

The Native American Sweat Lodge Ceremony – Part 1 of 2 ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 So, I'm wearing this rather striking shirt that was given to me by a Cree medicine man,
00:00:17 friend of mine, Vern Harper, who I've known for many years.
00:00:23 He's a rather well-known spiritual leader among the Cree people in the Toronto area.
00:00:30 I'm up in Canada now, running a retreat in Niagara Falls, and I'll be seeing him in just
00:00:38 a week when the retreat's over, because we offer, as a feature of our retreats here in
00:00:48 Canada, the opportunity for our retreatants to participate in a traditional Native American
00:00:57 sweat lodge ceremony.
00:01:00 It's not a required piece of the retreat, but if they want to stay on after the retreat
00:01:07 ends, we go to some property that he owns, and he does a sweat lodge for us.
00:01:15 The same thing happens when I run retreats in Arizona.
00:01:18 I have a Tohono O'odham medicine man named Rupert Encinas, who I've known for 27 years.
00:01:29 He does the same thing for my retreats in Tucson, Arizona.
00:01:32 In fact, I just saw Rupert just one week ago.
00:01:37 I just completed running a retreat in Arizona, and indeed, we had a sweat lodge ceremony
00:01:43 there too.
00:01:45 It was with Rupert in Arizona that I had my first experience of the Native American sweat
00:01:52 lodge, which pretty much convinced me that this is something for me.
00:01:59 I would say that the sweat lodge ceremony, which the Lakota people call inipi, I-N-I-P-I,
00:02:08 literally in their language meaning a tool for life.
00:02:13 I would say that the sweat lodge ceremony is the representative spiritual practice of
00:02:22 the Americas.
00:02:23 It's done all the way from Canada down into Mexico, if not further into South America.
00:02:32 I don't know about the southernmost part of the Americas, but it's certainly for Mexico

00:02:40 and North America absolutely representative.

00:02:44 In fact, in Los Angeles, where I come from, there is a canyon in Southern California called

00:02:52 Temezcal Canyon, which is from the Mexican Spanish temezcal.

00:03:00 Temezcal is the Spanish word, at least in Latin America, for the sweat lodge.

00:03:09 That's an Aztec word from the Aztec tamascali, meaning a hothouse, literally.

00:03:15 How I got involved in this was that 27 years ago, I was running retreats in Arizona.

00:03:23 I was using the ranch of a man named Doug Boyd, who has written some books about Native

00:03:32 American spiritual leaders.

00:03:36 Doug had this idea that Buddhist leaders should be getting together with Native American leaders.

00:03:43 He said, after your retreat, if you want, I can have a local Tohono O'odham Indian,

00:03:53 I can have a local medicine man run a sweat lodge for your retreatants.

00:04:02 I didn't know what a sweat lodge was.

00:04:04 I said, well, what is it?

00:04:06 He described it to me.

00:04:09 It's in some ways like a sauna, in that there are hot rocks and water is poured.

00:04:20 Whereas the sauna is a secular event, the sweat lodge is a deeply transformative spiritual

00:04:28 event with prayers, songs, and a kind of shared energy.

00:04:35 So he explained to me the sweat lodge and the mechanics of it, and it sounded interesting.

00:04:41 He said, you're very fortunate.

00:04:44 I know this local spiritual leader here in Arizona, Rupert Encinas.

00:04:52 He is a veteran sun dancer, in addition to being a sweat lodge leader.

00:04:58 I said, what's a sun dance?

00:05:00 He described to me this almost inconceivable shamanic ordeal that Plains Indians do called

00:05:10 the sun dance.

00:05:11 He said, Rupert has done this many years.

00:05:14 Actually at this point, Rupert's done it 18 years.

00:05:17 He's done 18 sun dances.

00:05:20 Each one of which involves four days in the blazing sun without food or liquid and with

00:05:28 pierces through you that have to be torn out.

00:05:32 According to the Lakota tribe, anyway, you have to do four years of sun

dancing before

00:05:39 you're qualified to lead a sweat lodge.

00:05:43 I say Rupert has now done 18 years, which is, by the way, the difference between doing

00:05:53 sweat lodges with native people and doing sweat lodges with incompetent non-native people.

00:06:01 There's absolutely no danger whatsoever.

00:06:05 I've been sweating for 27 years, starting with Rupert, and I've never, ever heard of

00:06:13 any even minor physical problems developing as the result of a traditional sweat run by

00:06:22 competently trained native people.

00:06:24 But you see, the kind of training you have to go through before they'll give you the

00:06:29 responsibility of running a sweat lodge is pretty amazing.

00:06:37 Doug described the sweat lodge.

00:06:39 He described Rupert, described Rupert's qualifications.

00:06:43 It sounded interesting.

00:06:44 It seemed to make sense to me.

00:06:47 We had our vipassana retreat, and then Rupert came over and they had a sweat lodge at Doug's

00:06:55 ranch, the physical structure.

00:06:57 It's sort of dome-shaped, and it's got a dug-out area in the middle where the grandfathers,

00:07:07 grandfathers are the hot rocks.

00:07:10 They're looked upon as the oldest people on the planet.

00:07:13 They're addressed as people when they're brought in.

00:07:15 They're sort of given, they're taken back to their original condition of being hot,

00:07:23 the way they were at the beginning of the earth.

00:07:27 They're heated in a fire, and then they're brought in.

00:07:30 This water is poured on them.

00:07:32 That gives off an intense steam that is called the breath of the grandfathers.

00:07:38 So these ancient ones breathe on you, and that purifies you physically and psychospiritually.

00:07:49 That's sort of the model, how they look upon it.

00:07:53 We took the group into the lodge, and he did that ceremony.

00:08:04 I remember coming out of the lodge, the first thought that occurred to me in talk space

00:08:15 was this joking thought, this irony thought, oh, so this is what they call primitive religion.

00:08:30 Because I can remember when I was young reading about the religion of tribal peoples under

00:08:36 the title primitive religion.

00:08:40 I saw that word primitive in quotes, and the joke was that it was one of the most sophisticated

00:08:54 and subtle and advanced spiritual modalities I'd ever encountered.