

# What is Shamanism?

by O'dl-la Tlv-da-tsi/Gary Gent

My sister, Ai Gvhdi Waya, asked me to write about shamanism. At first I smiled at her request. We'd lived in a shamanistic household when we were growing up. Later, as adults, we'd walked the path expected of a shaman. I asked her how I could encapsulate an entire lifetime into twenty or fewer pages. She said I'd find a way. She was right.

Our father was one-quarter Eastern Cherokee through his great-grandmother. As children growing up, we didn't know about shamanism; indeed, the word was never mentioned. My father never spoke of his Cherokee blood because, as I later found out, my Cherokee ancestor's blood and heritage were "hidden" in the family closet of skeletons. Back in that day, if one had an Indian in the family tree, it warranted shoving beneath the rug and never mentioning the fact. As a result of this prejudicial attitude, my sister and I know little about our great great grandmother's blood (although very little of it) which runs in our veins. Before she died, our Aunt Elaine, my father's sister, said that our common Cherokee ancestor was very dark skinned, short and had snapping black eyes and hair. We never knew her Cherokee name, but one small piece of information we have is that she was from the Wolf Clan.

As the third youngest in a family of four, I didn't even know I had a Cherokee ancestor. I know my father extolled our extensive Irish heritage and the drop of Dutch blood in his veins but he never mentioned the Cherokee connection. Of the four children in the family, I got the "Indian" looks; dark olive skin, dark brown eyes, dark brown hair and high cheekbones -- and the tall, skinny frame, to boot. My older sister, on the other hand, looked very white, but she had the dark brown hair, blue eyes (many Cherokee are lighter skinned and lighter eyed than most other Native American) and high cheekbones. She complains that she wishes she'd gotten the skinny frame too. I told her: next lifetime.

Ai Gvhdi Waya and I also have something else we share: a genetic heritage rich in shamanism. I believe our Cherokee great-great-grandmother was in part responsible for this but, after much research, I now believe our Irish roots also contribute to this ability.

Shamanism, in a few words, is the ability to "fly." No, I'm not talking about out of body experiences. That is known as "astral traveling." Instead, having shamanic skills means that one has the ability to shift into an altered state of consciousness while still awake (and not on any drugs or hallucinogenic substances), control that state and come back out of it *at will*.

Somewhere in our genetic history, my sister and I received the skill and talent to move into altered states at will and "fly," or travel through the other dimensions. A little scientific explanation will help readers understand what I'm saying. The left hemisphere of our brain is focused entirely on our third-dimensional existence here on Mother Earth. Most men are left-brain dominant (with the exception of Indians around the world, who are right-brain dominant).

## Left Brain/Right Brain

The left brain has to see, weigh and measure what it observes through a set of eyes in our head. It also has nerve endings moving from that hemisphere down to our throat region -- so, the left brain has a voice, a larynx with which to communicate in this third dimension only. It is the microcosm, the detailer, the grounding element that keeps us in our bodies and rooted here like a tree, in a manner of speaking. It is also as a microscope, unable to be aware of or see the whole that surrounds us every breathing moment of our existence in this physical vehicle we call a body. There is a filtering device in the left hemisphere that *blocks* our awareness of the other dimensions that are simultaneously interacting and interfacing with our third dimension. That way we're able to focus and concentrate on our life here and now.

The right brain is the macrocosm. It sees and perceives everything, whether it is seen or unseen by our naked eyes. All women and indigenous Indians worldwide are right--brain dominant. This hemisphere is creative and holistic and is the all-knowing side of the brain. Artists, writers, mathematicians and musicians work out of this hemisphere; they tap in to the unseen, the *metaphysical*, if you will, of our life. (That is what "meta" means: "beyond" the physical). If the left brain can be compared to a microscope, the right hemisphere is just the opposite. This side is aware of every subtle change, every vibration, whether perceived by the ears, eyes or body. It does not have a filtering device in it like the left hemisphere has, so it is in constant touch with all the dimensions that are around us.

Did you know that the right brain has no nerves connected the larynx/voice as the left hemisphere does? So where is the right brain's "voice"? The Cherokee believe that the voice resides in our heart and solar plexus or gut/stomach region. We call it intuition and knowing. When you know something, that doesn't necessarily mean it can be proven by weighing it, measuring it or even seeing it -- you just *know*. Further, the right brain's "eyes" are located in the center of our brow -- metaphysically it's know and

the third eye or brow chakra. To say the least, the right hemisphere is ultra-sensitive to all things seen and unseen.

Because the right hemisphere does not have that filtering device on it to stop me from being aware of the other dimensions, this gives me and others who have this skill/talent in place the ability to move into the unseen realms that surround us. There are at least four dimensions recognized by science: the first, second, third and fourth dimensions. We all live in the third dimension because, with our physical eyes, we can perceive three sides or dimensions to any object viewed.

A person who can shift into the right hemisphere can perceive the fourth side or fourth dimension and actually see *through* a physical object to see that fourth side of it. A shaman can move at will into this altered state that resides in the right hemisphere of the brain. Usually it's done with the beat of a drum because the drum approximated the heartbeat of Mother Earth. And we all know that for nine months we grew inside our biological mothers listening to the beat of her heart. This is why the drum is such a powerful tool for a shaman; it triggers and approximates the heartbeat so the shift is easily made.

Being a shaman doesn't mean one is a medicine person. One is not. First of all, shamanism is a skill that is practiced around the world by individuals in every country. Secondly, no one *owns* the process. Thirdly, Native Americans are only one of the groups with a genetic predisposition toward this skill. I've found that there is a European connections in such countries as Yugoslavia, Hungary and Spain where there are people who can easily develop shamanistic skills. Another branch is the Irish/Celtic or the Druid connection. It seems that people who have the ability for shamanism have one of these three genetic bloodlines. Or they may have more than one, as in our case: the Cherokee and Irish genes.

## **Honoring the Right Brain**

In the old days, shamans trained for a decade or more to refine, harness and control their skills. It wasn't uncommon for a shaman candidate to suddenly, one day, switch entirely into the right brain function. Back then, this switch was respected, honored and the person who was now living in all the dimensions at once was cared for by the entire village. Today, they would be sent to a mental ward, shot up with drugs, given electric shock treatment and called mentally unbalanced or worse.

Back then a shaman candidate remained in the right hemisphere learning about the other dimensions, talking to other spiritual beings,

traveling, learning and being educated by his or her inner, unseen guides and teachers. At some point, the candidate would come back to "reality" -- our third dimension -- and resume his or her living among the villagers. The student who went through this rite of initiation would have learned from the shaman of the village, been guided, supported and taught shamanistic methods. But first, the candidate had to go through the process of discovering the incredible worlds seen by the right brain's "eye."

Once the candidate had learned the ability to shift between conscious states, or literally between worlds, he took his place among the people as a healer. A shaman's entire reason for being is to retrieve or recover split-off pieces of a person's spirit. This split usually occurs due to a trauma, a tragedy, an accident, or a person's having taken (unconsciously) a piece of spirit out of neediness. The shaman would have his assistant beat the drum, and he would lie down, close his eyes, switch to the right hemisphere of his brain and journey, or fly, through the other dimensions hunting for and finding the missing pieces to bring them back to the patient.

## **"Hunting Dogs" of Spirit**

To dispel any possible awe about a shaman, my sister and I always say that we are glorified "hunting dogs." Usually a hunting dog leaps into the water to retrieve a killed duck or bounds across the field to retrieve the luckless bird. Shamans do the same thing. We "hunt" for and "retrieve" for our client pieces of missing or stolen spirit which have been lost in the unseen dimensions.

Nowadays, "shamanism" is a buzz word. I kind of smile sometimes when I see an advertisement in a magazine or book that says the person is a "certified" shaman. Actually, there is no certification from a school that can make you a shaman. One cannot attend a two-day, five-day or two-week workshop or seminar and come out a "shaman." At age 44, I can look back and know that at the tender age of six, I began my shamanistic training. It has taken up to the past few years for me to hone my skills to a level where I'm comfortable doing soul recovery and extraction for others. I find it incredible that in two weeks one can become a shaman.

My father was a shaman. He never said he was, but he didn't have to. He *lived* what he was and utilized his skills all the time in large and small ways. My earliest discovery about my father, and my siblings in general, was that I knew we were "different" from most other families. How, I didn't know. I just sensed it. That discovery didn't make me feel important -- just different.

From the time I was about four years old, I can remember the three of us always being with our father out in the forest. You see, we came from a very poor family and, growing up in the 1950's, there was no welfare. Besides, my parents were too proud to have taken it anyway. As a result, my mother and the three of us constantly shadowed his movement because we lived, literally, off the land. We accompanied him duck hunting, deer hunting and rabbit hunting. By the time my sister was 12 years old, she was scouring the black lava rocks of Blackfoot, Idaho, a .22 rifle in hand, with me trailing behind her, hunting rabbit for dinner that night.

Our father never said much at all; he taught by example. And let me say that he was painfully human, too, not some god to be worshipped. The good things he taught us were about respect and reverence for Mother Earth and all her relatives. I'm sure his Cherokee blood ran strongly in his veins because he was always happiest when he was in the forest hunting or on a river bank fishing. He hated interfacing with civilization in general, and was somewhat anti-social in his behavior. In his defense, I must say that during World War II he had three ships shot out from under him. Nowadays, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is recognized and helped, but my father never received the emotional or mental support he needed after four harrowing years of seeing war at its grisly worst.

I can remember catching fish and skinning and filleting them. I can remember several mule deer bucks hanging by their antlers from a tall tree, gutted, the steam rising out of their cavities in the early morning chill. I remember being very close to Nature, to all living things and understanding on clear terms that if something was killed, it was to help us survive. My father always said that we should thank the animal for giving its life so that we might live. Maybe that's why today my family and I are vegetarian.

## **The Training Begins**

When Ai Gvhdi Waya was nine years old, my father told my mother to put her into metaphysical training. He never said for *what*. Being the nosy six-year-old younger brother, I wanted to know what she was doing. Every night after my sister finished her homework, she would go to a small room that had been specially set up for her studies. There was a small ceremony involved in all of this: she would get her bath, climb into her nightgown and to the room. My mother would light the "incense," the candle, and my sister would wave her hands through the smoke and cleanse herself off. Today this practice is called smudging. She would then sit down, read certain books and practice what my father had instructed her to learn.

Because we were so close, Ai Gvhdi Waya relented and allowed me to stand quietly at her side on some nights to observe what she was doing. My father had set up several tasks for her to practice on a weekly basis. For instance, he told my mother to place one drop of oil in a large bowl filled to the top with clear, clean water. Then Ai Gvhdi Waya was to concentrate on getting all those tiny beads of oil together and gathered back into the center of the bowl! I stood mesmerized, night by night, watching her try to do this. And, sure enough, she was not only able to gather the tiny oil beads into one big one, but to move the bead of oil anywhere in the bowl; such was her mental concentration and focus.

So, by accident and my sister's kindness in allowing a six-year-old to be under foot, I began my shamanistic training. Ai Gvhdi Waya was a very curious person and would always ask our father *why* she was doing this. He would rarely say anything; only give her that look that told her *not* to ask. I asked, too. One day, he told me that we, the children, all had a mission and this was part of the training. What mission? I talked it over with my older sister and she didn't know the answer either. Now we know the answer because it has been slowly revealed to us over the decades.

## Teaching by Experience

In the old days, Native American medicine people and shamans taught their students not through the written word or, indeed, through the spoken word. They sent their trusting students out into the world to experience an adventure which the student would then bring back to discuss with his or her teacher. Looking back on the way our father began to hone our shamanistic skills, I see he did the same thing. Providing we *did* something with our training, we *might* receive an explanation or an answer. Usually we didn't. So this form of teaching was powerful in that it gave us the experience wholly unto ourselves -- and no one could take that away from us. We'd not learned it from the lips of another person, not read it in a book, not seen it performed; no, we *lived* it, the most powerful way to create confidence and knowing within a person. Later in life, Ai Gvhdi Waya would meet a Western Cherokee medicine man who taught just like our father had, only this time, because she understood the process, she made incredible progress through this form of education and profited enormously from it.

Our father was a powerful individual, metaphysically speaking. I can still remember how, when we lived in Oregon, he would play "hide and seek" with the three of us. Keep in mind he was about six feet tall and weighed 250 pounds -- a large man. The game always went something like this: we three would hide in our bedroom, our eyes closed, and count to 100. Then we would fan out through the one-story house with an attic, trying to find

our father. Kids are great at knowing all the nooks and crannies where one can hide but we could never find our father. You see, our father had the ability to disappear physically. It's very hard to hide a man of his size anywhere. But he was invisible and we didn't know that, so we ran breathlessly around for half an hour trying to find him.

Ai Gvhdí Waya finally figured out what our father was doing, so she wisely enlisted the help of our half-coyote dog, Foxy, who found him, despite his being invisible to our eyes, standing out by the gate in the yard. The dog yelped and barked, looking up at him. My sister ran back to the house yelling that she's found him. By the time the rest of us heard the good news, we saw our father walking back into the house, fully visible to our eyes.

As my sister progressed in her metaphysical education in preparation for her someday becoming a shaman, I watched, listened and learned. Ai Gvhdí Waya got so good with her mental focus and concentration that when I wasn't looking, she'd make my ear or nose itch furiously. At first, I didn't realize she was making it happen -- but after I caught on, I resolved to intensify my own ability to concentrate and focus so that we would become evenly matched. There was never any malicious intent in our familial games, and we'd been taught early on by our mother never to harm anyone or anything with these newly awakened abilities.

We had an interesting and unusual childhood where metaphysics was encouraged and supported equally with living in the "real" world. Such was the shamanistic directive: we had to learn to live with one foot in the third dimension and the other foot in the other dimensions. The trick, the one that takes decades to accomplish, is to walk around in the present, the here-and-now, and yet be sensitively attuned at the same time to the other dimensions. That is what Native Americans recognize as harmony or balance.

The point of sharing these incidents with you is to bring home the fact that our training for shamanism began at a very early age and has continued ever since. We're still learning, exploring and being shown new possibilities and realities. Shamans can't be made over night, nor can they be certified. I have no doubt there are people out there with the correct genetic structure in place to perform shamanistic work, but I cringe because the rest of what the work is about is rarely provided to such individuals.

## Shamanism as a Way of Life

Shamanism is more than just a skill or technique. It is a *way of life*. It is a way of walking one's talk -- and becoming it. At its finest, shamanism is a heart centered way of life. At its worst, it can fall into the wrong hands, those with few morals, values or principals, with brittle egos and lack of integrity. Then it becomes sorcery.

Shamanism is an Earth-centered spirituality, an unbroken umbilical cord extending from your heart to our real Mother, the Earth. We are, after all, her children. My sister and I grew up in a true Native American environment from several standpoints and even lived on the Navajo Reservation for a year, for which we are eternally grateful. We avoided starvation because of the wild meat we caught and killed. But we also prayed for the animal, too, and thanked it. How many people thank the cow or pig they're eating at their table tonight for giving its life so that they may live?

I'm grateful our mother instilled in us such high morals and values about metaphysics in general. Shamanism literally gives one access to another person on *all* levels, the client is completely vulnerable. If a person who is a shaman isn't of high moral fiber, then all may not end well for the client. This isn't said to frighten anyone but rather to force the reader into realizing shamanism isn't some "toy" to be played around with or taken lightly. Shamanic healing is a serious business and deserves to be respected as such. There are dangers for those who are shamans, too. I won't go into much detail on this point now (perhaps in a later article), but this is why it takes years, decades, to become a shaman. There are stresses, demands and rigors that can place the shaman in danger during a journey. If certain training and strengths aren't in place or can't be maintained, the shaman can be in trouble.

My sister and I agree that shamanism is a wonderful, holistic healing tool for those who are drawn to have it performed for them. We've seen miracles occur for our clients because of it. We've been a part of the process, and that is what is so humbling about being a shaman: we're only bird-dogs, open, conduit-like tubes through which the power of Love flows. Like sideline spectators, we not only get to see what is going on, we get to participate and yes, we get a healing because of it, too.

So if you are considering soul recovery and/or extraction, please investigate the background of the shaman you're thinking of utilizing. A "certificate" for "diploma" of shamanism doesn't mean anything -- not really. What does matter is the intent of the people claiming such skills, their moral



standing, their principles and how they carry and conduct themselves. Do they "walk their talk,"? How many years have they been practicing shamanism? With whom did they study? Be sure to ask for a referral list of at least three clients and call them. Find out if the soul recovery and extraction (SR/E) worked for these people. Lately I've been running into individuals who have had SR/E performed by "certified" shamans and they've reported poor results, or worse, no results. Remember this, too: true shamanism is about the heart -- not the head. This isn't some fantastic power trip. Most of the shamans I know aren't psychiatrists, psychologists or therapists. Instead, they are unnoticed, well-grounded, working class people who usually have nothing more than a high school education, sometimes less than that.

It doesn't take a higher education to make one a shaman. It does take a heart connected with one's head and one's soul. It takes a desire to help "all our relatives" and serve within our community to help mend the torn fabric of ourselves as human beings. Shamans in the old days were a respected hub of a great wheel called a village or community. They were more than just healers. They worked every day in the fields alongside everyone else and carried out the extra duties and responsibilities that came with their calling, as well.

There is no ego involved in being a shaman, and if you see someone exhibiting such arrogance or thinking they are special, be careful. Over the years, my sister and I have grown more humble about our abilities. After all, we're not doing it -- we're simply the messengers, nothing else. Great Spirit/God works *through* a shaman; nothing is coming *from* a shaman. So if someone is boasting, bragging, strutting around thinking they are "special", don't believe it. If anything, my sister and I agree, being a shaman is one of the most responsible positions we can imagine in our lives. Everything pales by comparison. That keeps you humble, too.

If a shaman journeys for you to recover missing soul pieces or performs extraction on you, *something* positive should happen to you within 48 to 72 hours after receiving the healing through the shaman. If it doesn't, then you need to explore the situation more fully with this "shaman" and do more investigation. In another article, I'll cover some of the journeys I've taken for others and share the wonderful outcomes with you.