



WHAT IS SHAMANISM?

By Neil W. McKinlay



For many millennia, human beings have engaged the unseen as a source of healing and guidance. Reaching out to a world beyond our limited sense of what is, we can draw upon a wisdom unconstrained by ideas and expectations. The resulting revelation has the power to transform our lives in a deep way - a way many cultures consider essential to the task of becoming fully human.

In traditional terms, the work described above is known as shamanism. To quote the well known Celtic practitioner Tom Cowan, "Shamanism is the intentional effort to develop intimate and lasting relationships with personal helping spirits by consciously leaving ordinary reality and journeying into nonordinary realms." A person who does such work is, appropriately, considered a shaman.

Shamanism has long had a place within the meditative context. In the Tibetan tradition especially, spirits and deities are regularly invoked as a means of helping us become who we truly are. Unique to this setting is the understanding that such entities embody our own wisdom. From this perspective, the beings encountered in shamanic work are aspects of our selves seeking integration and expression in daily life. They are aspects of our selves calling us forward to growth and development.

Because Neil's work arises within and is nurtured by his training in the meditative lineage of Chogyam Trungpa, this is the view he brings to shamanic practice. His ability to see, hear, and feel what some have called 'the other side' reflects a sensitivity to the imperatives of our lives as they manifest outside the restrictions of conventional conditioning. In attuning to our deeper selves, he helps us clarify direction, ignite awareness, and heal divisions so we might enrich our experience of the human journey.

The range of issues that can be appropriately engaged in this way is considerable. Any time we feel uncertain, imbalanced, or blocked, shamanism can provide the guidance and healing needed to remedy the situation. Put in even broader terms, whenever there is a sense of discontinuity between our lives and the fundamental path we were born to travel - a discontinuity we often sense as tension, anxiety, and ill-ease - the tools shamanic practice makes available can be used to rediscover and re-engage the life that lay waiting for us.

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