

# AT THE CENTRE OF CREATION

The Making of  
Sacred Space  
for Ritual or  
Ceremony

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*Above:* an altar representing the Four Directions and the Four Realms (the plant people, the stone people, the animal people, and the human people), placed in the centre of a pipe ceremony

The creating of a Sacred Space is fundamental to any ceremony or ritual practice, but exactly how does one go about creating one?

Well, the short answer is there is no single way, and every sacred tradition, and every practitioner will have their own methods, but there are a few fundamentals that most people and traditions will all share. So, here are a few ideas, and a few of the things I personally do.

The nature of sacred space is such that it is at the very heart of all things - it is the sacred centre point of creation from which all directions radiate. In essence - to paraphrase a medieval Christian phrase used to define God - sacred space is a place whose centre is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere. In other words, when we create sacred space it is the centre of everywhere - and where we stand is the centre of Creation, and everywhere else is the circumference of the sacred circle of Creation, the Sacred Hoop.

For me, this is very beautifully encapsulated in my favourite Lakota sacred pipe song, a song called 'The Sacred Nation Must Live':

*Lay yuah  
chey wa ceyelo  
Canupa kei  
Lay yuah  
chey wa ceyelo  
Oyate ke Zanipikta  
Oye wayelo*

*With this sacred pipe I go to  
the centre of the world to pray.  
I pray for the whole of Creation,  
that all creatures shall live in good  
health, and that the whole of  
creation be blessed*

When I do any ceremony, and especially when I am doing a pipe ceremony, I am stepping into the very centre of all of Creation, with the sacred Four Directions all around me, along with the Above and the Below, placing me in the centre of the sacred Six Directions.

This centre point of Creation is often depicted symbolically - especially if you are working with a

group of people, no matter how small - by placing a small altar, on the ground or on a low table, in the centre of your work space, and the group then sits in a sacred circle around that altar. The altar is the sacred centre point of Creation.

However, of course, if you are working by yourself, you can't sit in a circle by yourself, but you can still create an altar, and either you personally, or the altar will be the centre of Creation.

## ESTABLISHING THE CENTRE

It is perfectly possible to just place a single object as the centre point of Creation, a rock, a candle, a mug of coffee - whatever seems appropriate to you at the time, but if I am putting a centre down for a ceremony, I like to actually build a sort of medicine wheel, which represents the Powers of the Four Directions.

For this, I always put a cloth down first - an altar should always be suspended from ordinary reality, and a cloth is ideal for doing this. What is on the cloth is on the altar,

and what is not on the cloth is not on the altar - it's bad form and 'sloppy medicine' to have things half on and half off an altar; be spiritually tidy.

Different spiritual systems will have different attributes for each point of the compass. I have, for over 30 years, used the medicine wheel system taught by the métis (part Native American) teacher Hyemeyohsts Storm. His wheels have, pretty much, become the standard ones for many people in the West. These are shown in the medicine wheel diagram shown on this page.

I have specific objects, which I have used when constructing many hundreds of altars over the last few decades. These are a cedar cone for the South, a specific rock for the West, a magpie's wing for the North and a statue of Padmasambhava<sup>1</sup> for the East. I also always put five lit candles, one in the very centre and one each for each of the directions.

I have made altars like this for so long, their making has become part of me, and so, for me, an altar like this denotes the setting up of this form of sacred space - creates the sacred centre of Creation. Altars in this form are not traditional *per se*, but they have now, most certainly, become traditional for me.

### CALLING IN THE POWERS

When I am working with the sacred pipe the way the tobacco is placed into the pipe's bowl - along with the prayers to the Sacred Powers made during the filling of the pipe - means that I always formally invite the Powers in to help with the ceremony. But in general 'calling in' the spirit powers is an important aspect of creating a sacred space in its own right, and it can - without any physical supports such as an altar - be the simplest and most quickly performed method.

But before I write about that, let me say a little about intent. Intent is very important when you perform a ceremony or create sacred space. In reality it is the essence of what you do - whether you do it with words, objects or visualisations.

If you place a central altar down, with objects representing the Four Directions, you will be building intent when you first place the

cloth, and then expanding it each time you place one of the objects down. You can do this silently, but it can be a good thing to do it verbally too - calling in each Power as you place the object.

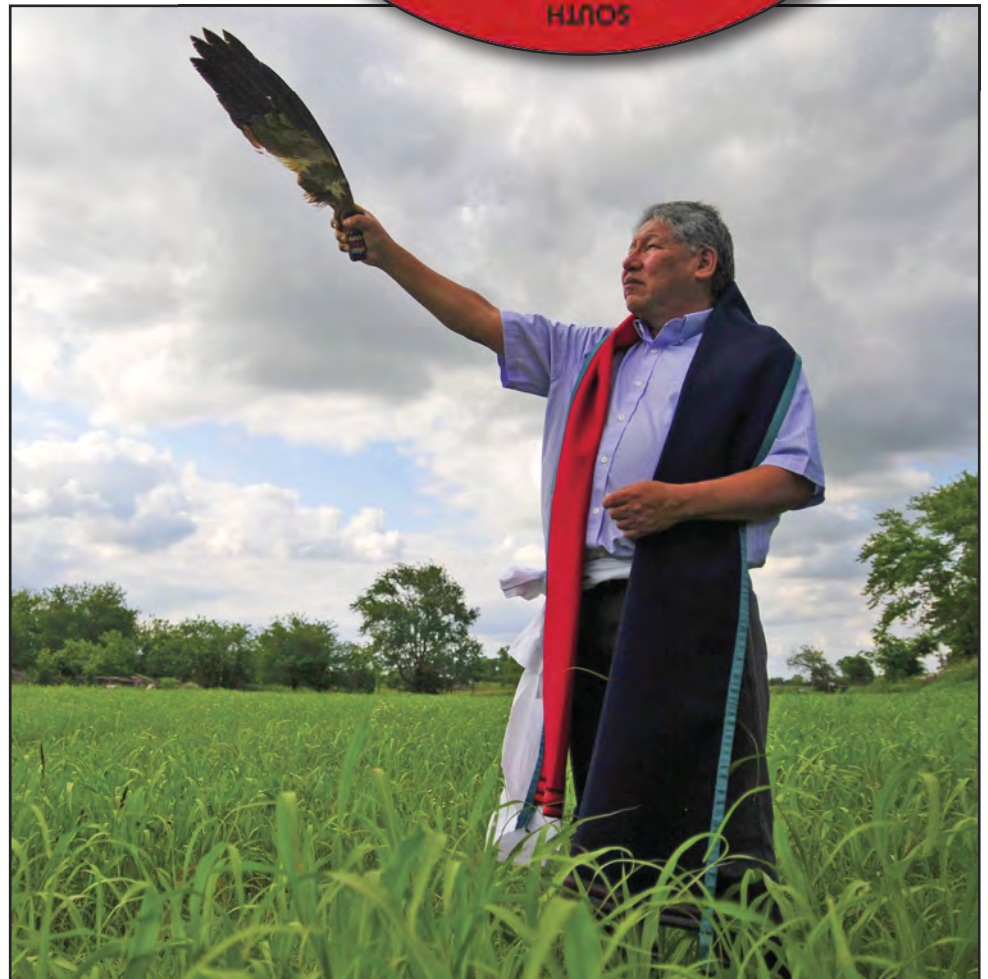
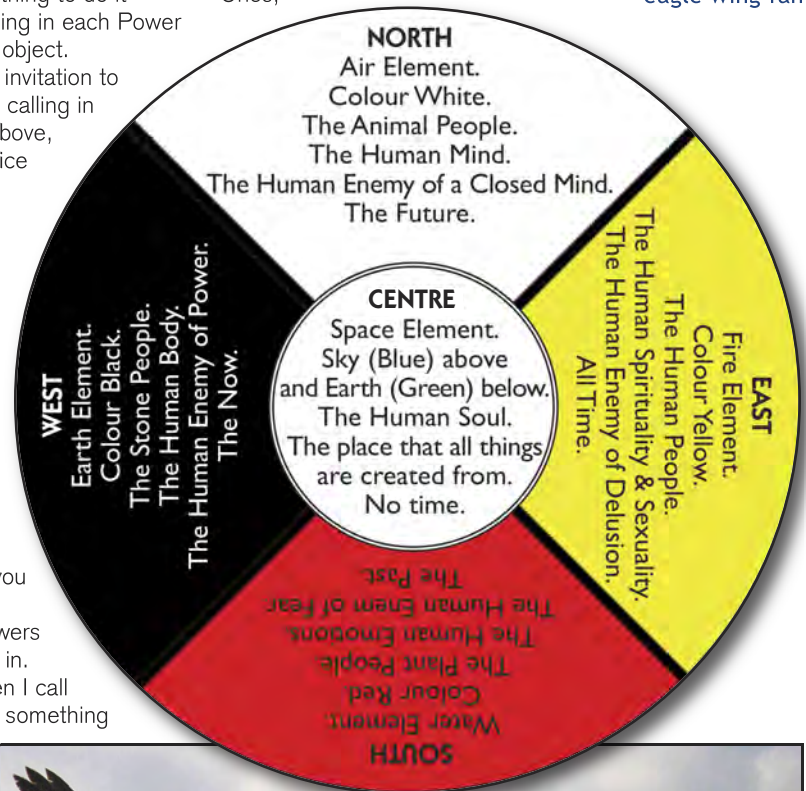
However, this invitation to the Powers - the calling in - can, as I said above, be the only practice needed.

To call in the powers you need to be clear what you are calling in, and it is good to be eloquent in your language too. It comes with practice - but the most important thing is clarity of speech and thought, so you really are actually inviting in the Powers you wish to invite in.

Generally when I call the Powers I say something

simple like: "Grandfather [Sky powers], Grandmother [Grandmother Earth], Sacred Ones,

*Below:*  
calling to the Powers using an eagle wing fan



**Below:**  
holding an eagle  
feather fan  
while making  
prayers outside  
of a sweatlodge.

Grandfathers [the Four Direction Powers].

The powers are not going to respond any better if you give them yards of verbose invitation, being lean of speech is good when you are doing ceremony, just as it is in life in general.

I might well face each of the directions in turn, always turning to the next one 'sun-wise' - clockwise - as moving the way the sun does in the sky symbolises that you are moving 'with life'. Some traditions - such as the ancient, pre-Buddhist Bon tradition of Tibet - travel anti sunwise in ceremonies, but this is rare, and in the West there has been a long tradition that it is a negative thing to do, done for black

magic, or if done accidentally will result in misfortune.

Some people will call in the Powers of the Directions simply by naming them - north, south, east and west - and I generally do this because I know the deeper meaning underneath those simple names. Other people may call in the four elements - earth, air, fire and water - possibly facing the direction they are attributed too - or other spirit powers. Intent is all.

I generally hold something when I am calling in the Powers. This may well be a feather, or my eagle wing fan, but it could be a rattle or a drum beater - whatever is sacred to you.

Holding something sacred helps to give you a sense of power and authority; it is like a conductor before an orchestra. When doing ceremony, one needs a balance of deep humility and authority. Humility because you know before Creation, the Great Mystery, the spirits you are nothing; and authority, because you are solid in your own centre and grounded, and sure about what you are doing. You as the 'dance chief' - the ceremony leader - are a bridge between this world and the spirit world, and the last thing a ceremony needs is a wobbly bridge.

I will also often add another line to my calling in, inviting in the 'Uncles and Aunts.' These are my relatives in creation, the plants and animals and general spirit folk, such as land spirits, local protectors and the like.

I don't tend to include ancestors with my intent in this group, if I want to invite them, I will call to them specifically, by inviting in the 'Sacred Ancestors'.

However, it is important to remember not everything is friendly out there. If you were to put an open invitation out to a party in the physical world, and everyone was free to come, you would get some unsavoury guests. It is not any different in the spirit world, so it is good to put a filter on any wider invitation you make beyond the Sacred Four directions and the Above and Below. This would apply to the Uncles, Aunts and ancestors.

The way I have been taught to do it is to put a caveat on my invitation, only inviting those 'who love me' (or 'love us' if i am working with a group), as not everything out there will love you. Be selective when you invite in your house guests.

#### **KEEP YOURSELF SAFE**

This brings us to another, often thorny, subject - how protected should our working be, from 'ghouls and ghosties and long-leggedy beasties?'

It is easy to become paranoid about the spirits, I have seen many people get so, and it gives them hours and weeks of entertainment, drama and neurosis. If you are too careful as to what they invite in you can end up being scared of



your shadow.

But, on the other hand, I have seen people be so cavalier and slipshod with their ceremonies that they let all sorts of 'undesirables' in to their space, and can, as a result, sometimes get themselves into all sorts of trouble.

I think, with any ceremony, one needs to have developed a degree of grounded awareness. If you get 'vibes' that 'something wicked this way comes,' you need to deal with it in no uncertain terms, but the first thing is developing an accurate awareness.

One night I was 'pouring for a sweat lodge' (running the lodge) with a friend, and both of us, unbeknown to the other, sensed the lodge was under attack. As a result both of us turned our backs on the central stone pit in the darkness, and faced the lodge's door to protect the lodge from any spirit intruders.

It was the most frightening ceremony I have ever been in, and a lot more happened during it than just a vague sense of dread, but it should have been a 'safe' - albeit - powerful - space, as we were both experienced and had done the ceremony properly.

In hindsight, it was the land the lodge was built upon, a most disturbed piece of land, and we should have factored that in the mix, but didn't.

Normally a ceremony will be safe and sound, but work with your 'spider senses' all the time and keep testing the feel, the vibe, of the state of play, and act accordingly.

The amount of protection needed will also depend on what the ceremony is for. If you are doing a healing for someone who has a serious health issue, such as a cancer or a bad infection - an illness that has a predatory spirit - you will need to be aware much more about protection than you will if you are doing a general blessing ceremony or a simple prayer circle.

There are many ways to protect a sacred space, and these include both physical and visualised defences.

In Tibetan Buddhism, a lot of the practices are done by visualising. Don't be put off, thinking this is some sort of second rate, new age way to defend a

space, because it is not.

However, visualising is like a muscle, and you need to work out regularly in order to bring up the sacred muscle tone. I have been visualising in a magical and sacred way for decades, but I was 'totally pants' at it when I started. So, the good news is - yes you can do it, but the bad news is, you might have to practise a lot and get spiritually fit, till you get the hang of it to do it strongly.

However, saying that, to borrow a phrase from Buddhism, it is important to develop a sense of 'vajra pride.' This means that you develop a really deep, inner certainty - a pride - that you are doing it right and it is working - even if you feel you are a raw beginner. This is about intent of course, so even if you can't visualise for toffee, if you can honestly tell yourself, with all your intent, that you are doing it right - it will be right.

I often visualise I am standing or sitting within a circle of protection when I am working. This can be a circle of light, but I often use a circle of tigers - calling them in with a tiger mantra.

I also place a visualised medicine wheel shape - a cross



within a circle - in each of the four directions around me and above and below me.

Because I work a lot with the phurba, the ritual demon dagger, found in Tibetan Buddhism and shamanism, and I very often place a visualised picket fence of them around me, at least 8 in a circle. I visualising thrusting them into the earth, and generally also say an accompanying Tibetan mantra as I place each one. Mantras are a bit like magic spells, in fact the word mantra actually means 'that which protects [the mind]'.

**When doing ceremony, one needs a balance of deep humility and authority. Humility because you know before the Great Mystery, you are nothing; and authority, because you are solid in your own centre and grounded, and sure about what you are doing. You are a bridge between this world and the spirit world, and the last thing a ceremony needs is a wobbly bridge**

If you are lucky enough to work in a regular room - a shrine room - you can do a lot more with the fabric of the walls of the room, spending time visualising protection and protective symbols of your choice into the walls, so that you know those symbols are there - in the fabric - acting all the time you doing practice in there. You can also paint symbols on the wall or hang textiles. The floor of my shrine room is covered in Tibetan tiger rugs, which also act as protection, as in Tibetan traditions such rugs attract the dakini, the fairy-like spirit beings who come around

*Inset: an antique bronze and iron phurba*

*Below: a Tibetan Buddhist monk holds a phurba ritual dagger*

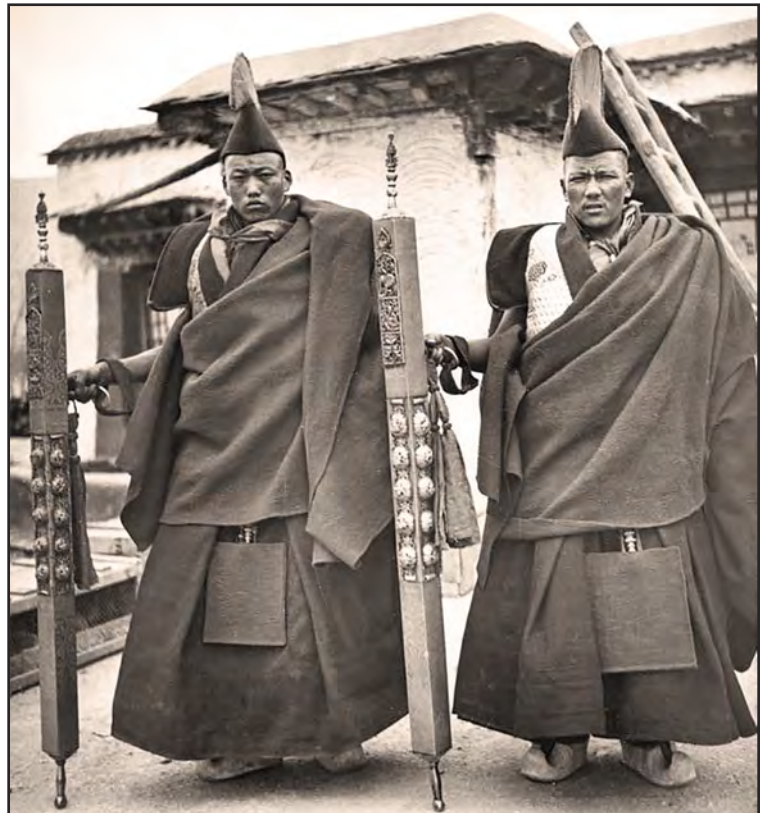




Above: a Tibetan thangka painting depicting a form of Mahakala, one of the main protector beings

Top right: two Tibetan Buddhist dob-dob monks, with their ritual clubs of office

Below: traditional Pembrokeshire cottage with red windows and doors to protect against fairies



practitioners to teach and protect them.

Red is generally considered a sacred protective colour, as it represents life and blood. In Pembrokeshire, in West Wales, where I live it is traditional to paint doors and windows red to stop the fairies and other mischievous spirits getting into the house.

If you are working with physical things for protection, the easiest and most obvious is smudge, the smoke of burning herbs, such as desert or white sage, or cedar or juniper. Smudging is so commonly practiced nowadays I don't think I need to say anymore about it, but if you are in doubt about it, Google it, you will find loads of information online.

Other physical things can include making a sacred circle of some kind. I often use eagle feathers - laid end to end, running

in a sun wise manner - and sometimes *paho* - sacred blue corn flour, or on occasions salt or tobacco, although these work best outside as they are difficult to clean up from carpets or wooden floors. If very extreme measures are called for, I might use something called 'banishing medicine', which is an equal mix of salt, garlic and cayenne pepper.

I would also, at times, place physical phurbas in the directions - ideally iron ones, but bronze or brass ones would be fine - especially if I intended they were iron. Protection bundles - collections of sacred objects in a bag or wrapped in cloth - can also placed in each of the directions. These are individual things, and I think - if you feel drawn to making these - it is best you talk to your spirits about what you should put in them.

### SPIRITS OF PROTECTION

I would - if needed - also call in the Protectors, spirit powers who act as protector beings - but as always, only those who love me, and who support the work I am doing. In Tibetan Buddhism there are specific wrathful Protectors, and they are there to keep the teachings and the practitioners safe.

Protectors act as 'dog soldiers' and this is another phrase I often use when I think of them. Dog soldier is a Native American term. Originally they were the bravest of warriors, those who would tie themselves to a spear, thrust the spear into the ground, and refuse to leave that place - fighting until they had either died or had won. Nowadays, the term is often used to denote the sacred 'police' at a ceremony, those who keep order and maintain the boundaries.

In Tibetan ceremonies big burly monks called dob-dob have the same role. When doing a ceremony - especially with a lot of energetic potential - it is good to have dog soldiers.

Another aspect of protection, especially in shamanism, is the 'shaman's armour.' This is the ritual clothing which many shamans wear. Shaman's armour is full of spirit helpers who assist the shaman and protect them, and in addition to that they are generally hung with empowered sacred objects, designed to protect the shaman in other ways - such as bronze mirrors, one of whose roles is to reflect away any harm.

The putting on of shaman's armour creates sacred space in it's



own right, as when a shaman puts it on, they are - with their intent - stepping out of the mundane everyday world, and stepping into the sacred centre of all things. Once they put it on, they immediately have their spirits close to them, and they start to go into trance. I know from my own experience of putting on my own ritual clothes how powerfully and quickly this trance can fall upon one.

Sometimes a shaman will not need their full armour - it depends on the nature of the work - but if it's a piece of dangerous work, the shaman will generally be in full kit, boots and all.

Even if you do not have or use 'shaman's amour,' you can have items of clothes you keep just for ceremony and also perhaps amulets or other 'ritual jewellery' which, when you wear them, denotes you are doing sacred work of some sort.

It is also good to dress respectfully for the spirits, so the wearing of fine clothes, ideally clothes kept especially for ceremony; this will help in the building of your intent, and also show you are approaching the spirits in a good way.

Creating a sacred space is just that - the telling to the universe that this place, at this time, is sacred because you are 'opening the sky' opening the gates to the spirit world.

The main thing is your intent - if you have clear intent, you will have created a good, strong sacred space. Intent is like legal language -

it needs no sloppy thinking, no magical loopholes. You have to cross every 't' and dot every 'i' and have all bases covered. You need to be on your toes, ready to steer the sacred ship away from unexpected high seas and into a safe harbour - you need your eyes peeled at all times and your feet firmly on the ground.

And when you have finished the ceremony, you need to collapse the space again - close the sky - and thank the spirit helpers you called in to assist you (so keep a mental checklist when you do your original calling in), scatter and dismantle the central altar if you have used one, put away any sacred objects employed, and generally close it down, so the spirits know play time is over for now.

Nicholas Breeze Wood is the editor of Sacred Hoop Magazine. He has made a long study of Native American, Tibetan and Southern Siberian shamanic traditions - especially their use of ritual objects. He is deeply apprenticed to his spirits. [www.NicholasBreezeWood.me](http://www.NicholasBreezeWood.me)  
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NOTES:

1: Padmasambhava is a Tibetan first-shaman figure and Tantric magician. In Buddhism he is considered to be the Tantric Buddha, the Buddha whom the historical Buddha (the man who formed Buddhism) spoke of when he said a more powerful Buddha would come after him. In historical terms, Padmasambhava was an 8th century prince from the region between modern day Pakistan and Afghanistan who brought the Buddhist teachings to shamanic Tibet. He was said to have travelled all over Tibet and surrounding

*Creating a sacred space is just that, telling universe that this place, at this time, is sacred because you are 'opening the sky' opening the gates to the spirit world*



Above: a female shaman's costume. Tofalar people, Siberia, late C19th

Below: a Tibetan woman with a domestic altar, containing offerings and a ritual dar-dar arrow with bronze mirror tied to it, which is standing in a brass pot

