

SACRED HERBS

The Smudging Ceremony

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and Steve Coyote

Our Native Elders have taught us that before a person can be healed or heal another, they must be cleansed of any bad feelings, negative thoughts, bad spirits, or negative energy--cleansed both physically and spiritually. This helps the healing come through in a clear way, without being distorted or sidetracked by negative "stuff" in either the healer or the patient. Native people throughout the world use herbs to accomplish this.

One common ceremony is to burn certain herbs, take the smoke in one's hands and rub or brush it over the body. Today, this is commonly called "smudging," and in Western North America the three plants most frequently used in smudging are sage, cedar and sweetgrass.

Sage

There are many varieties of sage and most have been used in smudging. The botanical name for "true" sage is Salvia. It is interesting to note that Salvia comes from the Latin root Salvare, which means "to heal." There are also varieties of sage which are of a species separate from Salvia -- Artemisia. Included here are sagebrush and mugwort. We have seen both Salvia and Artemisia sub-species used in smudging.



Sage is burned in smudging ceremonies to drive out bad spirits, feelings, or influences, and also to keep bad spirits from entering the area where a ceremony takes place. In Plains nations, the floor of the sweatlodge is frequently covered with sage, and participants rub the leaves on their bodies while in the sweat. Sage is also commonly spread on the ground in a lodge or on an altar where the pipe touches the earth. Some nations wrap their

pipe-bundles, as sage purifies objects wrapped in it. Sage wreaths are also placed around the head and wrists of Sundancers.

Cedar

There is some potential confusion here too, about the terms used to name plants, because in some areas junipers are known as "cedar." This doesn't mean that certain varieties of juniper weren't used as a cleansing herb; however, in the smudging ceremonies we have seen or conducted ourselves, Western Red and California Incense Cedar were used -- not varieties of juniper. Cedar is burned while praying either aloud or silently. The prayers rise on the cedar smoke and are carried to the Creator. Cedar is also spread along with sage on the floor of the sweat lodges of some tribes. Cedar branches are brushed in the air to cleanse a home during the House Blessing Ceremony of many Northwest Indian Nations. In the Pacific Northwest, the people burn cedar for purification in much the same way as sage -- it drives out negative energy; but it also brings in good influences. The spirit of cedar is considered very ancient and wise by the Pacific Northwest tribes. Old downed cedar trees are honoured with offerings and prayers.

Sweetgrass

One of the most sacred plants for the Plains Indians, sweetgrass is a tall, wild grass with a reddish base and perfume-like, musty odour. It grows mainly on the eastern side of the

berta, Canada, and also in some small areas of Wyoming and South Dakota. Its botanical name is *Rierochloe odorata*; some common names are Seneca grass, holy grass, and vanilla grass. We have been told that a variety of vanilla grass grows in North-Central California -- but how similar it is to the Plains variety we don't know. On the Plains.

Sweetgrass is usually braided together in bunches as a person's hair is braided, although friends say they have seen it used simply bunched and wrapped in cloth. Either way, it is usually burned by shaving little bits over hot coals or lighting the end and waving it around, letting the smoke spread through the air. This latter method is how we were taught to burn sweetgrass in the sweatlodge -- allowing the purifying smoke to get to all parts of the lodge. We were taught that it was good

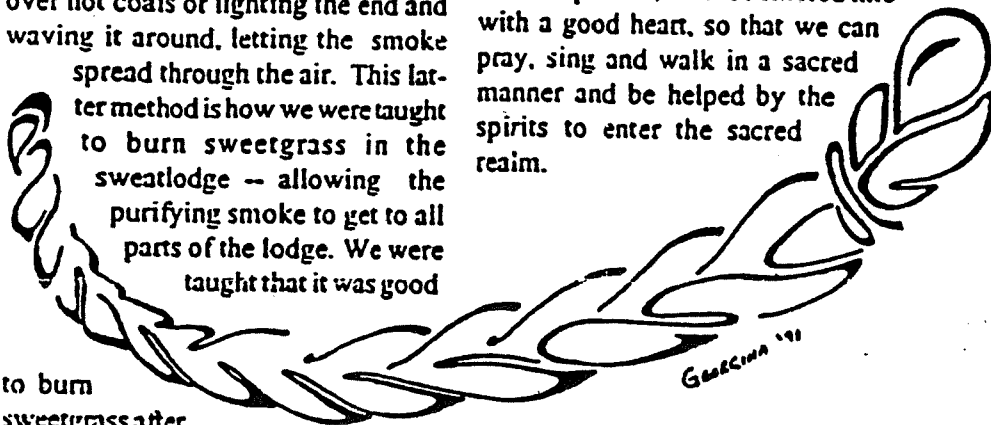
to burn sweetgrass after the sage or cedar had driven out the bad influences. Sweetgrass brings in the good spirits and the good influences. As with cedar, burning sweetgrass while praying sends prayers up to the Creator in the smoke. High Hollow Horn says in "The Sacred Pipe": Its fragrance will be known by the wingeds, the four-leggeds, and the two-leggeds for we understand that we are all relatives; may all our brothers be tame and not fear us! Sweetgrass is also put in pipe bundles and medicine bundles along with sage to purify and protect sacred objects

Sweetgrass is very rare today, its territory severely cut by development, cattle grazing, and wheat fields. Traditional Indians in the northern Plains are trying to protect the last remaining fields.

Smudging

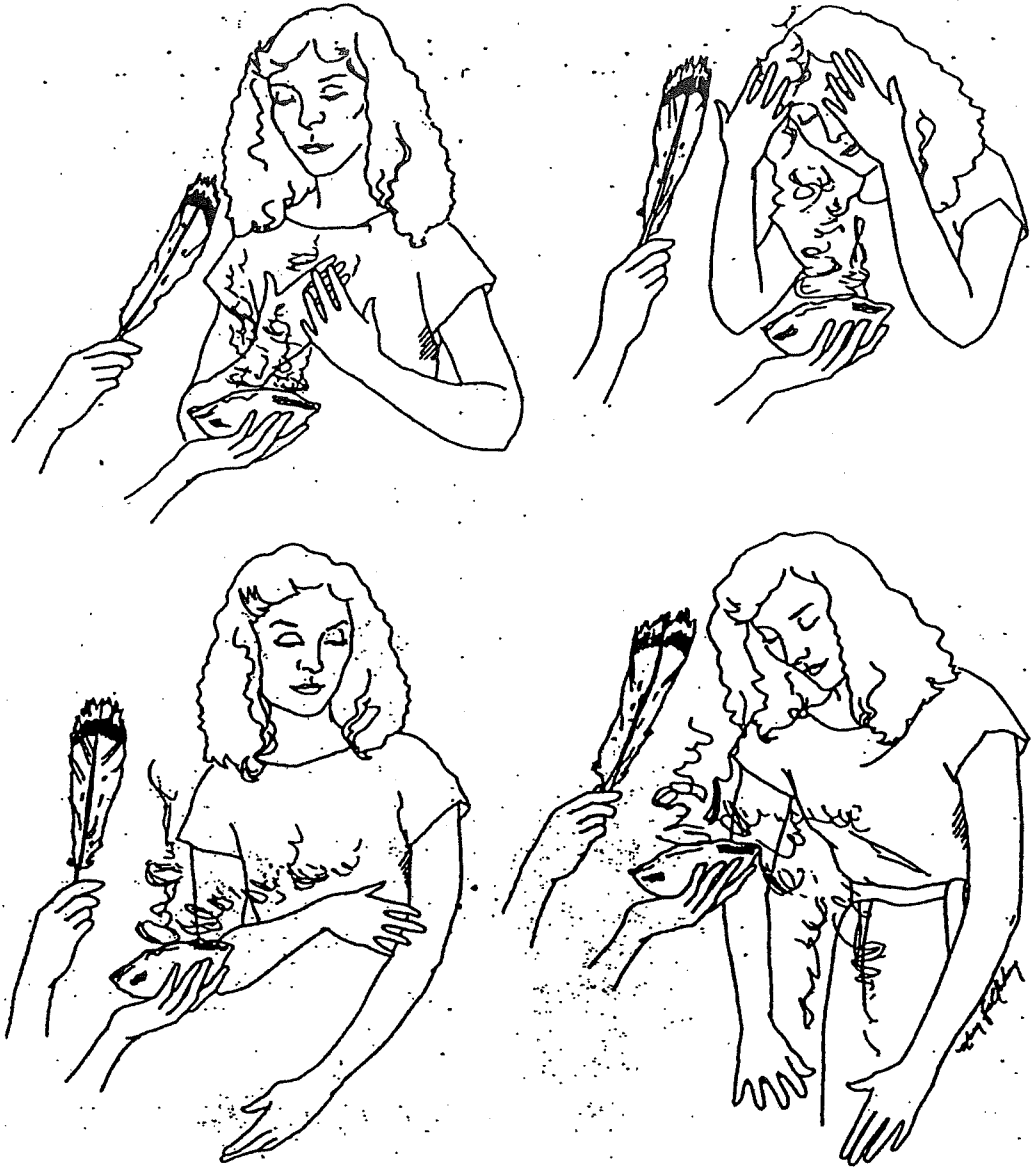
To do a smudging ceremony, burn the clippings of these herbs (dried), rub your hands in the smoke, and then gather the smoke and bring it into your body -- or rub it onto yourself, especially onto any area you feel needs spiritual healing. Keeping praying all the while that the unseen powers of the plant will cleanse your spirit. Sometimes one person will smudge another, or a group of people, using hands or more often a feather to lightly brush the smoke over the other people.

The Elders say that all ceremonies, tribal or private, must be entered into with a good heart, so that we can pray, sing and walk in a sacred manner and be helped by the spirits to enter the sacred realm.



We were taught that it was good to burn sweetgrass after the sage or cedar had driven out the bad influences.

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THE SMUDGING CEREMONY

What you need. Sage, sweet grass, cedar, or tobacco, singly or in combination, or other Medicine Wheel herbs; a shell or bowl; a fan or feather; and matches.

Estimated Time. Five minutes alone, more time if with a group.

1. Mix together the plants you will be using, place them in a shell or sturdy bowl, and light them.
2. When they are burning, use a fan or feather from a domestically raised bird (chicken, turkey, pheasant, or duck) to put out the flame. Throughout the ceremony you will need to intermittently fan the herbs to keep them smoldering.

3. Once the herbs are smoldering draw the smoke (not the bowl, just the smoke) to your heart, then over your head, down your arms, and down the front of your body then the back of your body toward the ground. If you need special balancing or healing in some part of your body you can emphasize by pulling the smoke there.
4. It is your responsibility to cleanse your own energy field. The plants help. They do not do it for you.
5. Next offer smoke to the six directions: up to the Creator, down to the Earth Mother, North to Waboose, East to Wabun, South to Shawnodese, and West to Mudjekeewis.
6. After you have smudged yourself and offered the smudge you can hold the bowl while other people present smudge.
7. You may then walk around the area you will be using, wafting smoke. If you are inside, smudge around the walls of the room paying particular attention to the corners.
8. Smudge any medicine tools you will be using in the ceremony.

Other Methods of Cleansing

Although smudging is most often used as a cleansing method in Medicine Wheel ceremonies, there are occasions when another way of cleansing is appropriate. If you are doing a fire ceremony you may offer herbs to the fire and then smudge yourself with the smoke from the fire.

If you are doing a ceremony related to water, Grandmother Moon, or the Frog clan—and circumstances permit—you can cleanse yourself by submerging in water to the point where the water covers the crown of your head. Duck yourself once briefly to cleanse yourself, once to cleanse for your family, and once to cleanse your relationship with the Creator.

You can also cleanse yourself with sound. Use a rattle or drum and smudge yourself with the sound beginning at your head and going to your feet. Afterward flick off any energy clinging to the instrument and ground this energy in the earth.

CENTERING YOURSELF

There are many ways to center yourself in a ceremony. Using one of them is critical because the more centered you are the more powerful the ceremony will be. Basically any centering technique helps to bring all your energy together, allowing you to let go of the everyday world and thus enter the sacred space.

Some of the ways we often use to center energy is to drum, rattle, and/or chant.

CENTERING YOURSELF THROUGH DRUMMING

What you need. A drum and drumstick and, if desired, chanting or drumming tapes and a tape recorder.

Estimated Time. Fifteen minutes minimum.