

Altered States of Consciousness in Shamanism & North American Aboriginal Religions

by Donalee Schofield

North American Aboriginal religions seem very foreign to Euro-American minds. Far from the savage beast, however, the Native mind can be very highly evolved, all the while still retaining its traditional beliefs. Highly developed states of consciousness are an integral part of their culture, as they serve as a vehicle for religious experience. And the adventures upon which they partake lead them straight into the heart of the divine. In order to begin to understand these experiences, we must first look at the cosmology that shapes them, for it is much different than ours. Then we look at the rituals, ceremonies and methods that they use to induce these states of consciousness, and finally at the amazing powers that manifest out of them. Only then can we hope to understand the naivety of our science in its understanding of the dimensions of altered consciousness. For ease of purpose I make references in the male gender, although women can be shamans as well. I have drawn mainly on material on shamanism in general, with an emphasis on North American tribes such as the Lakota and the Inuit. There are as many different Native religions as there are tribes, and they cannot be seen as one coherent belief system. By looking at material from many different tribes, however, we can see a larger picture and begin to open the scope of our minds in order to better appreciate the Native religious experience.

One of the symbols that can be found to represent North American Aboriginal cosmology is the cross within a circle. Native symbolism is intuitive, complex, multi-leveled and deeply profound, so we can only hope to touch on its meaning here. Basically, the circle symbolizes the ultimate Unity of all things in the universe. It represents the cyclical and sacred nature of time, rather than the Western view of time as linear, progressive and profane. In *God is Red*, Vine Deloria Jr. argues that it is precisely this linear, material and desacralized view of time and space that is responsible for the world's present ecological crises.¹ In a profound vision, Oglala holy man Black Elk saw the circle as the sacred hoop of the nation, and the cross as two intersecting roads, with the north/south axis as the 'red road' of traditional spirituality and sacredness, and the east/west axis as the 'black road' of greed, fear, selfishness and materialism.² The cross also symbolizes the four directions, the four seasons, the four chambers of the heart, the four races, and the four cyclical epochs of time (of which we are presently in the fourth, and most degraded, cycle³). The vertical axis of the cross opens dimensionally to include realms above, below, and the point in the centre, representing respectively the spiritual, physical, and subtle (or psychic) realms. It is the *axis mundi*, the world tree, or the dimensional ladder through which the spiritual manifests in form, and upon which humans may travel to the other realms. The spiritual realm exists in a state of timelessness, which intersects the horizontal axis of time, creating the world in which we live. It is the intersection of mortality and immortality, serving as a constant reminder of the heirophanic possibilities evident in all of nature, myth, rituals and in human consciousness itself. The human stands at the point in the centre of the cross, with feet on the ground and head in the sky,⁴ integrating body, mind and soul, and joining the three realms in a dance of joyous ecstasy.

The spiritual realm is considered by some to be the reality behind reality that reveals the true Unity of all that exists. "Crazy Horse dreamed and went into the world where there is nothing but the spirit of all things. That is the real world that is behind this one, and everything we see here is something like a shadow from that world."⁵ It can be multi-dimensional, often with seven levels or heavens. Many tribes know a hierarchy of divine and semi-divine beings and spirits, often subservient to a supreme power that the Lakota call Wakan-Tanka. This Great Spirit, or Great Mysterious, as it has been translated, is not necessarily seen as an almighty being as in Western religions. It more often means an underlying, all-encompassing energy or principle that manifests all the mysteries of the universe, or a combination of

many energies, such as in the Lakota's understanding of 16 separate entities comprising one coherent whole.

All realms, although differentiated, are integral and intricately linked, and reverence for nature reflects this belief. In tribal life, symbols, ritual, ceremony, relationships, and even village or campsite reflect the cosmology of the spiritual world. The natural order is not separated from the supernatural order, but is a reflection and manifestation of it instead. The physical realm is the embodiment of the spirit realm, and thus always has sacred potential. Spirits, divine and semi-divine beings, ghosts and demons can manifest in or send messages through the natural world as animals, plants, elements or geographic spaces which are then considered sacred. Animals have deep spiritual significance. In creation myths they were created first and thus are considered closer to the creator or Centre, nearer to the divine. Certain animals, such as the eagle, and certain land forms, such as high bluffs and mountain tops, commonly manifest sources of great power and thus are always respected as sacred. Astral phenomena are commonly personified as spirits, especially the sun, moon, stars and northern lights. As guardians, guides, and intercessors in human affairs, contact with the spirits is actively sought out.

Contact with the spirits can be accessed through the subtle or psychic realm. The shaman is the expert in this realm. The acquisition of spirit helpers is essential to the shaman as they are the source of his power. Many tribes tell of a time at the beginning of creation when all creatures spoke the same language, and could take on other forms at will.⁶ With cultural disintegration and exploitation of nature, these powers have degenerated. All life is still, however, united at its most basic level, and powerful shamans can still experience this mystical bond. It is through the imagination that the hidden reality is unveiled, and shamans, as masters of the ecstatic trance, can travel along the central axis of timelessness to any realm. This centre can be anywhere in physical space, and is represented in everything, from the tipi to the most sacred ritual. The central axis is often represented by the world tree, with its roots in the earth and its branches reaching to the sky, or the centre pole of the Plains Sundance, which leads the way to Wakan-Tanka. Similarly, the mountain top, with its belly in the physical world and its summit in heaven, is the place where the ancestors can be found, and the living and dead meet. From this vantage point one can see all three worlds. It is the place of creation itself, the divine Centre.⁷ Holes, concentric circles and spirals are related motifs representing the navel or womb of the universe and the opening of consciousness to the other realms. The journey represents the evolution of the spirit to move beyond time and space.

Arctic cultures such as the Inuit know three realms, but as the celestial world, middle earth, and the underworld. The celestial realm is seen much like the above mentioned spiritual realm. There is a large overlap in the belief in spirits, which can be both benevolent or evil or in some cases both, despite any particular views of positioning. More significant differences can be seen in the understanding of the lower realms. The middle world is the world of the earth, including both biospheric and atmospheric elements. Most notable are humans, animals, plants, land forms, the four winds, the whirlwind, rain spirits and thunderbirds. The underworld is home to the spirits of disease, monsters, Mother Earth, and the Mother of the Sea Beasts. This last spirit is mistress of the sea animals, and holds them back in rage when humans break taboos. The shamans travel to her undersea lair to learn of these transgressions, and run their fingers through her hair to comb out the dirt that these sins have deposited there. If the shaman is successful she releases the animals so that hunting can be fruitful again.⁸

There is much commonality with beliefs in the afterlife, ghosts and reincarnation, although specific details vary. The Lakota afterlife is thought to be similar to this world, but with all the ancestors and buffalo alive and well, and living in the traditional way. Even enemies can be found, and the practice of scalping was thought to keep the slain victims from the spirit camps after death, preventing them from seeking vengeance there. Many see the milky way as the route upon which souls of the dead travel on their way to the spirit camps of the afterlife. The stars are said to be their campfires. At a certain point along their route, judgment is pronounced, usually by a woman, who sends some along to the hereafter and

the rest to return to earth as ghosts or to reincarnate. The Inuit believe that a soul may go either to the celestial world or the underworld at death, with the underworld not necessarily seen as punishment. The Lakota understand the soul to split into four aspects at death, with one of the three following the route of the milky way and the other three reincarnating. They believe all souls spend one year after death as ghosts, and mourners engage in a year-long ritual feeding called 'Ghost Keeping', releasing the soul in ceremony when the year is up. Fear in ghosts is common to most tribes as ghosts are known to have the power to entice the living to join them in death.

Shamans do not dictate tribal cosmology, but rather keep it alive through encounters with spirits and mythical beings in dreams, visions and rituals. The spirit world expresses itself in ways he already understands, and tests the strength of his character. There are many different pathways to the other worlds, which may be seen as labyrinths, scrolls, or even as invisible paths. Trials and tribulations abound. Shamans bring the knowledge they gain to their community. They are the map-makers, depicting their pathways to the other worlds in their drums and costumes, and sharing their journeys through story, drama, song and dance. Ritual is a waking dream, and ecstatic trance may not even be required as the shaman mimes the journey of the soul for all to see, for this can be as effective as genuine trance. Often dramatic recreations of the act of creation (such as the Sundance) or events which transpired in the spirit realm, ritual and ceremony maintain the aboriginals' sacred pact to keep the earth alive. Manifesting the spiritual through ritual brings the true reality to bear. This helps to restore cosmic balance, without which the earth and the spirits cannot provide for our continuity, and which may now be in serious danger.

All life is interdependent, so just as plants and animals offer themselves that we may live, so must offerings be given in return. Offerings and prayers can be improvised, learned from elders or directly from the spirits, and can be simple blessings or complex rituals lasting up to several days. The pipe ceremony is an offering of utmost importance to most Native Americans. The Lakota say it was given as a gift to humans from White Buffalo Calf Woman as a means to communicate with the spirit world. She also taught the people the Vision Quest, the Sweat Lodge, the Sundance and Ghost Keeping. The pipe is a portable altar that transforms prayer, which is carried upon the smoke to Wakan-Tanka in the sky, into power or medicine in return. In the ceremony all of the forms of creation are represented by the grains of sacred tobacco. "The filled pipe is thus Totality, so that when the fire of the Great Spirit is added, a divine sacrifice is enacted in which the universe and humankind are reabsorbed within the Principle, and become what in reality they are."⁹ The smoker thus sacrifices his ego to the breath of creation and realizes the divinity in all of creation, which is ultimately One, linked in the sacred Unity of truth. The pipe is smoked before all important rituals, ceremonies or gatherings. Thus the meaning of the 'peace pipe' is a very profound seal of agreement, acknowledging the divine presence in all the parties involved.

In supplicating the spirits, purity is required in both body and mind. Incense and sweetgrass are commonly burned or smudged as purifiers and sage can be chewed, rubbed on the body, or laid on the floor of a ceremonial lodge. The Sweat Lodge, *inipi* or *inikagapi* in Lakota, incorporates offerings of tobacco, herbs, fire and water in a physical, mental and spiritual purification ceremony. It is commonly held before any rituals, ceremonies, or before going on a hunt, on the warpath, or on a Vision Quest. The shaman can also use this rite to enter into an altered state and make contact with the spirits. Incorporating the elements of creation: fire, wood, air, water, earth and stone, a small dome-shaped lodge is built from branches and covered with hides or blankets so that it is airtight. The shape of the lodge represents the shape of the universe and the darkness symbolizes the state of ignorance and impurity of those who enter. Heated rocks are placed in a hole in the centre and water is sprinkled over them, causing steam to fill the tent. Participants sweat profusely in the extreme heat, often slapping themselves with switches to increase circulation. They sing and pray for both themselves and their community. Four times the lodge is opened for fresh air, and the ceremonial pipe is smoked.

In the Lakota Sundance, the dancers offer their own life blood, being the only thing they own and

can truly be offered, to Wakan-Tanka above, represented by the sun. In this open air lodge is erected a sacred centre pole, which becomes the centre of the world, that place where all realms are connected. Its purpose is to restore cosmic balance, to thank the Great Mysterious for the past year, and to pray for the year to come. Usually held in early summer before the annual buffalo hunt, dancers fast and dance for several days, gazing in the direction of the sun, the physical manifestation of the spiritual Centre. Sacrifice is an offering concerned with cosmic rejuvenation, the idea that for life there must be death, and for abundance there must be sacrifice. It is a warrior code of conduct that is based on a recognition of the afterlife and the conquering of selfishness and individual desires. Males often have their chests pierced and tied to the centre pole, acknowledging their connection to the Centre of the universe. Accompanied by drums, instruments, chanting and song, they lean back and dance for hours or days in the hot sun, until the skin rips free and they fall into a semi-conscious state, where they have visions and gain power. Women sometimes dance as well, offering flesh from their arms, and children can have their ears pierced. Through this ritual the dancer renews humankind's connection to the spirit world, as well as individual spirit powers.

The Ghost Dance was a pacifist rebellion against the domination of the White Man. Wovoka, a Paiute from Nevada, had a vision of a cataclysmic event in which the earth itself would turn over. This event would wipe the White Man off the face of the planet and restore the ancestors, the buffalo, and the traditional way of life. In his vision, the ancestors taught Wovoka a dance that would help to bring this event about. In the ceremony, dancers fell into catatonic trance states at the touch of an eagle feather. In visions they would visit with their dead relatives in the spirit camp. This movement ended after the U.S. government abolished all ceremonial dancing and then murdered 260 men, women and children at the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890. The cataclysm did not happen when it was prophesied.

In the arctic, cold, long nights, solitude, and lack of vitamins commonly give rise to both arctic hysteria and spontaneous shamanic trance.¹⁰ In other areas, spontaneous trance is less common and a gift to only the most powerful of shamans. It is common for both shamans and others to use other means to encourage trance or altered states. Tobacco used in conjunction with fasting assists in inducing trance.¹¹ Many plants, herbs and mushrooms are taken for their hallucinogenic properties. These include psilocybine and fly agaric mushrooms, jimson weed, San Pedro cactus and peyote. The Native American Church, or peyote cult, uses 'buttons' from these sacred plants, which contain mescaline, in ceremonial contexts. Participants believe that there is powerful life force energy infused in the plant and that this power is transferred to the person who consumes it. They claim the mushroom creates an entry to the spirit realm, where the "horizon opens like a door." About the purpose of the peyote ceremony, Ramon Medina Silva, a Huichol shaman, said "It is one, it is a unity, it is ourselves,"¹² and others often say " it gives you heart." There is controversy over the use of psychedelic substances to contact the spirit world, however, as some believe that they decrease the ability to achieve these states drug-free.

The Vision Quest is a traditional way for anyone who wishes to see beyond the material realm to the spiritual realms that animate it, and see the true forms of being. Alone in a secluded spot in the wilderness, often a mountain top, with only a blanket and a pipe, the men and women fast and expose themselves to the elements, usually for one to four days. They hope to acquire 'medicine' or power from guardian spirits, who can come through dreams, visions, ghosts, animals, elements of weather or inanimate objects. The participant must pay careful attention to any dreams, and to everything that happens, no matter how ordinary it may seem. The shaman will help the person to interpret the experience later, back in the Sweat Lodge. Visions are the most powerful spirit communications, and most often come near the end of the time spent in isolation. The more Vision Quests that are undertaken, the more power may be obtained. Accounts often say that self-awareness vanishes and is replaced by feelings of peace, joy, love, and an at-oneness and reverence for the environment. Questers may be given a message, a name, prayers, songs, dances, costumes, herbal remedies, or instructions for making a pipe, pouch or medicine bag that will manifest the power of the guardian spirit. Anything communicated during a vision quest can be

symbolized in physical form and used to help that person manifest that power when in need. Sometimes a quest can even reveal a shamanic calling or vocation.

Shamanic initiation is manifested by crisis or calling, and can occur during an illness, vision, dream, spontaneous ecstasy, epileptic seizure, or ritual, with death and resurrection being the most common and recurring theme. Dreams most often begin the renewal process, a case in diverse cultures around the globe.¹³ Many times actual illness or accident brings the person close to death, but even symbolic death allows for rebirth on a higher plane, and opens the doorway to the other worlds. In approaching the edge of death the spirits gain a foothold in the psyche, and one learns to travel to the other realms and back. Relationships with the spirits are complex and varied. In dreams and visions an animal or demon that kills or devours the neophyte also devours his fear of death, and may even become his tutor or helping spirit. The eater and eaten become one in the interdependence and unity of existence.¹⁴ Dismemberment and skeletonization are common initiatory themes. The initiation is the cure, and one is transformed in the process, gaining a new spiritual body. The present-day secret society of the Midêwiwin lodge aims at restoring the paradisaical state through levels of initiation where members are symbolically killed and resurrected. Here, anyone with the desire and the money can be initiated into hierarchical levels of training, with those at the highest levels being considered shamans. Initiation rituals can include fasting, torture, sensory deprivation, psychic surgery, mountain ascent, purification, terror, symbolic dismemberment and rebirth. Through his own personal crisis the initiate sacrifices his ego, de-patterns his personality, and learns to heal himself. Only then can he use his powers to help others, and fulfill his calling to serve his community.

Usually called by the spirits but sometimes through heredity, the potential shaman must have an aptitude for mystical states. They are oftentimes loners -- contemplative types with a predisposition to asceticism and meditation, for it is through turning inward that the door to infinity is opened and in silence that the voice of the Great Spirit is heard. The shaman has two components to his education: the ecstatic and the didactic. Whether taught by spirits or elders or both, he learns the secret language of the spirits, and how to express the ineffable through ritual and symbol. The Shaking Tent, or yuwipi ceremony, is a shamanic ritual in which the spirits are called into a tent small enough for only one man. The spirits answer questions and affect cures through him with a great fury, shaking the deeply sunken poles of the tent and sounding out in a confusion of different animal calls. The ability to enter an ecstatic trance at will is the calling card of the shaman. He specializes in obtaining trance states where either his spirit leaves his body to enter transcendent realms, or the spirits come to talk to him. The spirits can also inhabit his body and speak through him, often in song or dance. He is taught self-discipline and self-control, even in cases of possession. He becomes an elite representative of mysticism, fully trained in techniques of ecstatic trance.

The drum and other instruments, song, and dance, are gifts from the spirit to help call upon the shaman's powers in trance. These methods are often learned in the trance state, as the response to the sacred power within. They are expressions of the spiritual realm, used to help those present to awaken to the spirit world, to enter a trance state, and as a vehicle for transportation. These elements bridge the realms to bring together matter and spirit in sacred Unity. The drumbeat is the heartbeat of the universe; it unifies those present and all the elements of ritual. It is often decorated with maps or images brought back through the dimensions, and may manifest a particular spirit power. The sound carries the shaman to the other world and provides a pathway of time upon which he can return.¹⁵ The Inuit shaman will drum until the spirits possess and speak or sing through his body. Songs may be communications from the spirits, may invoke the spirits, may renew visions or myths, or may be simply expressions of gratitude or prayers for help. They are often sung four times in succession to honour the four directions and may be in the language of the animals. Rattles, bells and whistles are also used and become the voice of spirit. The shaman's spirit may be in transit while his body sings, drums, or dances the journey he is on. Dance steps are grounded, moving towards the earth as a source of power. The dance is felt through the drumbeat, and

often imitates the animals. Antlers worn on the head symbolize the shamanic wisdom of balance, re-birth, rejuvenation and the power of opposites. Masks can be used to manifest the forces depicted. In the Iroquois False Face Society or the Zuni Mask dances, the dancer becomes the power of the mask. Bird feathers and animal skins are also worn for this purpose, and for protection from less than benevolent spirits. In one of Black Elk's visions he was instructed in the making of a 'ghost shirt', which saved him from the rain of the Cavalry's bullets at Wounded Knee Creek. It was only at a point where he had doubt and started to feel fear where a bullet finally hit and injured him.¹⁶ Traditional art or craft is always considered sacred, in any context, for it manifests a message from the transcendent realm and reminds us of our true spiritual purpose. A shamanic painting style depicts animals as though they were transparent, with organs exposed, revealing the true inner nature of being.

With these tools & instruments, the shaman awakens magical powers. The term 'medicine' refers to power and goes far beyond our idea of the word. Although he may know herbal cures, the power to heal is channeled and does not belong to the healer individually. He merely channels spiritual energy according to the capacity of the client. The shaman works to heal not only the individual, but society and the cosmos itself. From his initiation experience in healing and transforming himself, he brings this knowledge back to this realm, penetrating the veil that separates. He often confers with the spirits for diagnoses, or to find out what taboos have been broken, and may use clairvoyance or x-ray vision, or travel to find a soul lost in another realm. Herbs used are often individual to the shaman's power as gained through dreams and visions, but may also be handed down traditionally. The cure may involve extracting 'bad blood' or a foreign object embedded by sorcery, through sucking or psychic surgery, or the shaman may go on a flight to find and retrieve a lost soul or guide him to the afterlife.

Power of flight is a common feature of shamanism. The sensations are described as exhilarating as his pure spirit leaves his body. The eagle, as the bird who flies highest and closest to the sun, is a representative of Wakan-Tanka, and often carries the shaman to the celestial realm. Horses, deer, reindeer and stags are other common carriers, as is the rainbow bridge. Inuit shamans were said to be able to fly under the sea and far into space, often circling the globe or visiting the moon.¹⁷ Other shamans are said to have the power of levitation. Often the journeys the shaman takes are full of peril and even sheer terror. He puts himself in real danger for the sake of others, relying on his knowledge, traditions and his spirit helpers to guide him through and ensure his safe return.

The powers of the shaman rely on his ability to alter his state of consciousness. By remembering his dreams as travels into sacred realms, and by inducing visions consciously, he contacts the spirits and from them gains particular powers. No shaman has access to all powers, but only to those ones which he has been given. To manifest his powers he most often enters into trance, the fire of transformation, where his mortal self is burned away and he is reduced to pure spirit. The potential for his spirit is unlimited. In handling hot coals, his mastery of fire is indicative of mastery of the body and participation in the ecstatic, transcendent Self. His spirit self can transcend physicality, giving him the ability, like that of the raven for the Northwest Coast peoples, to change into any form.¹⁸ He can converse with the animals, the spirits and with the dead, divining the future and seeing into the distant past. He can find lost objects, receive spiritual messages from others and visit distant places. By learning the language of a particular spirit, he can summon it and command it, giving him power over the forces of nature, including animals, rain, wind, tornadoes and earthquakes. More than religious mystics, the shaman affects the dynamics between the realms, affecting changes in both people and cultures.

One of the shaman's greatest gifts is that of mystical rapture. It is the gift of inner sight, allowing him to see in the darkness, beyond both time and space. He can see the soul in its true form and the cosmic radiance that envelops everything. Like the Chinese meridians of ch'i in the human body, participants of the peyote ceremonies often see and interact with a web of inter-connecting, incandescent lines and geometric patterns of energy.¹⁹ These are seen in humans, animals, plants, and even in the planet

itself. This life force energy, called *kupuri* by the Mexican Huichols, can be found in all things to varying degrees. Ancient cave paintings show humans, animals and anthropomorphs radiating lines of life energy force, some with geometric designs drawn in the body's interior. The sun, or spiritual Centre, illuminates the psyche of the initiated, creating an aura of light around their heads and bodies.

Modern science is only just beginning to find the truth in traditional ways. Carl Jung coined the term 'individuation' to refer to the process of re-connecting or re-membering the true Self, (which he symbolized by a quadrated circle) and the collective unconscious, which could be seen as similar to the transcendent realm of the spirits. "When the psyche and the world are ordered within the quadrated circle – the archetype of wholeness – visionary dreams emerge."²⁰ It may then be a developmental process that incorporates these realms. Despite many Western historical views of shamans as psychotic or schizophrenic, the shamanistic experience does not fit into categories of medical psychopathological diagnoses.²¹ Although initiation crises often resemble psychotic episodes, the shaman learns to understand and control what is happening to him. Chaotic states, frenzy, mental illness, madness and even death can occur as a result of some trance induction techniques. Instead, the shaman becomes a highly functional personality, a leader in society with a strong mental constitution, a keen intellect and superior powers of concentration. He exhibits superior control over his mental faculties. In some cases he cures his own epilepsy, inducing seizures at will as a means to a trance state.²² He is a sick man who has cured his own sickness, and gained power from his struggle.

Each shamanic state of consciousness is unique; however, Roger Walsh defines certain typical elements and comparisons.²³ Even with reduced external awareness, the shaman still most often interacts with clients and the community. Powers of concentration are enhanced, with state and content under complete control. The shaman is able to move through various realms at will. Arousal and introspective sensitivity are increased. Sense of self is usually retained, but not limited to the physical body, and can travel out of the body at will. Experiences reflect an organized world view, can be either positive or negative, and are rich in visual and auditory stimuli. In contrast, in schizophrenics concentration decreases, control is low, environmental awareness can increase or decrease, sense of self disintegrates, and content is unorganized. Shamanic states of consciousness do not, as has been suggested, equate with mystical states found in other religions. The range of altered states is varied and complex. Each religion and philosophy has its own maps of consciousness, and they do not coincide in some areas. There are significant differences between mind states in Shamanism, Buddhism and Yoga in areas of arousal, concentration, sense of self and out-of-body travel. To equate the mind states of these traditions is oversimplistic.

Thoreau once said "Our truest life is when we are in dreams awake."²⁴ Recent evidence has shown that trance or altered states require one to maintain a state of conscious awareness while entering a state of reduced arousal with parasympathetic dominance.²⁵ The attainment of ascendant or expanded states of consciousness then, seems to require holistic brain functioning, integrating both left and right brain functions at the same time. These states are often associated with high amplitude delta or theta brain-waves. This ability to maintain awareness while cortical arousal is reduced may be an acquired skill or a natural ability. In a study on brain-wave correlates during a ritual held under the Sun Pyramid in Mexico, F. Holmes Atwater of the Monroe Institute found high-amplitude delta brain-wave activity that suggested progressive relaxation and entry into an altered state of consciousness.²⁶ The subject described a spiritual or religious experience wherein he felt a "oneness" with all of his people and visited with ancestors who seemed to be a part of himself in some way. Much of his experience was described as ineffable, and he said it was very special or sacred.

A definition of trance states as increased focus of attention along with decreased awareness of environment does not give us the whole picture, however. In some cases, awareness of environment is increased. Athletic peak experiences are known to cause transcendental states where time seems to stop or

slow down, consciousness takes on a dream-like quality, and performance is effortlessly optimized.²⁷ Conditions that have been found to produce altered states of consciousness include motor activity reduction or sensory deprivation; increased stimulation, pain stimulation, hyperactivity or hyper-arousal; focused hyperaltness; decreased alertness and relaxation; and certain somato-psychological states including extreme temperatures, sleep deprivation, hyperventilation, hypoglycemia and others. Most, if not all of these conditions, can be found in practices and rituals already mentioned. Trance-like states have also been correlated with the release of endogenous opiod agents in the brain, causing euphoria and hallucinogenic effects, with suggestion playing a key role.²⁸

Rhythmic sensory stimulation has been shown to affect the central nervous system by producing auditory driving responses at both fundamental and harmonic frequencies. The brain actually takes on the characteristics of the drumbeat, in increasingly complex patterns. Drumbeats and phrasing of songs can be very fast, as in the peyote ceremony, and may contribute to hallucinatory effects. Intensive stimulation of the senses also inhibits the transmissions of pain signals to the brain, which may be seen in the Sundance. Susceptibility to this stimulation is increased by stress, exertion, and the somato-psychological states listed above.²⁹

For Aboriginals, suggestion from cosmology and myth plays an important part in the content of experiences in altered states of consciousness. These experiences are, however, very real aspects of the personal psychology, and the divine Self within. Native American religions encourage the induction of altered states through ritual and ceremonial techniques, so that these other states of awareness can be developed, and this infinite source of wisdom and power can be tapped. All of the powers of healing and magic are available to us if only we can learn to access that knowledge. Although the rational mind of science has historically impeded this process, it is now starting to verify its reality. Maybe some day we can bridge the gap between the material and the spiritual, and find the power of Unity in a sacred balance.

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