

Introductory Medicine Wheel: Cree-Ojibway Customs

A Medicine Wheel is a sacred circle within many Plains First Nations' cultures. It is a place for spirituality, harmony, and a site for numerous sacred rituals. As well as the actual physical Medicine Wheel, the Medicine Wheel is also a metaphor for the knowledge of the Elders, for First Nations' teachings.

Structure:

Medicine Wheels are divided into four quadrants according to the four cardinal directions of the earth. A Medicine Wheel comprises three concentric circles: the outside rim has an opening on the south for entering; the space between the outer rim and the next circle is wide enough for a person to walk comfortably and to stop to pray, and is divided into quadrants; each quadrant has an opening facing one of the cardinal directions. The centre circle is much smaller and can fit one person at a time; this is the place of most power. The second layer of the Medicine Wheel has four spokes, each of which starts at the rim of the inner circle and radiates to the rim of the second circle. The spokes point to south east, south west, north west, north east.

The Medicine Wheel is entered through the south entrance and a person walks clockwise in the outer circle, inside the outer rim. Do not step over the stones.

Each of the four cardinal directions represents a season, a direction, and has a particular colour. East is the direction of the sunrise; the beginning of a new day. The quadrant within the East is associated with yellow, the colour of the rising sun, and the season of spring, a time of renewal. Since the circular direction of a Medicine Wheel is clockwise, the Southern quadrant represents the next season of nature; summer. Summer is a time of warmth and is symbolized by the colour red. The quadrant within the West represents the fall and is symbolized by dark colours; for example, blues and purples. The last quadrant lies within the Northern section of the Medicine Wheel. It completes the four cycles in nature by representing winter and is symbolized by the colour white.

Purpose:

An introductory Medicine Wheel is a place of prayer and meditation that is aligned with one's colour spirits. Colour spirits are associated with one's season of birth. Those born throughout the months of March to May are born within the season of spring and have colour spirits that are yellow. If born between the months of June through August, the season of birth is summer and the colour spirits are red. Those born throughout the months of September and November are born within the fall and have dark colour spirits. Finally, those born within December through February belong to the season of winter and have colour spirits that are white.

Similar to the cycles within nature, the Medicine Wheel is a circle; it has no beginning and no end. When entering a Medicine Wheel, it is important to enter the Medicine Wheel from the south and proceed within the wheel in a clockwise direction. When using an introductory Medicine Wheel for prayer and meditation aligned with one's colour spirit, enter the circle from the south and proceed in a clockwise direction until you reach the quadrant that represents your colour spirit. Once you have reached this area of the Medicine Wheel, you may pray and/or meditate while facing the direction of your colour spirit. When finished, continue moving through the Medicine Wheel in a clockwise direction until you have reached the southern exit.

Throughout their life times, First Nations people will participate in a variety of sacred rituals symbolizing their own spiritual growth. These sacred rituals begin within the location of their colour spirits and will proceed in a clockwise direction throughout the entire Medicine Wheel. In time, an individual will eventually be able to pray and mediate in all sections of the Medicine Wheel. This will signify a point of spiritual maturity within the person's life.

In terms of their symbolism and uses, introductory Medicine Wheels are simplified versions of traditional Medicine Wheels that have been used for thousands of generations within many Plains First Nations' cultures.

This information was shared with us by Elders Walter and Maria Linklater. Although Walter is an Anishnabe elder, he practices Nehiyaw traditions while on Treaty 6 land; Maria is a Nehiyaw elder.