

# ABOUT THE SWEAT LODGE AND ITS USE

*Adapted from the notes of Hopoyv Fekseko (D. Joseph Alderson) and others by Chetty Chapko of Pine Arbor, 1997*

*"All things employed in the sweat rite are holy and must be thoroughly comprehended for the true power of a thing or an act is found in the understanding." – Paraphrased from Bobby Woods, Lakota (Sioux) Sweat Leader*

## **Introduction**

Several community sweat lodge participants asked for more information and explanation about sweats. In response to such requests, this article is a compilation of notes gathered during years of listening to Elders; also included are excerpts from a few good books and hard earned personal lessons gained from our many experiences. It is easier to prepare and share detailed information about sweats when one is not engaged in actually preparing or conducting such a ritual at the same time. Like everyone, the authors are evolving, too. For them, writing creates a record of their own focus and growth; it also provides a mechanism for both self-evaluation and sharing.

Marcellus Bearheart Williams, an Oklahoma Creek Medicine Keeper, is the adopted uncle of Alderson-Fekseko. Bearheart taught Fekseko the basics of Indian sweats as he understood and practiced them. At the same time, Marcellus Bearheart helped Fekseko discover much about himself in the process. To his worthy student Fekseko, Bearheart presented a Sacred Pipe, an Eagle Feather and a promise that Fekseko would help many people in Tallahassee and Florida. Bearheart's words were true. The other authors have also had equally valid, though different, sweat lodge experiences.

Since 1982, Fekseko has been closely associated with Pine Arbor Tribal Town, a mixed-blood Muskogean community. He is actively involved at their traditional ceremonials. Thanks to many teachers and especially Hokte-Pvhe and Sakim, Fekseko continues to learn the details of tradition and gracefully integrates this knowledge, where appropriate, into his sweats. Every sweat leader does things a little differently; no two sweats are ever completely the same. Differences accrue to the fact that many ceremonies and customs are geographically specific to a particular area due to its unique climate, environmental conditions, plant life and so forth. The purposes of the sweat bath, however, are fairly universal throughout the world. Whether we participate in traditional sweats here or on the other side of the planet, the benefits derived from a sweat lodge would be the same.

Saunas and sweat lodges are an historical fact in many parts of the world: most of North and Central America, Ireland, Finland and much of Europe, Russia, Africa, Japan, the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Benefits of sweat baths have long been known. Spiritual renewal and the purification of body, mind, soul and spirit are the major purposes and benefits resulting from regular sweat lodge use.

## **Physical Benefits**

Sweating rids the body of wastes. In this modern sedentary age of pollution, artificial environments, synthetic clothing and lack of regular exercise, a sweat bath can open clogged skin pores and stimulate the healthy flow of a body's own natural sweat.

Depending on how hot the sweat bath is and the climate in which it occurs, a fifteen minute sauna or sweat can perform the heavy metal excretion that normally takes healthy kidneys 24 hours to accomplish. Body sweat flushes toxic metals such as copper, lead, zinc, and mercury from the body. A sauna is often recommended as a supplement to kidney machines. Sweat can also remove excessive salts; this is generally believed to be beneficial for cases of mild hypertension. Sweat can also eliminate urea, a metabolic by-product. Excessive urea can cause headaches, nausea and in extreme cases, vomiting, coma--even death. Sweat may also draw out lactic acid responsible for stiff muscles and a contributor to general fatigue.

Sweat lodge heat dilates capillaries; this increases blood flow to the skin. The heart beats faster and impurities in vital organs are flushed out by the flow of fluids. Finnish and German doctors cite studies indicating sweat baths help persons with high blood pressure and heart problems; many American doctors, however, continue to recommend against sweat baths for such persons.

Lungs benefit, too. Clogged respiratory passages are opened by heat; this gives relief from colds or minor respiratory problems. Sweat baths are not recommended for persons with pneumonia and major respiratory problems. The heat of a sweat bath and the often rapid cooling afterwards, conditions the body. A well-tuned body is more resistant to colds, disease and infection. In cold weather, a warm glowing feeling often lingers for hours following a sweat bath. In hot weather, the body seems cooler afterwards.

Recent Finnish tests validate the practice of splashing water on superheated rocks as a means to produce an abundance of negative ions. This seems especially true if the rocks are heated by a wood fire and not electricity. It is known now that where there are too few negative ions and too many positive ions, have been linked to heart attacks, aggravated asthma, migraines, insomnia, rheumatism, arthritis, hay fever and allergies. By the way, major causes of unhealthy ionic conditions are: weather disturbances, central air conditioning, smog and driving too long in a closed automobile.

### **Spiritual Aspects**

Examining important elements used in the Native American sweat lodge sheds light on its spiritual benefits. First, is the "symbolic" lodge itself. The lodge is often built (or renewed) during the morning of the chosen "Sweat Day." People fast while working on the lodge to help their intent remain focused, pure. Prayer is offered as willow or other saplings are cut, as holes are dug for the placement of saplings and as the pit for the hot rocks is excavated. Tobacco, a powerful herb now commonly misused, is often used for offerings--a visible "amen" to prayer. Such lodges can be, and often are, a portal for communication with a Higher Power, the Creator; it is very necessary to exercise care and good intent in all things connected with a sweat lodge, its construction and its rites.

Willow, it seems, is universally preferred for sweat lodge construction by most Native American groups. Words from Bobby Woods, Sioux sweat leader, illustrates some of the many symbolic attributes associated with willow. "Willow branches used to construct the lodge also taught bathers a lesson. In Fall, leaves of the willow died and returned to earth... in Spring, they come to life again. So too, men died but lived again in the real world of Creator where there is nothing but the eternal spirits of deceased things. A foretaste of this true life could be known here on Earth if they purified their bodies and minds, thus coming closer to the Great Spirit who is All-Purity....." Also, according to Bobby, the willows used in the lodge were set up in such a way as to symbolically mark off the four quadrants of the universe--everything of the world and sky was represented within the framework. The relationship of all things is visible here.

Muskogees use willow extensively for sweat lodges, brush arbors and medicines. Willow bark contains salicin, an analgesic and ingredient in several aspirin-like compounds. There are many ailments for which willow and aspirin are effective. Cutting or pruning willow encourages additional branches to sprout. A willow's life cycle reflects the natural cycle of life's many stages, too.

### **Reflective Symbology**

The constructed lodge is usually a round or oval shaped dome--symbolically not unlike the womb. Often, lodges are called Mother Earth's womb. The door is low to prevent heat from escaping but lessons of humility are easily taught when one must bend low to enter the lodge. Sweats begin in silent darkness inside the lodge. The arrival of glowing rocks is a constant reminder of One-Above's penetrating goodness and radiance. Sakim, Creek spiritual leader, constantly reminds us that Silence is the voice of Creator, One Above. Sometimes, a flute is played; this represents bird song, Creator's first specific gift to the newly created. In the Pine Arbor Creation Story, birds received songs for their part in drying out land when it was covered with water-- bird songs are both a form of spiritual silence and an aural blessing.

People are often unclothed in the sweat lodge; like the womb--each is a dark but secure and nurturing place. A womb does not produce a healthy fetus if contaminated with infection or impurities, neither can a sweat lodge produce a healthy spiritual birth or renewal if penetrated with unhealthiness or impure intent such as drugs or alcohol. Participants in a sweat rite are not unlike the fetus in a womb; both can be vulnerable to improper influences. Spiritual life deserves no less care than the physical life--sometimes, it should have more. Good and proper intent are very important. Those who sneer about the unclothed body are ill-equipped to understand the sweat; they probably shower fully clothed!

In his book, *Sweat*, Mikkel Aaland writes: "...The warm, dark, moist ambience inside a sweat bath is easily likened to a womb, even the womb of Mother Earth, Herself. A tired dirty bather climbs into the confines of the sweat bath,

crouches in a fetal position (especially in smaller, more primitive baths), sweats out impurities and emerges refreshed and cleansed--reborn.

Because of these re-birth qualities, rites of passage were invariably connected with sweat bathing. Cleanliness is next to godliness and close to God is a good place to be when an individual passes from one stage of life to another. The sweat bath prepared bathers for the rituals that attended birth, adulthood, marriage and death rites of passages--times when awe of the unknown was highest.

Finally, as with any religion or ritual, sweat baths would not have been given such cultural importance without serving humankind in practical ways. With its mystical powers marshaled, the sweat bath became a healer..."

In Native Medicine, Medicine Grizzly-Bear Lake writes about reasons people go unclothed in the sweat bath: "We prefer to go into the sacred sweat lodge stripped of all our clothes, symbols, badges of education, status and wealth, camouflages or other coverings which feed the human ego. We go naked as a newborn into the womb of our Mother Earth; humble, pure, innocent and prepared for nurturing. We try to strip ourselves of [defining] human qualities, desires and characteristics in order to become more spirit-like; we shed our human image and physical attributes in order to discover our soul and its spiritual nature. And, in most cases we come out reborn and re-created."

In the center of each sweat lodge a small shallow pit is dug. It is here the heated rocks are placed as they are brought into the lodge. This hole is deeply symbolic, even holy; within Plains Indian tradition this hole represents the center of the universe. Dirt from this center is used to form a small altar mound in front of the lodge entrance. On this altar, participants can place special things that may help them in the sweat. The altar is always on an east-west axis between the fire at the east end and the lodge at the west end of the line. To some, this is an avenue of power while others call it an energy exchange. The fire is special in many respects. For Creeks, Fire is a piece of the sun, perfect symbol of Creator; through Fire One Above, the Creator, finds expression.

Early Finnish sauna bathers believed fire was heaven sent. If the sweat fire was fueled by choice firewood and tended with appropriate ritual, disease and evil influences could be warded off. Treated disrespectfully, fire could (and would eventually) engulf and destroy the bather.

As we make the sweat fire, after gathering all the appropriate and needed materials, we are also preparing propitiations between mind, body, spirit and soul--a conciliatory reckoning to restore balance and harmony between these four elements. To show this intent while building the fire, fire makers offer constant prayers of thanksgiving for all the purposes at hand, especially prayers for participants that they may be cleansed in all these four parts and experience renewal. The purifying heat to come forth from the fire is also acknowledged and thanked for its help: heat, light and strength. The visible conclusion to all Native American prayers is the gift of tobacco to Creator. A fire maker often places tobacco into the structure of the fire as he or she sets the wood in place; tobacco is always carefully and tenderly placed into the newly ignited fire after it has caught sufficiently. Many fire tenders offer participants tobacco to place in the fire with their own special prayers and thanksgivings. It is not unusual for knowledgeable participants to bring tobacco with them for that purpose and to share with their sweat leader or fire maker.

### **Meaningful Materials**

Wood is important on many levels, as is the choice of stones, rocks or bricks to receive the heat and facilitate the sweating. Again, well-founded participants share in the gathering or bringing of wood so that it doesn't become an unnecessary expense or time burden on the sweat leader or fire maker. Natural woods are best--those gathered from Mother Earth's breast without felling live trees or breaking off their branches. Wood in other forms is also acceptable, often more abundant and sometimes necessary. We try not to use lumber with nails in it, and never pressure treated wood. Damp, wet or rotted wood is also to be avoided. Certain woods are favored for particular occasions or uses. Cedar is always regarded as a spiritually impregnated wood carrying special properties which can enhance properly offered prayers. Cedar shavings are sometimes placed in the bottom of the fire pit to fragrance the lodge. Evergreen needles are sometimes used for this. Fat-lighter pine, abundant in the South, makes a good fire starter but is a poor choice for the principal wood--too much acrid ash, smell, smoke and tar. Seasoned wood burns rapidly and well. Green wood is preferred by many sweat leaders who believe it imparts more force and power to both participant and stone than

commercial lumber gathered without ceremony or acknowledgment. Wise experienced leaders will combine different types of green and seasoned wood in a ceremonial sweat fire. Each type of wood imparts a different energy and heat to the occasion. By mixing different types of wood in the same fire, a sweat leader can kindle a fire specific to the purpose of a particular occasion and bring appropriate energies to bear which will enhance all proper ceremonial actions.

### **The Ever-Present Duality**

Other important points remembered and practiced by Creeks, Fekseko and the people of Pine Arbor are: to thank the wood as it is gathered or collected and to smudge it before beginning to build the fire. Bringing raw water and flame together is to mix opposite spiritual elements in an improper fashion; therefore, avoid using damp or wet wood when laying the fire. Because of this principle, it is neither correct nor proper to blow on the fire with moist breath. Pine Arbor sweat leaders include appropriate fans in their sweat lodge gear such as a bird wing, stretched leather on a wooden frame or a woven fan such as that used at the Busk Fire. An old hat will do in a pinch (--especially if it isn't yours!) Finally, nothing except for more wood, tobacco or a special morsel or other offering is to be placed in the sweat fire or any ceremonial fire for that matter. Nothing with saliva on it may go into the fire--period. To throw any trash on the fire is a great desecration! Fekseko and all sweat leaders are constantly learning about woods and their different qualities from their own experience and practice; wood is always teaching the careful observer. Wood and Stone, Fire and Water, Light and Dark, Earth and Sky, Lodge and the Outdoors along with the Sweat Leader and Participant make up the necessary duality of the Muskogee Sweat Lodge Ceremonial according to Pine Arbor Tribal Town's traditions.

The stones used in the sweat represent Earth as both Grandmother and Mother--an eternal matrilineal kinship. Stones are symbols of endurance in the same manner in which Earth endures. Creeks regard sweat stones as bones of Mother Earth. They are alive. Stones absorb the power of fire. When water is splashed on them in the lodge, the steam or vapor produced is also considered powerful and holy--the visible symbol of Creator's Breath. Finns call this vapor "loyly," spirit of life. Such rocks or stones are sometimes called "rock people," signifying that we are related to them as we are with all creation. Stone is to Earth as bone is to flesh say the old time Creeks of Pine Arbor.

As in creating the lodge or gathering wood, prayers and offerings are given when obtaining stones for the sweat. Usually stones are gathered from dry fields, uplands, hillsides or mountainsides. Those taken from streams or near wet places will exp lode when heated! Creeks often used baked clay balls in ancient times and firebricks in modern times when good sweat rocks weren't available. A prominent feature of historic Creek towns was the "hot house" or "Chukofa" where an actual fire burned in the center to produce a "dry sweat" felt to be very beneficial to the whole community during winter cold spells. It was also an economizing way to ration scarce wood and provide evening warmth for all the town's citizens.

Water used in sweats represents one of the two essential life giving elements--water and air. We always give thanks for water from whatever source it comes--be it spring, sinkhole, spigot or bottled. Sometimes, a Creek sweat leader who is properly trained, uses a hollow blowing tube through which he "bubbles" or oxidizes the water thus becoming a vessel for One Above's breath. Bubbling water or any liquid mixture for sacred or ceremonial purposes is a prominent feature of most southeastern Indian medicinal practices, too. To show respect in more than a symbolic manner in the lodge, water is first given Mother Earth to drink before we partake ourselves. Water is one of the basic elements for survival. Many elders believe nothing can hurt the power and spirit of moving water--not poisons, toxins, germs or diseases. Moving water purifies, heals and protects; it is often used by One Above to heal the earth. Given free flow, water purifies itself; it is a basic environmental principle long understood by all natural peoples. Many Creeks will often put willow leaves in sweat water to promote healing. Water brings out the power in all medicines because it is a matrix of One Above.

During the building of the fire and throughout the ceremony, we often invoke the four directions; in fact, most actions occur in sets of fours. There are four rounds or stages of the sweat. There are four sacred medicine colors: Pine Arbor and Florida Seminoles and Miccosukee acknowledge red, yellow, black and white. The four stages of life--infancy, youth, maturity and old age or eldership are also shared by these three tribes and many others throughout north America. Meanings associated with each direction differs somewhat from tribe to tribe in specifics but usually agree in the broader categories--Power is geographically specific say the people of Pine Arbor. Animals are often associated with each direction as are many other benevolent beings.

## **Directional Attributes**

Attributes, usually four in number, are associated with each cardinal direction. These attributes are said to influence or even to govern certain emotions, features, ideas or intellect, passions and even personality traits in receptive individuals. The effectiveness or force of each direction on an individual varies greatly and depends on the interaction of the influencing factors from the other three directions. Each attribute has an equal but opposing partner in another direction.

The North largely governs or influences physical aspects of an individual person's life--courage, strength, patience, and endurance. To endure with a purpose, leads to patience. Strength is nothing more than patience exercised for a specific purpose. Courage is built on strength--a strength that is nothing more than courage exercised with a purpose to accomplish a specific goal.

In short, the cold winds of winter teach the whole person about her or his physical aspects and abilities. The North brings about physical balance and harmony for the individual in the same manner the South brings about those same aspects for the community as a whole entity.

East governs mind--learning. It is the direction from which light awakens each morning: life, light, wisdom and knowledge. One must have life to endure. Patience is endurance coupled with knowledge. Wisdom, following this model, is knowledge exercised for a good purpose, usually one of service and sharing or problem solving. Each eastern attribute is a sibling to a northern attribute.

The South, from which warming breezes come, brings rains and warmth to grow and nourish our crops. It governs our interconnected sense of community, family, growing and working together as one body--community as a body. Called environment and ecology today, it is characterized by harmony and balance, like the three sisters in a garden--corn, beans and squash. Each puts into soil what the other needs. Harmony, balance, relationship and interdependence are all associated with the South. Both South and West govern, influence and teach the idea of community body and mind--family, in the same manner North and East teach development of an individual's body and mind. Earth is a living world with many nations such as bird, deer, grass and the star nations; desert, forest, mountain, plains and other regions are like clan camps--each with its own particular citizens. Each with its own four-fold path : infancy, youth, maturity and old age.

The West is associated with humility, reverence, holiness, and the origins of love. When the sun wakes up, it doesn't come roaring like a beast. It gently nudges its brothers and sisters from the sky--the moon and stars--telling them they may rest now. This is devotion--humility originates love. The sun ends its journey with quiet humility. It doesn't brag that it is bigger or has more light than its brothers and sisters. We learn the origins of love through this example of true humility. It is the direction where life ends. The sun is powerful. It does not have to rest, but each evening it leaves quietly to make room for brothers and sisters that they may have their season, too. This is the visible example of love--the Sun, perfect symbol for perfect Creator. It is One Above made visible in symbolic form.

In the sweat ceremony, a talking stick is often passed so that everyone has an opportunity to speak and to listen. If no talking stick is available, Creeks often pass a twig of willow or cedar or they tie such a twig to a rattle or other object to serve as the governor of counsel. Willow and cedar are sacred plants; the speaker speaks more clearly when holding a twig or green bough from these plants which remind them that their words should be as living words.

Songs are often shared in the lodge. Some have passed to us from our elders and teachers for opening certain rounds; most reflect the spiritual leanings of the participants. Most are songs of worship praising Creator. They often show appreciation for creation. Songs help clear away obstructions to clarity and growth. They lift our spirits and call upon helper beings, ancestors and Creator.

Through combination of silence, singing, praying, and sharing from the heart, sweat lodges become the other heart of a community. The sweat lodge experience is very holistic with innumerable benefits to be experienced on many levels of understanding. It is a microcosm of the cosmos.

Everything we do is an outward symbolic presentation of an inner action. It is important that sweat rituals serve you; do not simply serve the ritual. A certain amount of discipline and form enables participants to be more focused as both individuals and as a community. One woman once said: "The sweat lodge is like your child--you must care for it properly. One wouldn't want negative influences to contaminate your child." Why would you want a negative sweat lodge? The community is the parent of the sweat lodge. Know and understand the importance of the four purposes of the sweat lodge and all the beautiful symbolism that connects the materials of the sweat lodge and its practices to community life.

Words cannot describe all things that occur during a sweat. Each individual receives something different than other participants; yet all share in a general way, too. Participants in a particular lodge may come and go. They may benefit for a while and then need to seek a different spiritual path. This is not the way for everyone and that is fine. All that is asked of the participant is respect--respect what we are doing and know that our intent is good. It is important that we recognize that all are connected and part of the true Great Creator of the Universe, The One.