

# The Meaning and Use of the Medicine Wheel

## Case Study: Lakota Philosophy

By Roy Dudgeon

### Introduction

This essay shall focus primarily upon the meaning of the closely related symbols of the circle and the Medicine Wheel in Native American philosophy, and conclude with a brief discussion of the contemporary relevance of those teachings.

While all Native American traditions did not share a single philosophy, there are many themes and symbols which are common to a wide variety of tribes. The medicine wheel, a cross inscribed within a circle in its simplest form, is one of those symbols.

Because of the great diversity which characterized Native American beliefs and practices, including those related to the Medicine Wheel and its symbolism, I have chosen a single tribe to serve as a case study in what follows. How far their beliefs are generalizable to other First Nations communities I leave it to readers to determine through their own research.

My case study shall be the Lakota speaking peoples who inhabit the northern American plains, in the North and South Dakota area. I chose them because of the abundant indigenous literature which exists for this tribe. Much of this literature is dictated or written by their own shamans or medicine men. There is also an abundant literature written by Western educated Lakota scholars concerning the traditions of their people.

### The Meaning of the Circle & the Medicine Wheel in Lakota Philosophy

As Lame Deer points out, it is actually the circle which is fundamental in Lakota philosophy: "...the Indian's symbol is the circle, the hoop. Nature wants things to be round...With us the circle stands for the togetherness of people...The camp in which every tipi had its place was also a ring. The tipi was a ring in which people sat in a circle and all the families in the village were in turn circles within a larger circle, part of the larger hoop which was the seven campfires of the Sioux, representing one nation. The nation was only part of the universe...circles within circles within circles, with no beginning and no end. To us this is beautiful and fitting, symbol and reality at the same time, expressing the harmony of life and nature".

The circle and the Medicine Wheel are closely related, however, since the Medicine Wheel is also circular. But let us begin with the fundamental meaning of the circle itself, as Lame Deer suggests, and proceed from there.

There are 8 points concerning this philosophy which I would like to emphasize in this essay:

1. The circle expresses an inclusive rather than exclusive philosophy. It brings things together within progressively larger contexts rather than separating them from one another. Each family resides in a circular home, which is part of a circular encampment or village. Each of the several Lakota villages were also a larger, or more inclusive circle, representing the Lakota people. And importantly, in Lakota philosophy, people were also just a small part of the larger context of the natural world.

Thus, one of the fundamental teachings of the circle is that it expresses a participatory philosophy, in which people are a part of the natural world. There is no separation between the two as there often is in modern Western traditions.

2. In the social sphere the circle represents two things. The first is the egalitarian political philosophy typical of many domestic scale cultures, while the second is the ideal of generalized reciprocity, or the practice of freely sharing food and other necessities within the group. They are closely related, since generalized reciprocity is a fundamental way of achieving one of any egalitarian political philosophy's main goals, an equitable distribution of wealth within society.

3. As already mentioned, Lakota philosophy is both participatory and egalitarian. When you combine the two, it follows logically that Lakota philosophy would extend egalitarianism in order to include all living things within an even greater circle of reciprocal relations.

Gregory Cajete, a Tewa scholar, describes such a pattern of beliefs as a philosophy of "natural democracy." What this implies is that Native philosophies generally did not reserve a special place for humanity. Instead they considered all living things to be equal, and equally deserving of respect.

Jenny Leading Cloud, a Lakota elder, once expressed this philosophy in the following manner:

"...we Indians think of the earth and the whole universe as a never ending circle, and in this circle man is just another animal. The buffalo and the coyote are our brothers; the birds, our cousins. Even the tiniest ant, even a louse, even the smallest flower you can find-they are all relatives".

Like all tribal societies, Lakota society was organized in terms of kinship among the people. But the participatory philosophy of the circle implies that relationship between humans and other species are also understood in terms of kinship.

4. This sort of participatory and egalitarian philosophy was also closely connected to the fact that Native American philosophies, like many tribal religions, tended to be animistic.

What this implies is that spirit was considered to be immanent within all things. Spirit, like humanity, was seen as part of nature.

This is very different from Western traditions, where spirit tends to be seen as transcendent or *supernatural*. Both the soul and God in Christian traditions, for example, tend to be portrayed as *beyond* nature. As *outside* it.

The same was not true of Lakota traditions, as Luther Standing Bear relates:

"Wakan Tanka (the Great Spirit) breathed life and motion into all things, both visible and invisible. He was over all, through all, and in all, and great as was the sun, and good as was the earth, the greatness and goodness of the Big Holy were not surpassed. The Lakota could look at nothing without at the same time looking at Wakan Tanka, and he could not, if he wished, evade His presence, for it pervaded all things and filled all space".

One of the implications of such an animistic philosophy is that Creation did not happen in 7 days, long ago, after which the Creator rested and watched. Rather, in Lakota philosophy, the creation is a continuous process. In this view the world is continuously being created and sustained by the immanent presence of the Great Spirit within all things.

5. If all things are manifestations of the Great Spirit's power, which flows through them and within them, it then follows logically that all things must be respected if the Great Spirit is to be respected. In other words, to respect nature and its ways is to respect "God" because the Great Spirit is not separate from the world.

As Standing Bear continued, this attitude of respect for the creator/creation imposed certain duties upon people:

"The animal had rights, the right to man's protection, the right to live, the right to multiply, the right to freedom, and the right to man's indebtedness...This concept of life and its relations was humanizing and gave the Lakota an abiding love. It filled his being with the joy and mystery of living; it gave him reverence for all life; it made a place for all things in the scheme of existence with equal importance for all. The Lakota could despise no creature, for all were of one blood, made by the same hand, and filled with the essence of the Great Mystery".

Not only does Wakan Tanka continuously breathe life and motion into the entire creation in this view, but all things are again related *through* its immanent presence within the world.

The idea of seeing all things as relatives in Lakota philosophy was also represented in the symbolism of picturing the Sky as a Father and the Earth as a Mother. As Charles Eastman, a Lakota author who published several books on their culture and beliefs in the early 1900s explained:

"...the Indian no more worshiped the Sun than the Christian adores the Cross. The Sun and the Earth, by an obvious parable, holding scarcely more of poetic metaphor than of scientific truth, were in his view the parents of all organic life. From the Sun, as the universal father, proceeds the quickening principle in nature, and in the patient and fruitful womb of our mother, the Earth, are hidden embryos of plants and men. Therefore our reverence and love for them was really an imaginative extension of our love for our immediate parents".

Importantly, both the male and female powers are pictured as equally necessary to life. In other words they are pictured as complementary principles. Just as the life of a human infant is only made possible through the coming together of its mother and father in sexual intercourse, the same is true of the analogous relationship between powers of Earth and Sky. All living things are once again represented as being *related* to one another by being children of Father Sky and Mother Earth.

6. Having learned something about the general implications and meanings of the circle in Lakota philosophy, we are now ready to come back to the Medicine Wheel. In sum, the Medicine Wheel brings together the teachings of the circle, such as egalitarianism, reciprocity, natural democracy, complementarity, and a participatory view of the relationship between humanity and nature, with the central importance of balance as an ideal in Lakota philosophy.

The Medicine Wheel is sometimes represented as a cross inscribed within a circle. The Four Directions are represented as points on this circle. The particular directions are often associated with different animals, colors, or characters in specific traditions, but these vary widely cross-culturally. The cardinal points are also connected by two lines from North to South and East to West.

These lines are often described as two paths, as they were by Black Elk. He described them as "the good red road" (east to west) and the black "road of difficulties" (north to south). The first was a harmonious or balanced path, and the second was an inharmonious or imbalanced path.

Note especially that the balanced path follows the pattern of celestial motion, or the patterns of nature itself, while the north/south direction is contrary to this pattern.

To quote Black Elk, in this symbol: "we see that everything leads into, or returns to, the center, and this center which is here, but which we know is really everywhere, is Wakan Tanka".

The ideal, the sacred, is represented by the center, the point of balance between all the natural forces, and by the place where balance and imbalance meet. And this center represents Wakan Tanka, or the "Power of the World", the Unity behind and within all things, and the ideal of the parts and whole moving together in harmony.

8. Finally, due to the fact that the sacred is seen as immanent within the natural world, it follows logically that one must also model one's own style of life after the ways of all living things. As Eastman described the teachings he received as a child, before being educated in one of the first American boarding schools:

"After arriving at a reverent sense of the pervading presence of the Spirit and giver of Life, and a deep consciousness of the brotherhood of man, the first thing for me to accomplish was to adapt myself perfectly to natural things, in other words, to harmonize myself with nature."

What this implies is that both one's own behavior and the patterns of relationship in the social sphere generally, have to be adapted to those which can be observed in nature among other forms of life. And since society is considered to be a part of nature, it must move according to the same patterns as those in nature if it is to be successful.

## **Conclusion**

Given our current ecological problems, I think that there is much the contemporary world could learn from this philosophy concerning how to think and live more ecologically. Its basic ethic of respect for nature and adaptation as an ethical idea has clear relevance to our times.

For as ecological philosophy points out, we are in dire need of an ecologically appropriate ethic in the West, an ethic based upon our observations of the natural world, rather than an abstract ethic such as the economic system. Economics merely measures human preferences, but tells us nothing about empirically observable aspects of the world.

The problem is that, from an ecological perspective, nature does not care what we prefer. Whether we prefer nuclear power over solar power, nuclear radiation is still deadly to all life, including our own.

The flip side of this is that though nature does not care about our preferences, if we treat nature and natural systems with respect, she will take care of us, as she always has.

In this author's opinion, it is this fundamental philosophy of respect, both for our fellow humans and for nature, which we are most in need in the contemporary world. And that philosophy of respect for all things is the fundamental teaching of the Medicine Wheel.

## **References, additional readings**

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### **About the Author**

Dr. Roy C. Dudgeon is a cultural anthropologist who has published academic articles in journals and books. His main interests include ecological issues and philosophy of science, political systems, comparative religion/philosophy and Native American history and ethnography.

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