

The sweat lodge as medicine: restore the balance between fire, earth, water and air

by Veerle Phara, author of *Wise Playful Woman*, medicine woman, shamanic healer & coach, earth & fire keeper, keeper of sweatlodges



Ode to the sweat lodge

Touch the Earth and Surrender yourself to PachaMama
Be a flowing River, observe the Water within you
Listen to the Air, you can hear it, feel it, smell it, touch it
Wonika Wayan, the sacred air, spirit, life, breath
Melt together with the Fire, the Stones, your Ancestors
Become one with your true nature
allowing it ... to emerge
From these roots you shall grow, move, breath...

Veerle Phara

Medicine wheel

Sweat lodges are rituals, initiations, portals, ... balancing all the elements, allowing us to come home to ourselves and guiding us towards the heart of the earth's creative power. They are ancient ceremonies connecting our daily reality, all worlds and the Sacred Web in which everything is intertwined.

A sweat lodge is a medicine wheel, an instrument for balancing ourselves and remembering who we truly are. They are not about who we are supposed to be, or who we think we are, but they are about who we are in our naked truth, without frills or masks. We peel off our roles and offer them to the earth, the water, the hot stones.

While living in our mother's womb for nine months, we remain in the dark. We are born into the light, new life arises from the dark. Just like the seeds in the black soil during wintertime which germinate in spring.

In a sweat lodge, it is not the dark nourishing womb of our mother that we are crawling back into, but it's the womb of the Earth, our universal mother. The Earth is here for everyone and it is always ready to receive our heavy baggage and transform it into nourishment and lightness. In this way we can heal and be reborn, full of new energy and life force.

A sweat lodge is a ceremony with different rituals. It is a ceremony for our personal prayers and wishes, for the prayers and intentions of all participants, for the healing of a community, of women and men, children, the elderly, and for an intention far greater than ourselves. We connect our hearts with Spirit to create a New Earth. That process starts with and in ourselves. We cannot change anything in our surroundings unless we live in harmony with ourselves and cherish our unique gift in this world. From there, balance can flow to society, to all our loved ones and relatives, to our sisters and brothers and our tribe, connected with all the places in the world where sweat lodges are held.

Fire

The sweat lodge as medicine begins with our dialogue with fire. What is our connection to fire? Are we afraid of fire? Is our inner fire burning or is it extinguished? Throughout the seasons and the daily solar cycle, trees store sunlight in their trunks. When trees are cut and the wood from the trunks and branches burns in the fire, all the stored sunlight is released back to the cosmos. The magical cycle of life.

We offer tobacco and/or herbs to the fire and pray for healing. Building the fire is a subtle play of giving and receiving. We decorate the earth with herbs, flowers, grains, sugar, sweets and create a solid base from branches and wood. Like a Grandfather, the fire guards the entire process of a sweat lodge. He heats the Grandmother Stones to their core. Together they merge, they become one in energy and dynamism. Both carried by Mother Earth, she carries the fire and the stones and she carries us. We honour her with respect and gratitude time and again.

It doesn't really matter whether the fire is male or female, it is more important to honour and restore our connection with the burning sweat lodge fire and with our inner fire. If we are in a circle with only women, masculine energy is indispensable to maintain harmony. Indigenous cultures teach us how essential it is to welcome the male and female components equally into our midst, even when we are only travelling with women. Mama Coca is feminine but when we add a bit of the masculine Ilipta - a mixture of lime, ashes of roasted quinoa and/or amaranth and stevia - while chewing, the coca leaves become juicier and the effect of the coca more powerful.

Even though I like to honour Grandmother fire among women, when in a sweat lodge ceremony with only women, we honour the fire as a Grandfather, who lovingly carries our stones and warms them to their core.

Stone Ritual

Sacred stones
you have grown
deep in the quiet of the ages.
Sacred stones
you have known
fires of the Druids and the Sages.
We call to you now
Help us to find our way home somehow
We call to you then
Help us connect with our ancient kin

Kellianna

All indigenous peoples know that stones and rocks are alive, after all, everything is animated! We call them the Stone People, the oldest people on earth. In Lakota tradition, life began when a large stone rose from the waters of creation. When the stones of the sweat lodge are heated and placed red-hot in the centre of the hut, we return to the earliest memory and wisdom of creation and therefore of ourselves.

The stone ritual is the foundation of a sweat lodge ceremony. The stones symbolize *las abuelas*, the grandmothers or our ancestors. Especially those stones that we find in nature, like volcanic stones once spewed from the deep lava core of the earth, scattered on the earth or lying in riverbeds for centuries. These stones have stored so much wisdom and stories throughout the centuries. On top of that, they will carry our intentions which, once the stones are lying in the fire, are literally and figuratively heated to the core. They are therefore treated and addressed with care, respect and love. When the hot stones are brought into the sweat lodge one by one, we honour them, every time, with *la medicina*, healing herbs, resins and woods.

It is completely fine for participants to lie on the earth during the rounds. The earth nourishes, heals, grounds and provides rest and strength. But every time we welcome new ancestors into the lodge, we sit up, out of respect for the stones and our intention.

Not all stones are suitable for a sweat lodge. The best stones are basalt ones, old or younger, because they are more heat resistant than, say, ordinary boulders, granite or marble, which can burst into pieces once the fire starts heating them up. When basalt stones break while we remove them from the fire and place them in the navel of the womb - the central pit -, we smile and say that this symbolizes our children or multiplies our intentions ...

Usually we let the participants themselves choose their stones. They charge their stone symbolically with their intention or wish for this ceremony and then place them on the wooden pallet. Which stone calls us? Together we light the fire that the firekeeper will carefully guard throughout the ceremony. While drumming and rattling, while singing and

dancing, we honour all visible and invisible forces, the directions, the elements, the worlds, the place where we are and all those who have gone before us.

Sacred fire
We welcome you, we honour you,
we're loving you, we're embracing you
Fire Sacred fire
Spirit of the fire
Come to us, give us joy
Fire, sacred fire

The Preparation Ritual

Each sweat lodge is preceded by a preparation. Both the stone ritual and the preparation ritual are essential for the grounding of the group and the connection between the participants. Ultimately, we will crawl as one family into the sweat lodge where we will spend a couple of hours or even a whole day and/ or night together.

Making medicine pouches is one of the most famous rituals, a tradition dating back to the Native American Lakota tradition. A medicine pouch is a cloth bag filled with tobacco and/or herbs, any personal small power objects and our own prayers. Depending on the intention of the sweat lodge, we create one personal bag or four or seven pouches with wishes for the larger whole.

In the lodge, we hang these bags on the willow branches above our heads, welcoming our intentions or wishes. After the sweat lodge, they stay there as a grateful offering for the spirits and ancestors of this place, and to rekindle our intention with each sweat lodge, within this protected and safe environment. When the sweat lodge is broken down and ritually burned to be replaced by a new one, all the pouches are burned in the ritual fire. This reinforces our intentions once more and they are sent out into the world through the smoke of the fire, as seeds of light.

Besides making medicine pouches, we can prepare for a sweat lodge in several ways. By making an offering to the fire or by writing our intentions on a block of wood or ribbons. We take the ribbons with us into the lodge and take them home afterwards, to hang them outside in trees or shrubs. The wind will send the intentions into the world as seeds of light. There are so many possibilities to tune in, as long as it comes from the heart and everyone feels involved in this process in one way or another.

Respectfully I throw a handful of pure tobacco and dried herbs into the glow of the fire as an offering, asking for connection with my intention. I kneel in gratitude before the opening of the lodge, made of willow branches, covered with piles of blankets. I greet all my loved ones and relatives so that they may support and accompany me in the sweat lodge, and to

remember that in this sweat lodge I connect with something much larger than myself. I kiss the earth and crawl to my place in the humble dark space that smells like a mixture of earth, fire and herbs ...

Many Native North American cultures hold their sweat lodge ceremonies according to a set structure with recurring prayers and songs. We honour this tradition respectfully, but we let go of their rules. I like to give the example of women in their moon time. For various reasons, they are not welcome in a Native American sweat lodge. It is said, that menstruating women don't need a cleansing sweat lodge because they are already purified through their menstrual blood. This is understandable to a certain extent, although in our over-polluted Western world, we can all use some extra purification on a regular basis. However, I have also heard other reasons from male water pourers. On the one hand women in their lunar time are vulnerable in their most feminine zones and on the other hand they radiate a special primal force that (many) men can't easily grasp for the simple reason that they themselves do not know this monthly process. When women enter into the sweat lodge during their moon period, they take that fertile primal power with them. Not every water pourer can handle this, sometimes they feel disempowered by these women, so they prefer to keep them out. In the worst case, even the entire sweat lodge and surroundings must be purified with the smoke of sage if a woman gets too close during her period. To me, this tells more about the limited strength and fear of the person who guides the sweat lodge than about the strength of women in their lunar time.

With all humility and respect, I honour these women for their courage when they want to be part of this ceremony, bringing their vulnerability and their primal feminine energy. I ask them to choose consciously where they want to sit in the lodge - preferably a little closer to the door -, to ground themselves well and possibly drink a little more water. And if possible, I invite them to offer some of their blood to the earth. What happens then, is difficult to describe. It is one of the most powerful offerings to Mother Earth, who gratefully accepts the fertile pure blood through her roots and allows it to flow through the earth, with an impact on feminine healing that is almost incomprehensible.

I am mainly experienced with *temazcales* from Latin America, where a lot of water, steam and herbs are used. The *temazcal* was traditionally used by Mayas and Aztecs, to purify body, heart and thoughts and to connect more deeply with all elements. *Temazcalli* means: *Te: Tetl* = stone, *Ma: Mazitli* = hot, *Calli* = house, so house of the hot stones, but also the grandmother of the steam baths and the belly of the mother, connected with the goddess *Toci*¹. The magical fusion between water and fire in the sweat lodge, creating steam, is called *Atlachinolli* by the ancestors, the energy that symbolizes the duality of life, but also the creation of all life, the sacred unity that brings us healing.

Many houses originally had a square or rectangular space connected to the house, where steaming with herbs was done daily or weekly. With the intention to wash, cleanse and

¹ *Toci*, in Náhuatl 'our grandmother'. Other names are 'the mother of the gods' (Mexico Teteo Innan), 'heart of the earth' (Tlalli Iyollo), 'night healer' (Yoalticil) and 'the grandmother of the steam baths' (Yoalticil). She is the Goddess of the healers, the midwives, the *temazcaleras*, the herbalists and the fortune tellers.

purify. But it was also a place to bear children. How special! This thought gives me goose bumps.

The *Hampi Wasi* that we hold, stems from the Andean cultures. These are medicinal lodges in which we use clay and herbs to heal on deeper layers.

Women in their lunar period usually are allowed to participate in *temazcales*. In some traditions they tie a red rope or a red rope with a tobacco pouch around their waist. This is to protect their feminine vulnerable zone. After the sweat lodge, this pouch is thrown in the fire as an offering.

In our own sweat lodges we consciously distance ourselves from old traditions and patterns, to make room for what is needed and for spontaneous inspirations, to let people come closer to themselves and, above all, to allow them to stay close to their feelings, intuition and heart energy. The heart and the belly guide our ceremonies.

The structure of our sweat lodges is created beforehand; it is always different because we tune in to the energy of the moment. The content or how the ceremony will ultimately take place is a creative play in which the energy of the group helps determine the process. The sweating is not dictated by strict rules and fixed songs. Everyone is welcomed, everyone can feel at home and connect with whatever happens in the moment.

In Mexico we learned a beautiful song:

Agua vital, purifícame,
Fuego del Amor, quema mi temor
Viento del alba, llévame al altar,
Madre Tierra, vuelvo a mi hogar
en el temazcal, en el temazcal...

Living Water, purify me,
Love Fire, burn my fears
Wind of the Dawn, take me to the altar
Mother Earth, I am coming back home
in the sweat lodge, in the sweat lodge ...

Earth, Water, Cleansing, Purifying

Fire, earth, water, warmth, heat, breathing, praying, singing, sounds, sweating, crying, laughing, playing, asking and answering, sinking in heart and belly, feeling and enjoying ... It is all part of this healing ceremony.

Traditionally sweat lodges have been used for cleansing worldwide. Our Celtic ancestors also had their sweathouse or *Tigh 'n Alluis* (*Allus* = sweating).

Sachamama, the spirit of the snake, invites us to sweat off old skin and to purify us physically, emotionally, mentally and energetically, so we create space for new skin. We can

enjoy sweat lodges all year round, but certain phases of the year, or the moon, are extremely suitable times to cleanse, purify, or empower an intention.

The Crescent Moon stands for new seeds, new ideas, what do we want to plant or give attention? The Full Moon connects us with strength, passion and abundant feminine energy. The Waning Moon invites us to make choices, to distance ourselves from what no longer serves us. Just before New Moon, in the energy of the Black Moon, we can look at what is reflected to us, at our shadow parts and at death. The New Moon brings light into the darkness, the very beginning of what wants to be born.

Entering a sweat lodge feels like coming home to the earthly womb. We crawl through the portal of the womb, kneeling for ourselves, for our ancestors, for all the participants, and for our loved ones and relatives. We often say *Mitákuye Oyás'ín*, Lakota for 'all my relationships'.

To come home to the womb of the earth and into our own body, silence is important, entering the void, to merge with the warmth, the nothingness, to be all-one. Because that is what we are in a sweat lodge, we are alone with ourselves and yet together with others. Ultimately, we are all connected and we mirror each other.

In the first round, it is important to arrive and ground. Soon everyone starts yawning, sighing, coughing, burping, which is so healing for the physical body. Letting go of the old skin sometimes takes effort. A sweat lodge requires that we surrender, that we let go of our thoughts and sink into the here and now. This can be quite a tough process. It will be more pleasant if it can be done effortlessly and relaxed. We often use seasonal herbs, to literally clean ourselves physically and to connect with the roots of the plants, and with our own roots.

In the first round we ask all participants to introduce themselves to the stones and the spirits of the sweat lodge. My name is ... Many say I am (name) ... But we are not our name, every time we say I am (name) ... we pick up the baggage of our ancestors, which we carry with us but ultimately is not ours. Do we know who we are when we don't stick to stories? I Am ... can we truly fill this in?

We do not have to suffer in a sweat lodge, we do not have to force ourselves into a straitjacket, we do not have to think: is this or that possible, is this or that allowed or not? We are allowed to relax and come home to our wonderful body.

During the different rounds we usually stay in the lodge. People can go through difficult personal processes. Often, the *sweat lodge virgins*, anyone experiencing a sweat lodge for the first time, have many questions in advance. Anxiety, claustrophobia, how long will a round last, what should I do if, I have a lot of stress and will I be able to handle this ... But once in the sweat lodge, all the frills and masks fall away. When the first physical layer is sweated out and the pores are wide open, it is as if the cells are also opening up and everyone descends from the head to the heart and slowly also to the belly, more towards feeling.

Air, Breath, Heart

The first intentions that were formulated outside the lodge often take on a much deeper meaning once the fusion with fire, earth, water and our breath takes place. The portal of our heart can only open and express what truly lives in us when there is a balance between the elements, between earth and cosmos, between dark and light ... When we can see the image behind the stories or the emotions that block us.

Regardless of *I'm Anxious, I'm Hungry, I'm Thirsty, I'm Scared, I'm Lonely, I'm Angry, I'm Claustrophobic ...*

You are not your name, not your family, not your job, not the roles you play in your life, not your nationality, ...

Nor are we what we think we are. Why do we hold on to that? To be special? To be heard? To be loved? To be different? The old structures no longer serve us. Through the process of a sweat lodge, we can offer our stories of fear, pain, loneliness, hunger, thirst... to the earth, the water, the fire, and the air.

Allow yourself to say: I Am in my centre, I Am Safe, I Am Connected, I Am One, I Am ...

For four rounds we go deeper and deeper into the fusion with the heat, into the emptiness, into the connection. We follow our breath to infinity and emptiness. And to our Heart. The fifth round is one for the firekeeper. He or she can choose to do this round alone or to share it with the group. The firekeeper prays by the fire throughout the ceremony, merging with the fire. During the fifth round he or she is keen to empower this prayer. The heat, steam and energy can make this round particularly intense. That is why this round is often called 'the little death'. Dying to be born again.

Death and Rebirth

In each sweat lodge, we die a little to be born again. Depending on the intention and purpose, we can sit in a sweat lodge from two hours to a whole day and night. Certain sweat lodges keep working overtime as initiations. The *Chadir* is the Siberian sweat lodge or the house of death. What part of us may die, what do we leave behind? A profound sweat lodge in which we dive totally into the energy of the Indian Time, No Time, asks us to let go of any form of control and to go into complete surrender. This dying process makes a sweat lodge so powerful because it resets our cell memory and makes room for our true soul path.

A sweat lodge acts like an alternative doctor. It doesn't matter whether our biological ancestors died of cancer, heart disease, dementia, or illness. It doesn't even matter what's the matter with us. If we can surrender ourselves to the silence, the emptiness, the warmth,

the 'not knowing', then we forget for a moment who we are supposed to be. Embracing our shadows, embracing our nakedness! A deep dive into the void. Inside the womb of Mother Earth and not that of our biological mothers. The Mother of All, who wants to be nourished with our heavy energy, so she can give back light, transformed energy.

After a sweat lodge, we are reborn. We crawl out of the womb as a new human being, healed and cleansed. We lie down on the earth to recover and cool down. A shower or herbal bath works wonders. Afterwards we share our experiences and together we enjoy a potluck, the abundance of mother nature.

A sweat lodge doesn't end when we hug and say goodbye. When we drive home tired, satisfied, and with an open heart, we send gratitude and healing to all our loved ones and relatives. The ceremony will be resonating on all levels for the next few days. Because of their deeply healing and transforming energy, sweat lodges sometimes work as initiations. That is why it is so important that we take time to integrate this ceremony, immediately after and if possible, the next few days.

Because of the deep grounding effect of sweat lodges, they have an enormous healing effect on women. Sitting naked in a circle of women in the warm womb of mother earth is a process that sets a lot in motion. During women's festivals, we hold morning *temazcales* for up to fifty women, with lots of herbs and water. They provide a powerful grounding bedding, after a few days it is as if roots are growing under the sweat lodge that extend far beyond the grounds of the festival.

What sweat lodges can offer women:

~ Reminding us that Mother Earth is a mother to all women, unconditionally. We can give her all our baggage as nourishment and the space that is freed up, can be filled with energy from the deep warm core of the earth.

~ Reminding us that Mother Earth nourishes each of us to the very depths of our cells and she does it with love. Earth drenched love!

~ Reprogramming our cell memory. Releasing fears, old patterns and beliefs to the earth and the water. To a greater or lesser extent, we die in every sweat lodge.

~ Daring to be, to live, to breathe, to yawn, to cough, to burp, to speak our inner truth, to play.

~ Learning to love ourselves and each other in a natural, simple way.

~ Learning to become aware of embodiment, of everything that we embody. Coming home and learning to appreciate ourselves in our beautiful authentic sensual bodies, just as they are. Daring to touch ourselves, learning to love and cherish every part of ourselves, including our belly, yoni, breasts. Daring to pay full attention to our feminine beauty again.

~ Honouring the power of prayer. Listening to the wisdom of the grandmothers in the lodge, but also praying for women in their moon time and for the younger generations. We honour especially the women in their moon time in the sweat lodge. I admire their courage to

participate in the sweat lodge in their naked vulnerability and their primal strength. I honour them in the midst of the circle of women. Often, they offer some blood to the earth, a fertile and healing gift.

~ Rediscovering playfulness. How wonderful it is to cover ourselves, in our naked beauty, with mud or honey, to touch each other, to sing, to connect, to honour each other, to honour each other so deeply in who we truly are.

~ Reminding us that we as a circle of women can be present for each other, just by being there, without having to care for each other. When someone is crying or grieving, we do not need to comfort, care for or reach out for this woman, because we feel pity. We are simply there for each other, we carry each other without words, in love, gentleness and compassion.

~ And... that we are allowed to be gentle and compassionate towards ourselves.

*I will be gentle with myself
I will love myself
I am a child of the universe
Born in every moment.*

Participating in a sweat lodge is coming home to ourselves,
it creates balance between earth, water, fire and air, in and around ourselves.



@ Veerle Phara, 2020