

Meeting the **Healing Heart** of the Great Spirit

By Stephen Gray



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Stephen Gray spent many years teaching Tibetan Buddhism, and for the past eight years his main practice has been with the Native American Church. Stephen's recently published book is called *Returning to Sacred World: A Spiritual Toolkit for the Emerging Reality* (O Books, 2010).

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FOR the past eight years I've been a member and a frequent participant in the all-night peyote medicine ceremonies of the Native American Church (NAC.) These ceremonies are often referred to as prayer meetings and, in a broad sense, are always about healing. The work accomplished in that environment may offer some of the most remarkable examples we have of the power of mind. Elders of the NAC talk about the almost unlimited potential for healing that can happen when, as they say, all hearts are united in one intention.

Many readers of MAPS' bulletins will be familiar with the description of psychedelics as "non-specific amplifiers." My experience in the NAC, and the many stories I've heard from elders and other members, support this understanding. In optimal conditions the psychedelics can greatly amplify, clarify, and deepen intention and connection to healing energies—or you might say, as is common in traditional indigenous cultures, healing Spirits.

I've heard directly from several healers working in these environments, and read about others whose comments on the influence of the medicine have paralleled each other. When asked if they can commune with Spirit without having taken the medicine, the answer is yes, but that having the medicine in them makes the connection much clearer and stronger. Peyote, for example, opens the heart and sharpens the mind at the same time.

The NAC ceremonies create a highly effective container for this fortuitous meeting of mind and medicine. Though there are many who are more experienced than I am, I believe I can safely say that the purpose of everything associated with the ceremonies is to open, protect, and maintain the strongest and clearest possible connection throughout the night. All elements of a ceremony are executed with great care; from the placement of the tipi and the altar constructed for the night, to the maintenance of the sacred fire, to the respectful handling of the ritual objects and the medicine itself. The rules of conduct during ceremonies are few and exist so as not to interfere with the

movement of Spirit in the tipi.

Most meetings are called by someone for a particular purpose. That person is referred to as the sponsor for that meeting and early in the ceremony explains to the assembled what they are being requested to pray for. Until a certain point deep into the night, all are asked to focus their attention on that prayer as much as possible. The medicine then goes around the tipi, and the instruments—the water drum, gourd shaker, the roadman's staff, and a sage bundle—are passed around for each person who knows some songs to lead a set of four prayer songs. These chant-like songs are the wings that carry the heart's intention to its

destination. One elder told me that at peak moments, when all or most have brought their minds into full presence, she sees that the songs begin to sing the singers.

This notion of full presence is central to the work. Participants are cautioned to watch out for “head traffic.” Each individual plays an important part in opening the channel for Spirit to enter and do its work. The one thing I’ve seen Kanucas become upset about in meetings happens when he observes that too many people are in their heads and not fully there. He once told me that when he first began going to meetings forty-five years ago he wondered how all those very old people were able to remain upright and still throughout the long night. He said he eventually realized it was because they kept their minds focused on the prayer with that united heart.

This is where what we in the mainstream cultures might call “magic” comes in. With concentrated attention in a skillfully and reverently created environment and the powerful assistance of Grandfather peyote, it is said that almost any condition is amenable to healing. In one meeting I attended there was a woman who had been in very bad health for months and was so ill that night she had to be taken to hospital before the ceremony was over. In the morning, as the meeting drew near its end, Kanucas spoke to the group. “Relatives,” he said, “I don’t mean this judgmentally. I know it was not the purpose of this meeting. But I want you to know that if we had

wanted to and if everyone here could have brought full, open-hearted attention to it, we could have healed that woman. I have seen people with serious illnesses and injuries come into these meetings and walk out healed in the morning.” In my years with the NAC I’ve heard many stories that confirm this remarkable capability and been present for a number of powerful healings myself.

Perhaps the example of the work accomplished in the Native American Church can offer us in the modern societies a general model for conducting effective healing ceremonies as well as encouragement that we’re capable of far more than most of us have imagined. When all the pieces are well in place, when set and setting are optimal, when intention manifests with conviction, and with the compassionate and brilliantly intelligent participation of the medicine Spirits, we may discover that, as writer Philip K. Dick once noted, “Matter is plastic in the face of mind.”

I believe this is central to the great shift underway: the insight that until now the dominant paradigm has utterly failed to understand this mind power, this power of intention. Humanity may be on the cusp of a revolutionary and rapidly spreading realization which, as I understand it is composed of two intertwined truths: First, that our thoughts determine and either limit or throw open the doors of our experience; and second, that the Great Spirit—by whatever name we call it and far beyond any conception we have of what “it” is—is real and always willing to assist us with our compassionate intentions. This realization hints at immense possibility for healing at every level from the personal to the planetary. •

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Our mission is 1) to treat conditions for which conventional medicines provide limited relief—such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), pain, drug dependence, anxiety and depression associated with end-of-life issues—by developing psychedelics and marijuana into prescription medicines; 2) to cure many thousands of people by building a network of clinics where treatments can be provided; and 3) to educate the public honestly about the risks and benefits of psychedelics and marijuana.

If you can even faintly imagine a cultural reintegration of the use of psychedelics and the states of mind they engender, please join MAPS in supporting the expansion of scientific knowledge in this area. Progress is possible with the support of those who care enough to take individual and collective action.



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