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The Shamanic Drum: A Guide to Sacred Drumming

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# **THE SHAMANIC DRUM**

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ISBN 1-59113-164-2

Talking Drum Publications  
814 SW Lindenwood  
Topeka, KS 66606, USA  
[www.geocities.com/talkingdrumpub](http://www.geocities.com/talkingdrumpub)

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Printed in the United States of America

Cover design and art by Elisia Drake

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 91-90824

First Printing 1991  
Second Printing 1992  
Third Printing 1994  
Revised Edition 2002

Booklocker.com, Inc.  
2002

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**A Guide to Sacred Drumming**

**Michael Drake**

## **Introduction**

In Western culture, there is a great renewal of interest in the practice of shamanism. This surge of interest can, in large part, be attributed to the purity of shamanic cosmology as well as the freedom and individuality of the shamanic experience. No intermediary such as the church or priesthood is needed to access personal revelation and spiritual experience. All dimensions of reality and the mystical knowledge and powers they contain are available to one who practices shamanism. Every shamanic practitioner becomes his or her own teacher, priest, and prophet. Shamanic practice brings one ultimate power over one's own life and the power to help others do the same.

“Shamanism is the most ancient and most enduring spiritual tradition known to humanity,” asserts Mongolian shaman Jade Wah'oo.<sup>2</sup> It predates and constitutes the foundation of all known religions, psychologies, and philosophies. It originated among nomadic hunting and gathering societies. Within these tribes, the shaman played many roles: healer, seer, ceremonialist, sacred artist, mediator, counselor, and keeper of cultural myths. With their many roles and transcendent insight, shamans exerted great social influence.

Anthropologists define a shaman as one who enters an altered state of consciousness, usually induced by drumming, in order to make “journeys” into alternate realities, seeking the knowledge and power indigenous to those worlds. Shamans utilize this knowledge and power for healing and manifesting what is needed to benefit the community. These ancient shamanic ways have withstood the tests of time, varying little from culture to culture. Over thousands of years of trial and error, primal peoples the world over developed the same basic principles and techniques of shamanic power and healing. A whole way of life evolved that was based on everything being in right relationship.

In the worldview of the shaman, all life forms are interconnected and interdependent. If one species suffers, all others are affected. The health and well-being of humanity is, therefore, dependent upon the overall health of the web of life. The shaman is sensitive to this sacred interrelationship and serves as a bridge, linking the human and natural realms. The shaman's prayerful communion with the natural elements and powers preserves an orderly, harmonious universe. The shaman seeks harmony with nature and the drum serves as an instrument of attunement.

Decades of intensive anthropological studies in shamanic cultures have yielded great insights into shamanic methodology, mythology, and cosmology yet relatively little has been revealed regarding the drum. To a certain extent, researchers have overlooked, misunderstood, and underestimated the drum's role in shamanic work. In addition, the "medicine" of drumming, like that of many spiritual matters, has, until recently, been a closely guarded secret. Until 1978, with the passing of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, it was illegal for many Native Americans to practice their traditional religions in the United States (see Appendix D). Past oppression has most certainly left traditional native peoples reticent about sharing spiritual doctrines.

Due to escalating environmental poisoning and nuclear militarism, concerned shamans and medicine people have, in recent years, shared their sacred teachings with non-native people. The intention is to teach individuals how to renew and maintain harmony with their families, communities, nations, and Earth herself. The hope is to restore a sense of sacred to the world, of the divinity present in nature and all living things—values that oppose domination and exploitation. The primal nature has never been fully integrated into the collective consciousness of humanity, but primal peoples are now sharing it. Sacred drumming is a significant part of the learning.

In Western culture, most people will never have the opportunity to meet a shaman, let alone learn from one. Though no substitute for an apprenticeship situation, a handbook can convey the fundamental methodological information. The information presented here is the culmination of my quest to understand the power of rhythm. It is a synthesis, a blending of drum ways I learned under the tutelage of Mongolian shaman Jade Wah'oo with rhythmic knowledge from many of the world's shamanic

traditions. Truly significant shamanic knowledge can only be acquired through individual experience, however, one must first acquire the methods in order to utilize them.

Shamanic drum ways provide the opportunity to acquire shamanic experiences. The techniques are simple and effective. The resurgence of shamanism nationwide can, in large part, be attributed to the fact that shamanic drumming offers a relatively easy means of controlled transcendence. When a drum is played at an even tempo of 180 to 200 beats per minute for at least fifteen minutes, most novices report that they can journey successfully even on their first attempt. This ease of induction of altered states and related experiences contrasts dramatically with the months or years of practice usually required by most meditative disciplines to induce significant effects. Today's drummers are rediscovering the trance or ecstatic aspects of drumming. As Anne Cushman points out in a notable article in *Yoga Journal*, this new rhythm consciousness is "oriented not toward performance and musical virtuosity, but toward personal transformation, consciousness expansion, and community building."<sup>3</sup> By employing the drum ways described in this book, you will have an opportunity to personally experience shamanic states, power, and healing. These ways do not require faith or changes in your definition of reality. No change in your subconscious mind is required either, for the drum only awakens what is already there. It will awaken the shaman that lies dormant within you.

The most effective way to learn shamanism is to adopt the same basic concepts shamans do. For example, when I speak of "power," it is primarily because the term is basic to shamanism. Power can represent many different things. To some shamans, power is understanding energy and how to utilize it. To others, it is a measure of one's ability to manifest a vision in the material world. However, it is best to avoid any preoccupation with seeking a scientific understanding of what power may really represent or why shamanism works. I practice shamanism myself, not because I understand why it works, but simply because it does work.

**A SHAMAN'S MAGIC SONG**

*You Earth,  
Our great Earth!  
See, oh see:  
All these heaps  
Of bleached bones  
And wind-dried skeletons!  
They crumble in the air,  
The mighty world,  
The mighty world's  
Air!  
Hey-hey-hey!*

—Alaskan Inuit<sup>1</sup>

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Role of the Drum**

The drum has a role of first importance to the shaman, for its rhythm develops a oneness of feeling and purpose with the rhythms of the universe. Everything in the universe, from the smallest subatomic particle to the largest star, vibrates with rhythmic motion. All things are born of rhythm and it is rhythm that holds them in form. Rhythm is the heartbeat of life. Every living thing has a unique song, a pulsing rhythm that belongs only to it. Within the heart of each of us, there exists a silent pulse of perfect rhythm that connects us to the totality of a dynamic, interrelated universe. The drum's beat unites the shaman with all life forms into a single being, a single heartbeat. The drum reconciles all of the disparate and discordant aspects of nature. It promotes individual and planetary resonance and restores harmony and balance.

The drum's sonorous voice expresses the basic rhythm patterns man has observed over and over in nature: the tides, the phases of the moon, the changing seasons, and the myriad cycles of life. Rhythm and resonance order the natural world. Dissonance and disharmony arise only when we limit our capacity to resonate totally and completely with the rhythms of life. Rhythm is a universal vibrational language. We respond to rhythm whenever we sense it and seek it out when it is not present, for it is invariably pleasant.

Drumming affects aurally generated emotion more than any other musical instrument. Drum rhythms cover the whole range of human feeling. Whatever the emotion, the drum seems to compensate and offer satisfying expression. Drumming provides solace, relief from anger, courage when afraid, or even ecstasy.

Ecstasy is defined as a mystic, prophetic, or poetic trance. It is a trance-like state of exaltation in which the mind is fixed on what it contemplates or conceives. The drum serves as a concentration device, enhancing the shaman's capacity to focus attention inward. It stills the incessant chatter of the mind, enabling the shaman to enter a subtle or light-trance state. It is an inward spiritual journey of rapture in which the shaman performs his or her mysterious work.

In his classic work, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, eminent religious scholar Mircea Eliade concluded that the ecstatic experience does not belong exclusively to the shaman, but "is a timeless primary phenomenon."<sup>2</sup> All people, therefore, are capable of flights of rapture. Ecstasy is a frequency within each of us. Like tuning a radio to the desired frequency, the drum attunes one to ecstasy.

Eliade defined shamanism as a technique of ecstasy. Shamanism is based on the principle that the spiritual world may be contacted through the inner senses in ecstatic trance. It is a great emotional adventure open to whoever wishes to transcend their normal, ordinary definition of reality. The shaman is able to contact and utilize an ordinarily hidden reality in order to acquire knowledge and power and to help others. He or she gains access to a new, yet familiarly mythic universe.

### **The Mythical Paradise**

In that time before there was Time, there was Grandfather Fire. Around Grandfather Fire sat the Circle of Animal Brothers. Each in their turn, speaking the Sacred Language of Spirit, told their Telling through which Grandfather Fire expressed the nature of Creation. In this Circle there was Eagle, Raven, Owl and Gander. There was Bear, Panther, Deer and Horse. There was Turtle, Fire Lizard, Snake and Spider. There was the Two-Legged (human).<sup>3</sup>

So begins Jade Wah'oo's mythic telling of shamanic creation, when human beings were one of the Animal Brothers. The mythology and creation stories of all Earth peoples speak of a primordial, but now lost paradise—a "Garden of Eden" in which humanity lived in harmony with all that existed. The cosmos had total access to itself. There was but one

language for all creatures and elements. Humans were able to converse with animals, birds, minerals, and all living things. As respected Nakoda elder John Snow puts it, “We talked to the rocks, the streams, the trees, the plants, the herbs, and all nature’s creations. We called the animals our brothers. They understood our language; we understood theirs. Sometimes they talked to us in dreams and visions. At times they revealed important events or visited us on our vision quests to the mountain tops.”<sup>4</sup>

Animal characters played a prominent role in mythology. They were often portrayed as essentially human in bodily makeup, but possessed the individual characteristics of animals as they exist in nature today. Thus, Coyote is distinguished in the tellings by its mischievous behavior and Eagle by its great vision and ability to fly high into the realm of the Great Spirit. Then, according to various cultural myths, the animals evolved into the forms in which they are found today.

A balanced union between the physical and the spiritual realms existed within the mythical paradise. Humans were aware that the spirit and the ego are two manifestations of the same presence, that each human body is the manifestation of a spirit being on the material plane. Each human utilized the input of their intuitive and imaginative frequencies, the inner communication channels designed to maintain harmonious communion between each spirit and its physical human projection.

The imagination, as a means of communication, developed much earlier than language and used different neural pathways for the transmission of information. This preverbal imagery was both personal and transpersonal. On a personal level, the imagination affected one’s physical health and well-being. Images communicated with tissues, organs, and cells to effect a change. Imagery was transpersonal in that it could be transmitted from the consciousness of one person to the corporeal structure of another.

Intuition served as a conductor of divine knowing energy. Thus, each human received spiritual guidance from the “Creator” and played an active role in the continuing work of creation within the physical realm. Through the eyes of the soul, or intuition, the Creator’s actions appeared within human awareness as the most natural thing to do. By following their intuitive sense, humans connected with the awesome powers of the

universe. Intuition connected the consciousness of one being to another, uniting the universe and its life forms completely.

### **The Fall**

In his recount of “The Circle of Animal Brothers,” Jade Wah’oo goes on to tell of how humans lost their way:

There came Time when the Two-Leggeds left the Circle of Animal Brothers, left the embrace of Grandfather Fire, and went into the Darkness and into the land of Death that we humans refer to as Life. In this place of Death, we lost our ability to communicate in the Sacred Language of Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

As the centuries passed, humans placed more and more emphasis on the input of their five physical channels of perception, forgetting that perception was also available to them on the more subtle imaginative and intuitive levels. With increasing emphasis on the physical, humans lost contact with their spiritual nature. In time, the body and its physical priorities became their sole reality. The harmonious bonding of the spirit and the ego ceased to exist. Humans saw the spirit as separate from the physical body. Their egos cut them off from spiritual inner direction.

Without the communication systems designed to connect humans to creation, the Creator’s evolutionary plan, the “Sacred Vision,” was left unfulfilled. Ego-humans departed into worlds of illusion dominated by fear, emotional turbulence, and warfare. Man’s alienation from nature caused him many ills. He fell out of rhythm with life and ceased to grow.

The following mythic account describes the circumstances surrounding man’s estrangement from the natural world and the maladies he suffered because of it. Recorded by James Mooney among the Cherokee in 1890, it is the myth of the origin of disease and medicine:

In the old days, the beasts, birds, fish, insects, and plants could all talk. They and the people lived together in peace and friendship. As time went on, however, the people increased so rapidly that their settlement spread over the whole earth, and the poor animals

found themselves cramped for room. To make things worse, Man invented bows, knives, spears, and hooks, and began to slaughter the larger animals, birds, and fish for their flesh or their skins. The smaller creatures, such as the frogs and worms, were crushed and trodden upon without thought, out of pure carelessness or contempt. So the animals resolved to consult upon measures for their common safety.

The Bears were the first to meet in council, led by old White Bear. After each in turn had complained of the way in which Man killed their friends, ate their flesh, and used their skins for his own purposes, it was decided to begin war at once against him. Once the angry crowd calmed down, White Bear told them that the human beings had a decided advantage—the bow and arrow. So the Bears decided to make their own weapons.

However, the Bears had a problem. Their claws made it impossible to properly draw back on a bow. Some of the younger Bears thought of cutting their claws, but White Bear objected, “If we cut off our claws, we will all starve together. It is better to trust the teeth and claws that nature gave us, for it is plain that Man’s weapons were not intended for us.”

No one could think of any better plan, so the old chief dismissed the council and the Bears dispersed to the woods and thickets without having concerted any way to prevent the increase of the human race. Had the result of the council been otherwise, we should now be at war with the Bears, but as it is, the hunter does not even ask the Bear’s permission when he kills one.

The Deer next held a council under their chief, Little Deer. After some talk, they resolved to use their magic. Thenceforth, if a hunter wished to kill a Deer, he must take care to ask their pardon for the offense. Any human hunter failing to do so would be stricken with rheumatism. The Deer sent notice of their decision to the nearest settlement of Indians and told them at the same time what to do when necessity forced them to kill one of the Deer tribe. No hunter, who has regard for his health, ever fails to ask pardon of the Deer for killing it.

Next came the Fish and Reptiles, who had their own complaints against Man. They held council together and determined to make their victims dream of snakes twining about them in slimy folds and blowing foul breath in their faces, or to make them dream of eating raw or decaying fish, so that they would lose appetite, sicken, and die. This is why people dream about snakes and fish.

Finally, the Birds, Insects, and smaller animals came together for the same purpose. They decided to spread disease among the humans. They began then to devise and name so many new diseases, one after another, that had not their invention at last failed them, no one of the human race would have been able to survive.

When the Plants, who were friendly to Man, heard what the animals had done, they determined to defeat the latter's evil designs. Each Tree, Shrub, and Herb, down even to the Grasses and Mosses, said, "I shall appear to help Man when he calls upon me in his need." Thus was medicine born. The plants, every one of which has its use if we only knew it, furnish the remedy to counteract the evil wrought by the vengeful animals. Even weeds were made for some good purpose, which we must find out for ourselves. When the doctor (shaman) does not know what medicine to use for a sick man, the spirit of the plant tells him.<sup>6</sup>

### **Reunification**

The preceding myth illustrates the importance of developing communication with the natural world. Plants, for example, have much to share regarding their healing properties. According to Mongolian mythology, such communication would not be possible were it not for the gift of the drum, or *hengereg*. As Jade Wah'oo explains in his mythic telling:

So that we would not be lost forever, but always have a way of finding our way home, Grandfather Fire sent the Eagle to Grandmother Earth. This Eagle—Eagle Brother/First Shaman—brought to us Two-Leggeds 'The Ways' . . . through which we could seek, find, and fulfill our own unique Path of Reunification with Grand-

father Fire, which is our path of self-realization. There came a time when Eagle Brother brought to us the Shamanic Drum. It is the Shaman's foremost vehicle for engaging one's attention in spiritual upliftment, for the gift of the drum is that it enables us to once again communicate in the Sacred Language of Spirit!<sup>7</sup>

Though the mythical paradise is lost in our physical mode of perceptual awareness, it still remains accessible along the intuitive and imaginative frequencies. In our day, as in times past, the shaman utilizes the drum to gain access to the mythic realm of reality. Through the drum's rhythms, he or she transcends time and space to reestablish communication between the spiritual and the physical realms.

### **Altered States of Consciousness**

Drumming offers a relatively easy means of controlled transcendence. Researchers have found that if a drum beat frequency of 180 to 200 beats per minute is sustained for at least fifteen minutes, it will induce significant altered states in most people, even on their first attempt. This ease of induction contrasts significantly with the long periods of isolation and practice required by most meditative disciplines before inducing significant effects. Rhythmic stimulation is a simple and effective technique for affecting states of mind.

One scientific explanation for this is that the sound of drumming creates strong, repetitive neuronal firing in the auditory pathway that could block out other sensory stimuli. Multiple sound frequencies, recurring at an even, steady rate, tend to block the left-hemispheric processing of the cerebral cortex and simultaneously to activate cerebral electrical rhythms not ordinarily employed in the brain in normal conscious awareness.<sup>8</sup> Research has demonstrated that the physical transmission of rhythmic energy to the brain synchronizes the two cerebral hemispheres. Brain hemisphere synchronization links the conscious and subconscious minds, opening one's ability to hear and recognize the messages of one's inner voice.

The left hemisphere of the brain functions primarily through a linear flow of information, the sequential process of analysis, and a continual

referral to our past experiences stored in memory. The left cerebral specializes in science, mathematics, and language processing. It is characterized as deductive, rational, and producing consciousness.

The right hemisphere is involved primarily in processing visual and spatial information. Artistic, musical, and creative abilities are heavily dependent on right brain functions. The right cerebral is characterized as intuitive, imaginative, and the seat of the subconscious.

When these hemispheres begin to pulsate in harmony, the inner guidance of intuitive knowing can then flow unimpeded into conscious awareness. Intuition reveals appropriate action in the moment for a given set of circumstances. Synchronous activity appears within consciousness as the most natural thing to do. One can readily perceive what aims are in accord with the cosmos and not waste energy on discordant pursuits. By allowing the intuition to lead the body, one attains clarity in movement. So long as one follows one's intuitive sense, one's actions will be in sync with the true self and ultimately the cosmos.

The ethereal rainbow, arching high into the heavens, symbolizes this harmonious union of body and soul. In her book, *Voices of Our Ancestors: Cherokee Teachings from the Wisdom Fire*, Dhyani Ywahoo states, "We are the rainbow, each of us. When we speak of rebuilding the 'Rainbow Bridge,' it is to bring into harmony the left and right hemispheres of the brain, to renew the flow of our intuitive mind."<sup>9</sup> Regarding the drum, she states, "Chanting and drumming were also a significant part of the learning, balancing activity of the right and left hemispheres of the brain."<sup>10</sup>

Each cerebral is associated with opposite sides of the body, yet both hemispheres complement each other. For example, the right cerebral (left ear) specializes in the perception of melody, pitch, timbre, and harmony, but the left cerebral (right ear) has an advantage pertaining to the perception of rhythm.<sup>11</sup> Most striking, however, is the right hemisphere's ability to analyze or devour information all at once, while the left hemisphere analyzes information one bit at a time. It is the right hemisphere that accesses the invisible sea of information that we bathe in daily, the all-pervading frequencies of consciousness immanent in all phenomena. The right hemisphere accesses this intelligent energy primarily at a subconscious level. We become consciously aware of this information only

when the two hemispheres are synchronized in harmony. The left cerebral allows us to see only the surface of things. Until the right side is awakened, “seeing” with the inner vision is not possible. Each person has the ability to connect directly with this energy information flow, thereby awakening the higher mind. Drumming rebuilds the Rainbow Bridge.

When pulsed at some 180 beats per minute, rhythmic drumming induces an alpha wave cycle in the brain.<sup>12</sup> Alpha activity is associated with meditation, light trance states, and holistic modes of consciousness. The alpha rhythm is the resonant frequency produced by our planet’s electromagnetic field. All life on this planet is plugged into this primary frequency. When the brain oscillates in this common frequency, attunement to planetary collective consciousness is achieved. One’s sense of being a separate individual gives way to an experience of union, not just with other individuals, but with the entire planet. Drumming is a quick and easy way to induce this state.

A recent study by Barry Quinn, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist specializing in neuro-biofeedback therapy for stress management, demonstrates that even a brief drumming session can double alpha brain wave activity, dramatically reducing stress. Stress, according to current medical research, contributes to nearly all disease and is a primary cause of such life-threatening illnesses as heart attacks, strokes, and immune system breakdowns. Moreover, nearly 40 percent of the population has little or no alpha in their brain wave patterns. Drum induced alpha states may well be the antidote to modern society’s worst ills.

High alpha states are usually fundamental to undertaking shamanic tasks. As Jade Wah’oo explains, “The mind, fixated and silent, cannot help but pay attention to that which is transpiring within the alpha state. We are now able to perceive directly the expressions, or desires, of our Spirit—that is, we are now able to once again communicate in the Sacred Language of Spirit!”<sup>13</sup> In his book, *The Way of the Shaman*, anthropologist Michael Harner notes that in this light trance state, “part of the shaman’s consciousness is usually still lightly connected to the ordinary reality of the physical or material environment where he is located.”<sup>14</sup> This permits full recall later of the visionary experience, unlike the much deeper trance characteristic of mediumistic trance, psychedelic drug induced states, or hypnosis. One maintains conscious control over the di-

rection of travel, but does not know what mysteries will be uncovered. The experience is ecstatic—one is inspired and visionary.

The visionary experience is as valid as the ordinary state of consciousness. The basis for the empirical definition of reality is, after all, what is observed with one's own senses. Perception is the latticework of reality. The Australian anthropologist A.P. Elkin regarded the shamanic vision as "no mere hallucination. It is a mental formation visualized and externalized, which may even exist for a time independent of its creator."<sup>15</sup>

The trance or transcendent state of awareness becomes a learned state of awareness through repeated journeys of the spirit into the mythic planes of reality. There the shaman learns to communicate with plants, animals, and the guiding forces of nature. He or she acquires knowledge, power, healing, and a harmonious union of the spirit and ego. He or she becomes a direct participant in the evolution of creation. The shaman, like our modern physical scientists, views the universe as a web of inseparable energy patterns that is in a continuous process of creation. By utilizing the input of the intuitive and imaginative frequencies, the shaman becomes the primary creative dynamic in the human realm.

This useful book reveals profound teachings about shamanic drumming, which is a time-honored method of healing and helping others. Rhythmist Michael Drake presents the first practical guide to applying this ancient healing art to our modern lives.

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