this point, as I always feel jumpy, find a song - which is really a pipe prayer - grounds me. Often I sing one taught by Grandfather Wallace Black Elk.

Great Mystery  
Have pity upon me  
I am suffering  
I want to live the way  
Of the sacred pipe.

I hold the bowl in my left hand, and the stem in my right, and lift them above my head, asking permission to join and smoke the sacred pipe at this time. I wait for an answer, which comes in the form of the bowl and stem either being attracted to each other, or repelled.

This is a physical sensation, and it reminds me of holding two magnets together. If the polarity of the magnets is right, they attract each other, but if they are reversed they repel each other. I have found the repelling only happens very occasionally, and if I feel it, I thank the Powers and put the pipe away.

If I sense it is right to join the pipe, I gently bring bowl and stem together and join them, in celebration of the people.

I then bring the pipe bowl down to the level of my heart, and holding the bowl close to me in my left hand - the stem facing away from me - I take a pinch of the smoking mix from the shell, hold it above my head and thank the Creator, the Sky Powers, for my life and this day. I then ask for all the prayers said during the ceremony to be blessed, and ask for help with the prayers.

Then, with the same pinch, I lower it to the cloth in front of me and thank Grandmother Earth for everything I have. I am always aware of the feel of the cloth under my fingers, and this reminds me that everything I have comes from Her, my body, my food, everything. I then ask Grandmother Earth to help me, like I did Grandfather Sky.

Now I turn towards the South, and thank the South Powers, asking them to help; and I turn to the West, North and East in turn,

*Below: a sacred pipe in its bag, leans upon a buffalo skull stuffed with sage, on the 'turtle's head' (earth altar) outside of a sweatlodge*





and thank them and ask for their help with the prayers.

I am now sitting in the centre of all things. I have - by my prayers - placed myself in the sacred centre of the universe, from which all my prayers, and the prayers of others who are with me, will radiate out.

Now, having called to the Six Powers, I gently push this first pinch of smoking mix into the bowl, and take another pinch into my fingers.

With the second pinch I repeat all I did with the first pinch, but before I put the pinch into the bowl, I pause a moment and sense what other spirit beings wish to be invited. These may be ancestors or spirits of the land, or perhaps a specific animal or plant spirit. I sit with a blank mind and wait for them to come, and then I see them in my mind's eye - and they often surprise me.

When I know who wants to come, I name them and invite them to add their prayers, but I was strictly taught that not all spirits love us, and it is important to remember to only invite those spirits who do love us; so I say that out loud, "all those who love us", putting that filter on the invitation.

Once this extra spirit has been invited to join the ceremony, I push the pinch into the bowl, and I now repeat the whole process with the last two pinches of smoking mix - making a total of four pinches in all.

Sometimes I 'feel' to do a seven fill pipe ceremony instead of the Shoshone four fill I have just described. The first pinch of a seven fill ceremony is for the Creator - the Sky Powers. The second is for Grandmother Earth. The third is for the South Powers. The fourth, the West Powers. The fifth, the North Powers. The sixth the East Powers, and with the seventh, I invite - from the sacred centre - all my relatives in the human, animal, plant, mineral and other realms - who love me - to come add their prayers.

### PASSING THE SACRED PIPE

Once the pipe is filled it can be lit. Traditionally a glowing buffalo chip (dried dung) was used, but nowadays matches are far more practical. To avoid struggling to hold the pipe and light it, I always have a small candle alight in a bowl on the cloth before me, and I simply light a

match from that candle.

I put the end of the pipe stem in my mouth, light a match and say a prayer of gratitude to Grandfather Fire, then light the smoking mix in the bowl. I am not lighting it for me to smoke, as the Great Mystery has the first smoke, and so, once it is lit, I turn the pipe so that the stem is pointing towards the sky. Here I sit for a moment, as empty of thoughts as I can be, before the Mystery that is the whole of Creation.

Once this moment has passed, I turn the pipe around again, so that the stem is in my mouth ready for me to smoke it.

When turning a pipe or passing a pipe, the bowl always remains in the left hand, and the stem always remains in the right hand. The stem is always rotated sun-wise (clockwise), as that movement echoes the movement of the sun in the sky and is seen as going 'with' life.

The pipe may well have gone out by this time, so if it has I relight it, and then puff a little smoke upwards, towards the sky, then puff a little downwards, towards the ground, then puff a little to each of the Four Directions, starting at the South and moving sunwise to the East.

Now I make my own personal prayers. It is always good to pray out loud so that the prayers do not rattle around in the head.

When I have made my prayers, I sit still with the pipe a little, to listen to any answer that may arise.

If others are in the circle with me, the pipe is then passed sunwise to the person on my left. They make their prayers and smoke the pipe if they wish. I normally light it for them, it's easier to have someone else light it, and so the matches follow the pipe around the circle, each person having it lit by the person who last held the pipe. It is fine if not everyone in a ceremony wants smoke, so long as everyone hold the pipe and says prayers with it.

Once the pipe has come back to me, I need to finish all the mix left in the bowl. I normally make a small prayer here, asking that all the prayers spoken (and unspoken) in the circle have been heard, and then I smoke the pipe until all the mix has gone.

Once this is done the pipe can be separated. I hold the joined pipe

above my head and thank all the Powers and the three special spirits who came to pray with us.

I then separate the bowl from the stem, and then ask everyone present to acknowledge that they have done the ceremony for all beings in the universe, by saying the phrase 'for all my relations.'

I say this, and everyone acknowledges me by saying "aho" or "ho", then the phrase 'for all my relations' is passed around the circle sunwise, each person who says it being acknowledged by the rest of the circle, until the last person to my right has said it and been acknowledged. Then the pipe ceremony is over.

I then clean the stem and bowl, collect the ashes, putting them, with any unburned smoking mix left in the white shell, into a special dried gourd I use, pack the pipe bowl with sage to protect it and wrap up the pipe and all the sacred objects I have used in the ceremony.

The ashes and the unburned mix are then given to the land outside as a thank you, or, if the pipe ceremony has been done as a healing for someone, I gather up the ashes and the unburned mix, make a small cloth bundle for them, and send it to that person, so they can keep it with them as a support.

Every pipe ceremony is different, All are deep, some are funny, some are moving, some are heavy and some are light, and all are special.

For all my relations



Above: a beautifully made, beaded buckskin pipe bag. Southern Cheyenne C1870

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