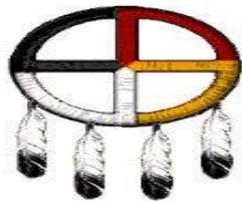


THE MEDICINE WHEEL

By Rick Runningbear



The Medicine Wheel is a very ancient ceremonial tool. There are some who say that it is not limited to the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere, but that ancient circular structures in the British Isles, France, and other places around the world were types of Medicine Wheels used in ancient ceremonies. For example, the famous "Stonehenge" located in England is seen as a type of medicine wheel in which certain focal points of the structure lined up with the locations on the surrounding horizons of where the sun set or rose during the equinoxes and solstices.

One ancient medicine wheel found on the American continent is located in the Big Horn mountains of northern Wyoming. At an elevation of nearly 10,000 feet it is only accessible during the warmer months of the year. It has a central "cairn" (heap of rocks) 10 feet in diameter and 2 feet high. The outer perimeter is 80 feet in diameter and there are 28 "spokes" made by local stones (perhaps representing the 28 days of the lunar month). About 100 ancient Medicine wheels have been identified in North America in places such as South Dakota, Montana, Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The use of medicine wheels among Native peoples continues up to the present time. It is perceived to be a physical and visible representation of unseen spiritual realities. Its applications in ceremony are many faceted. In some ways it can be looked on as a large calendar or "clock". The circular shape of it represents the circular nature of the solar system in which we live and the entire physical universe.

One application of the Medicine wheel is that it represents our life span. At some point we begin our trek around our own personal "medicine wheel" of life. When we have completed our journey around the medicine wheel of our lives, we pass away and enter into the "shadow land".

Another application is that the medicine wheel is a calendar of one year (365 days), and certain points along the rim of the wheel represent different "moons" or months. Walking around the wheel in a clockwise direction can represent going forward in time whereas, walking counterclockwise around the perimeter can represent going backwards in time. These concepts are important in times of ceremony at the medicine wheel.

Not all medicine wheels are the same. Depending on the culture or tradition of the peoples using the Wheel, there may be different colors, different kinds of stones, and different configuration of stones. Some Wheels have a precise number of stones, others are variable and progressive. But each stone used is unique in its functional contribution to

the whole, and thus has its own special "medicine".

Medicine wheels can be huge or small, ranging from the huge, such as the one on Big Horn Mountain, Wyoming, to small portable personal medicine wheels which one puts together using small stones of various types and arranges in a circle in their particular ceremonial corner of their lodges.

Medicine wheels are not just pretty "rock gardens" built to look interesting or pretty on the ground. They are intended to be functional ceremonial areas where individuals or groups can come to do ceremony and receive the "medicine" that is available from the "grandfathers", that is, the stones. Universally, the center stone or cairn is representative of Creator, The Great One. All the individual medicines of the various stones derive from this central source.

When we come to the Medicine Wheel for ceremony, we can go any time of day or night, but dawn and dusk are especially powerful times. We come with an open heart. It is always good to enter the medicine wheel from the east, as this is the point of beginnings. As we enter the medicine wheel with the right attitude, we feel "drawn" towards one or more of the stones. Each one of us has different needs at any given point in time. The Medicine Wheel, with its various stones each with its own personality and medicine, will direct us.

If one feels drawn to a stone during the ceremony, it is good to stoop down and touch the stone with the hands. Our hands are

like "antennas" which can both transmit or receive spiritual energy. By actually touching and handling the stones we feel drawn to, we enhance our ability to receive benefit from the Wheel.

One type of ceremony that one can do at the medicine wheel is to approach it around sun rise or sun set with tobacco in hand. Tobacco is always representative of prayerfulness. We use it also in our prayer pipe. When we smoke it, the prayers rise into the air mingled with the smoke of the tobacco and seems to disappear, but symbolically it continues heavenward and is picked up on the wings of "Awohali" (Eagle who flies highest of all birds) and Awohali carries the prayers to the very face of the Great One and presents them.

Enter the Medicine Wheel at the eastern gate with tobacco in hand. Prayerfully approach the center stone (Creator Stone). Offer your prayer to Creator and place the tobacco as an offering onto the center stone. If need be, linger inside the Wheel and gather medicine from any of the stones that "call to you". At last you will exit the Wheel at the Western Gate, being mindful that in so doing you are recognizing your own mortality and that one day you will pass through the Western Gate of the Medicine Wheel of your life, and enter into the Shadow Land, where you will enter a different reality.

The Medicine Wheel: a ceremonial location and visual aide of unseen spiritual realities. It is there for our benefit. # # #