



# Dancing the Wheel of Life

At the UK's first residential conference of the Society for Shamanic Practitioners, **Will Gethin** explores how shamanism can be integrated into modern health care and whether this time-honoured tradition can play a role in saving our planet from environmental destruction

**S**wathed in chunky mandala beads and strings of bells, a cosmic warrior sits resplendent in a bright-white robe and headdress of peacock feathers, clutching a rattle and drum.

Illuminated by flickering candles, he beholds the mandala laid out before him, intricately designed with grains of rice to represent the four directions and the three worlds of the shaman – upper, middle and lower. Burning smudge incense, he chalks mystical markings on his face and drum and, pointing to bowls filled with rice and seeds, he explains to the surrounding entourage – some 70 shamanic pilgrims – that, as we offer the grain to the mandala, it will act as a medium, transferring our offerings to the spirits.

'This healing ceremony will give us space to heal ourselves as we invoke the helping spirits and work together to create a harmonious environment,' he announces. Eyes closed, he starts to drum and chant and, rising to his feet entranced, he whirls around the room – beating his drum on both sides and jumping up and down frenetically as he spins – his soul cavorting with the unseen.

Welcome to *Dancing the Wheel of Life*, the first UK conference of the Society for Shamanic Practitioners (SSP)



Left: Bhola Nath Banstola leads Nepali Shamanic Dance. Above: Huichol Fire Ceremony. All photographs by Mark Loman.

at the Earth Spirit Centre in Dundon near Glastonbury, where Nepalese shaman Bhola Nath Banstola – 27th in an esteemed bloodline of shamans – conducts a sacred healing ceremony to protect us from malign forces and to bring blessings, power and vitality.

The SSP was set up as a non-profit corporation in 2004 to support the re-emergence of shamanism into modern Western culture. According to its website, the society serves as ‘an alliance of people deeply committed to the re-emergence of shamanic practices that promote healthy individuals and viable communities’.

The world’s oldest, spiritual healing tradition, shamanism, is believed to have originated in Siberia among the *Tungus* people, but can be applied to all indigenous healers attuned to the Earth, otherwise multifariously labelled as witches, witch doctors, medicine men, sorcerers, wizards, magicians and seers. According to Michael Harner, who is credited with bringing shamanism to the West, a shaman can be defined as: ‘a man or a woman who enters an altered state of consciousness – at will – to contact and utilise an ordinarily hidden reality in order to acquire knowledge, power and to help other persons.’ (*The Way of the Shaman*, 1980).

Along with the wider alternative movement, shamanism is undergoing a revival in the West, as shown by the burgeoning membership of the fledgling SSP, which to date has over 700 members in 13 countries and is growing fast. Many of its members are licensed health-care practitioners, psychologists and social workers who apply shamanic techniques in their practices alongside

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conventional western therapies. Some members use shamanism to support their work in communities, corporations, schools and other institutions; others are multifarious artists using shamanism to enrich and empower their lives.

The SSP’s membership includes some of the leading figures in the Western shamanic movement, like Alberto Villaldo, Tom Cowan and Sandra Ingerman in the States and Howard and Elsa Malpas in England, the organisers of this UK conference.

‘The society provides us with a voice

greater than our individual voices,’ says Villaldo, renowned for his work in the Peruvian shamanic tradition, ‘and a place for our calling as caretakers of the Earth to be expressed. We are no longer alone.’

**Native American pipe ceremony**

The three-day conference was opened by Nick Breeze Wood with a traditional Native American pipe ceremony and Lakota prayer songs, summoning the powers of creation to help us in our sacred pursuits. This was followed by a tribal jamboree as 70 shamanic warriors danced and beat their drums in a cacophony of primal beats to charge the communal energy.

An eclectic range of workshops and ceremonies fill the ensuing days. Elsa and Howard Malpas guide daily shamanic journeys in their Dancing with Chaos sessions, while other highlights include teachings from the Medicine Wheels by Leo Rutherford, hailed ‘Grandfather of UK Shamanism’; Karen Kelly’s seidr oracular ritual from the Nordic Viking tradition connecting with the ancestors; a Shamanic healing circle with US transpersonal psychologist and acclaimed trance medium Adele Ryan McDowell; a workshop from Ross Heaven, author of *Plant Spirit Shamanism*, exploring the mystery of





Top: Rev Dr John-Luke Edwards prepares for Swaying Walk ritual. Above: Howard Malpas pipes for a healing circle.

‘Love’ through the Medicine Wheel teachings; and a ‘Swaying Walk’ ritual to release past traumas, theatrically directed by Canadian shamanic practitioner and psychotherapist, Reverend Dr John-Luke Edwards.

### What inspired the Society of Shamanic Practitioners?

The SSP was dreamed up in 2000 by its now Board President, Dr Alan Davis, Assistant Professor at the University of Utah School of Medicine and Medical

Director of Quinney Rehabilitation Institute at Salt Lake Regional Medical Center, whose practice is primarily in hospital medical rehabilitation. After extensive experience of shamanic healing and several years of shamanic training, Davis was convinced shamanic practice had vital tools to bring to healthcare.

‘I did my own dream and journey work to ask what it would take to orchestrate a gathering for people who had an interest in bringing shamanism into healthcare,’ he tells me. ‘I followed the

dream through, ultimately bringing seven physicians together to plan an initial conference on shamanism and health care.’

The seven physicians created and ran this leading-edge conference for three years, before deciding to extend their support to shamanic practitioners in addition to physicians with an interest in shamanism – and the SSP was born.

### Services offered to members

One of the primary functions of the SSP is to build a shamanic community so that isolated, individual practitioners don’t have to feel alone. This conference provides an educational forum for otherwise disparate practitioners to come together as a community, to train and share ideas about incorporating shamanic practice into contemporary society and to collectively heal the Earth.

The SSP also aims to be a voice for shamanism as it integrates into modern healthcare; key members have compiled a book, edited by anthropologist Barbara Tedlock, about the various ways shamanism has been amalgamated into different healthcare sectors, like osteopathy and naturopathy, including a chapter by Davis about shamanism in the hospital. ‘The book is an exciting project because it shows integration into modern practice is already happening,’ Davis says.

Every two months the SSP puts on a global ‘phone-in’ talk by a renowned shamanic teacher; you can hear the talk and participate in the ensuing discussion by downloading a ‘podcast’ and then dialling a telephone number in the States. The society is also launching a journal that will include case studies and research, as part of a wider effort to support research into shamanism, evaluating its effectiveness in healthcare. The website ([www.shamansociety.org](http://www.shamansociety.org)) is a great resource for information about conferences and gatherings, for sharing personal newsletters, articles and research and for promoting individuals’ work. The SSP is still in its infancy, so its services to practitioners are in constant evolution.

### What does shamanism have to offer healthcare?

Incorporating shamanic practice into Western healthcare addresses the spiritual dimension of health, blending the best of mainstream medicine with spiritual healing so patients can get well, while making the necessary emotional and behavioural shifts to live in holistic balance.

In his hospital rehabilitation practice, Davis helps people regain quality-of-life after major health traumas like strokes,



heart attacks, limb amputations and severe debilitating illness. In cases where he perceives any imbalance, disconnection or lack of wholeness in a patient, he lets them know that, in addition to treating them as an attending psychiatrist, he can also provide spiritual healing and adjunct treatment.

‘Because the core of shamanic healing is to bring a person back into balance spiritually, emotionally and physically,’ he explains, ‘patients may welcome shamanic work as an opportunity to explore more deeply the profound adjustments they confront following major medical illness or trauma.’

Like Utah, where Davis operates, many other states in the USA legally allow shamanic practice in support of conventional medicine, but UK health authorities have yet to reach this level of openness to shamanism.

While Davis more cautiously suggests that spiritual healing should be used as an adjunct to conventional medical treatment, helping to restore balance and harmony to lives disrupted by illness and impairment, Leo Rutherford boldly advocates shamanic healing over and above conventional medicine. While recognising the great strengths in Western medicine, he champions the grass roots medicine of indigenous healers – currently labelled ‘alternative’ as the most natural medicine – and therefore the most suitable for healing serious illnesses.

‘A lot of emotionally related diseases like cancer are being looked at from the wrong place,’ he protests, ‘as if the human being is a machine, rather than treating the whole person. We need to reverse medicine around – the advanced mechanical medicine should be used as the alternative, then we will have things very much more in balance.’

### **Can shamanism help the world’s environmental crisis?**

Leo Rutherford believes that the rebirth of shamanism can support our reconnection to the Earth in these times of environmental meltdown, because it recognises the earth and sky as the ruling powers of the universe, rather than the ‘false patriarchal gods’ of our religions. ‘It’s a true understanding of how life really is,’ he says, ‘that the Sun and the Earth are the father and the mother of our existence. If you take them away, we don’t have existence, it’s quite literal.’

Rutherford suggests we look back in order to move forward and recommends a balance of the old ways with the new – the old to show us what really holds the universe in the balance and to remind us that, by worshipping false gods all this



Howard Malpas, Elsa Malpas, Leo Rutherford, Dr Alan Davis.

time, we have been giving our power away. ‘As our patriarchal culture continues to trash the planet and our great mother with its disrespect for the feminine principle and ignorance and inability to live a balanced life, it is cruising for a major wake-up call,’ he warns.

So, shamanism’s ancient Earth wisdom contains tools to help us tackle the impending shake-up of global warming. It can help people to get more

### **Gathering around the fire in circles, swathed in blankets and ponchos, trees tower like tall shadows as flames roar...**

grounded, to realize that the feminine needs to be balanced with the masculine, that the Earth needs to be honoured and that empowering ourselves and each other is the way forward.

### **Making magical re-connections**

On the final evening of the conference we commune for a fire ceremony in the tradition of the Huichol tribe of Mexico in a clearing surrounded by woodland. Gathering around the fire in circles, swathed in blankets and ponchos, trees tower like tall shadows as flames roar, rising, licking the encroaching twilight.

As I huddle by Jenny Sessions, a shamanic practitioner from Brighton, she shares her awe for the events of these last few days: ‘I feel incredible gratitude for being able to attend this gathering,’ she muses, ‘it’s been a wonderfully open-

hearted and illuminating dance between participants, organisers and guiding spirits ... a rite of passage.’

And this fire ceremony – a gateway that connects the fire in our hearts to the natural world – seems to inaugurate this rite of passage. Approaching the fire, we give Tatewari, the Fire God, offerings of tobacco, copal, cocoa beans and sticks rubbed with our prayers. Staring meditatively into the fire – the ‘bush TV’ of indigenous peoples – I give thanks for this magical re-connection to Nature, as glowing embers whirl skywards – scattering into the starry firmament to a crescendo of beating drums. ☘

For further information about the Society for Shamanic Practitioners, visit [www.shamansociety.org](http://www.shamansociety.org) or contact UK directors Howard and Elsa Malpas: 0208 758 9950; [warrriorintheheart@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:warrriorintheheart@tiscali.co.uk)

Shamanism workshops, courses and events in the UK are run by the following SSP members: Leo Rutherford and Eagles Wing, ([www.shamanism.co.uk](http://www.shamanism.co.uk)) Howard and Elsa Malpas ([www.shamanicwarrior.com](http://www.shamanicwarrior.com)), and Ross Heaven ([www.thefourgates.com](http://www.thefourgates.com)). Any healthcare professionals interested in attending a UK-based workshop focussing on shamanism in healthcare, contact Alan Davis (SSP President): [grokwork@aol.com](mailto:grokwork@aol.com).

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