

SWEAT LODGE

If you are on a healing journey the Sweat Lodge is a good place to begin because when you are sitting in a sweat lodge, you are at the centre of the Four Directions.

The sweat lodge ceremony forms part of the ceremonial life of many First Nations. Even within one territory, there may be differences in the way the ceremony is conducted.

Some Types of Sweats

The Sweat Lodge has been called “the most powerful structure in the world.” It is a place specially constructed to conduct ceremony. Sweats vary from purification and cleansing to healing sweats. It is said that the Sweat Lodge during ceremony “responds” to what the participants need.

Other types of sweats include clan sweats, such as Bear clan sweats, sweats for fasters both before and after they fast, sweats for sundancers and sweats when you seek your spirit name.

In some traditions, the women sweat together at one time and the men sweat at another. Specific sweats may be held for children or for warriors.

~ Fire and Altar ~

As you approach the sweat lodge you come first to the altar and the sacred fire where the rocks, called Grandmothers and Grandfathers, are heated for the sweat. One of the teachings of the fire is that when we leave this earth, we have to go through fire to get to the spirit world. It takes only a second and all the impurities that we have gathered while on this earth are removed.

Both the fire and the altar are in line with the door of the lodge.

Before you enter the lodge, offerings are made at the altar or the sacred fire. Tobacco is always one of the offerings.

The Structure of the Lodge

A sweat lodge is a dome-shaped structure. When people talk about the lodge they talk about entering the womb of Mother Earth. It is a sacred place.

~ Doorway ~

The direction of the doorway that the people enter differs according to the teachings of the conductor. One conductor’s teachings may specify that the doorway face east. Another conductor’s teachings will require that the doorway face south because his or her medicine and what they learned came from the south. The teachings of another lodge specify that the direction of the doorway change throughout the year. This four direction lodge would face each direction for three months of the year.

~ Frame ~

The frame of the sweat lodge or sweat house is made of a specific number of red willow, ash, birch, maple or jack pine saplings. Some teachings refer to the frame as the ribs of Mother Earth. Tobacco is placed at the base of the hole that each pole is set into.

In the past, the frame would be covered with buffalo or deer hides. Today, canvas tarps and blankets are used. The coverings keep the light out and the heat in.

Once the lodge is constructed, a ceremony is held before the first sweat takes place.

~ Inside the Lodge ~

Inside the sweat lodge, the participants sit in a circle around the central fire pit.

The sweat lodge conductor usually sits at one side of the door and may have other participants sit in the four directions of the lodge. The number of people attending the ceremony varies depending on the reason for the sweat.

~ Grandmothers and Grandfathers ~

A firekeeper tends the sacred fire outside the lodge. At the request of the conductor, the firekeeper brings the Grandmothers and Grandfathers to the lodge door. They are then placed in the pit at the centre of the lodge by the conductor’s helper. Even though the firekeeper is not inside the sweat lodge, he is very much a part of this ceremony and may receive teachings, cleansing and healing.

In some teachings, the rocks are known as the bones of Mother Earth. Women call the rocks Grandmothers and men call them Grandfathers.

In one tradition, teachings describe four-lodges-in-one where the number of rocks is specified for each type of sweat. Seven rocks are used in the cleansing sweat, fourteen rocks are used in the healing sweat, twenty-one rocks are used in the hunting sweat and twenty-eight rocks are used in the truth sweat.

~ Drum ~

When you enter the sweat lodge you are seeking the help of the Creator and the spirits. The helping spirits are called into the sweat lodge by means of the prayers, songs, drums or shakers. A drum, either a little hand drum or the water drum, is an important item in the ceremony because the drum is made from all of Creation. The sound of the drum is like the heartbeat of Mother Earth.

Songs and prayers are offered during the ceremony. Sometimes a pipe is used.

Each person has a chance to speak or pray within the lodge. Cedar water is poured on the Grandmothers and Grandfathers, creating a cleansing steam in the lodge.

At the end of the ceremony, the spirits are thanked and sent home.

When you come out of the sweat lodge your spirit feels new and alive. You can feel the healing energies and you are more aware of all Creation and the beauty that is there.

Sweat Lodge Conductors

Sweat lodge conductors are men or women who have trained for many years to earn the right to conduct sweats. They have received the teachings and have gone through ceremonies to develop the gift that is given to them.

The sweat lodge conductor knows the protocol and history of his or her lodge. They are able to explain it clearly and concisely when asked.

It is important that the sweat lodge conductor is aware of health issues you may have before you enter the lodge.

He or she is also able to assist you with your experiences in the sweat lodge.

Preparations for a Sweat

When you request a sweat, an offering of tobacco is made to the sweat conductor.

Some sweat lodge conductors say you should abstain from alcohol or drugs for at least four days, others say seven days.

As our awareness and knowledge of our traditions and culture increases, so does our honour and respect for these ways. This has not always been the case in our communities. There are always those who present themselves as Healers, Elders or Medicine People who have not earned that title and may use the teachings and medicines in the wrong way. It is important for everyone, especially young people, to be aware of this and to exercise caution when they seek healing, teachings or advice. It is advisable to consult with people whom you trust to get referrals to respected and recognized Traditional Elders, Healers or Medicine People.

Other pamphlets in this series include:

- C Approaching Healers, Elders and Medicine People
- C Fasting
- C Clans
- C Your Name and Colours
- C Feasts and Give Aways
- C Moontime
- C Traditional Healing
- C Four Sacred Medicines
- C Sacred Items and Bundles

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“Native Teachings are about a Way of Life”

The information in this pamphlet is only a small portion of the many and extensive Native Teachings that exist. Teachings vary from First Nation to First Nation and even from one geographic region to another. For more information, please consult with a Traditional Elder, Healer or Medicine Person.

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