

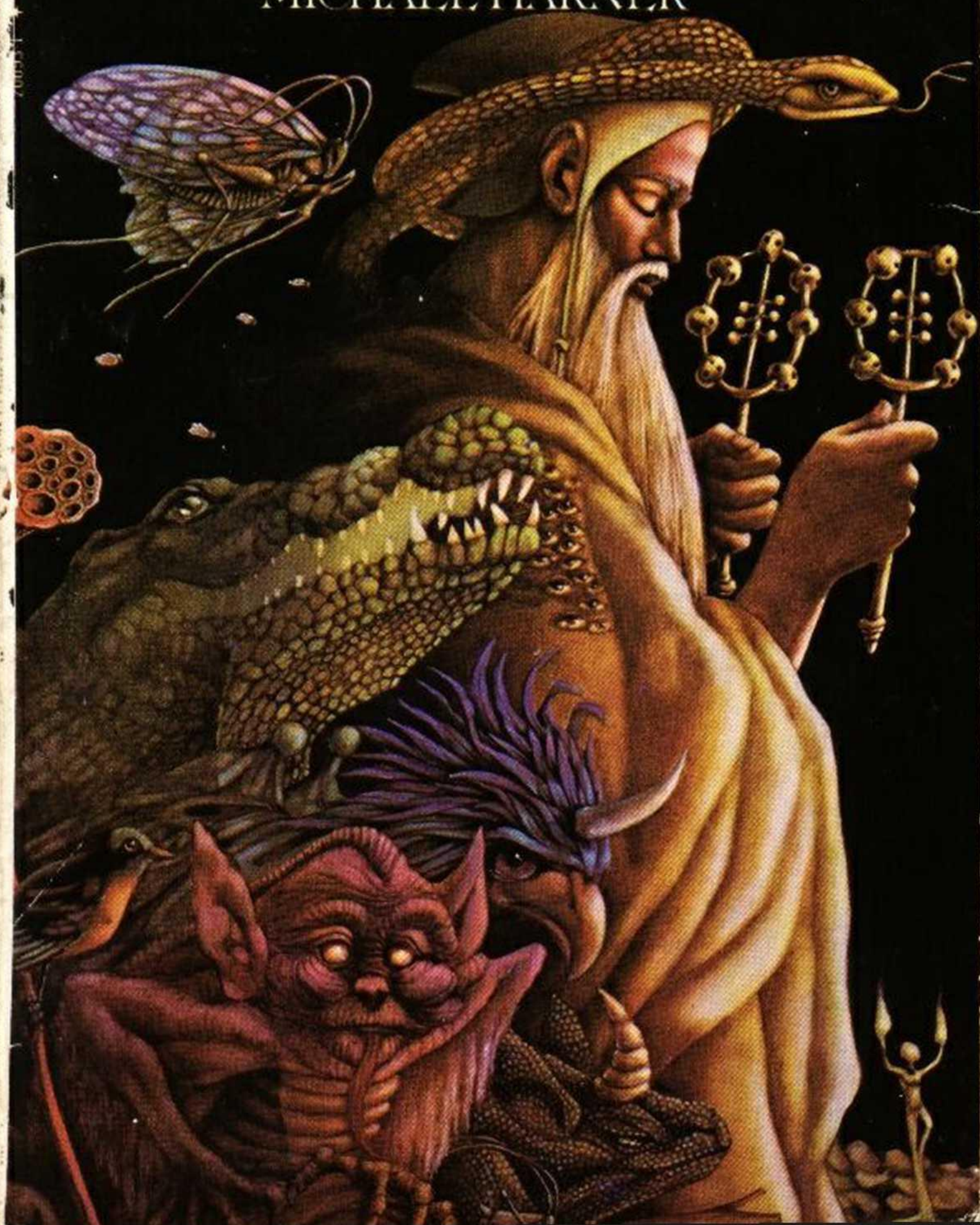


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"Wonderful, fascinating... Harner really  
knows what he's talking about."

A GUIDE TO POWER AND HEALING

# THE WAY OF

MICHAEL HARNER





**Michael Hamer** teaches anthropology in the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York, and is currently co-chairman of the Anthropology Section of the New York Academy of Sciences. He has been visiting professor at Columbia, Yale, and the University of California, Berkeley, where he received his Ph.D., and served as assistant director of the Lowie Museum of Anthropology. His research has taken him repeatedly to the Upper Amazon forest of South America as well as to western North America and Mexico. His books include *The Jivaro, Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, and a recent novel, *Cannibal*, which he co-authored.

"An intimate and practical guide to the art of-shamanic healing and the technology of the sacred. Michael Harner is not just an anthropologist who has studied shamanism, he is an authentic white shaman."

—Stanislav Grof, M.D.,  
author of *Realms of the  
Human Unconscious*

# The Way of the Shaman

*A Guide to Power and Healing*

Michael Harner

A Bantam New Age Book

The shamanic way of healing presented in this book should not be considered as an exclusive method of confronting medical problems. It should be viewed as an adjunct to orthodox medical or psychological treatment, unless contrary medical advice is given.

*This low-priced Bantam Book has been completely reset in a type face designed for easy reading, and was printed from new plates. It contains the complete text of the original hardcover edition.*

NOT ONE WORD HAS BEEN OMITTED

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I also would like to acknowledge the research assistance of Bruce Woych and Karen Ciatyk, and the advice of my editor, John Loudon, as well as that of my wife, Sandra Hamer.

. . Aboriginal medicine-men, so far from being rogues, charlatans or ignoramuses, are men of *high* degree; that is, men who have taken a degree in the secret life beyond that taken by most adult males—a step which implies discipline, mental training, courage and perseverance . . . they are men of respected, and often of outstanding, personality . . . they are of immense social significance, the psychological health of the group largely depending on faith in their powers . . . the various psychic powers attributed to them must not be too readily dismissed as mere primitive magic and 'makebelieve,' for many of them have specialized in the working of the human mind, and in the influence of mind on body and of mind on mind . .

**From *Aboriginal Men of High Degree* by the  
late Australian anthropologist A. P. Elkin  
(1945:78-79)**





# Introduction

Shamans—whom we in the "civilized" world have called "medicine men" and "witch doctors"—are the keepers of a remarkable body of ancient techniques that they use to achieve and maintain well-being and healing for themselves and members of their communities. These shamanic methods are strikingly similar the world over, even for peoples whose cultures are quite different in other respects, and who have been separated by oceans and continents for tens of thousands of years.

These so-called primitive peoples lacked our advanced level of medical technology, so they had excellent reason to be motivated to develop the nontechnological capacities of the human mind for health and healing. The basic uniformity of shamanic methods suggests that, through trial and error, people arrived at the same conclusions.

Shamanism is a great mental and emotional adventure, one in which the patient as well as the shaman-healer are

involved. Through his heroic journey and efforts, the shaman helps his patients transcend their normal, ordinary definition of reality, including the definition of themselves as ill. The shaman shows his patients that they are not emotionally and spiritually alone in their struggles against illness and death. The shaman shares his special powers and convinces his patients, on a deep level of consciousness, that another human is willing to offer up his own self to help them. The shaman's self-sacrifice calls forth a commensurate emotional commitment from his patients, a sense of obligation to struggle alongside the shaman to save one's self. Caring and curing go hand in hand.

Today we are discovering that even the near-miracles of modern Western medicine are not always adequate in themselves to solve completely all the problems of those who are ill or who wish to avoid illness. Increasingly, health professionals and their patients are seeking supplementary healing methods, and many healthy individuals are also engaged in personal experimentation to discover workable alternative approaches to achieving well-being. In this experimentation it is often difficult for the layman or even the health professional to distinguish the spurious from the effective. In contrast, the ancient methods of shamanism are already time-tested; in fact, they have been tested immeasurably longer, for example, than psychoanalysis and a variety of other psychotherapeutic techniques. One purpose of this book is to help contemporary Westerners, for the first time, to benefit from this knowledge in their quest to supplement the approaches of modern technological medicine.

By employing the methods described in this book, you will have an opportunity to acquire the experience of shamanic power and to help yourself and others. In my training workshops in shamanic power and healing in North America and Europe, students have demonstrated again and again that most Westerners can easily become initiated into the fundamentals of shamanic practice. The ancient way is so powerful, and taps so deeply into the human mind, that one's usual cultural belief systems and

assumptions about reality are essentially irrelevant.

Some may question whether shamanism can be learned from a book. To a certain degree the question is justified; ultimately, shamanic knowledge can only be acquired through individual experience. You must learn the methods in order to utilize them, however. They can be learned in a variety of ways. For example, among the Conibo of the Upper Amazon, "learning from the trees" is considered superior to learning from another shaman. In aboriginal Siberia, a death/rebirth experience was often a major source of shamanic knowledge. In certain preliterate cultures, persons spontaneously answer the "call" of shamanism without any formal training, while in others they train under the guidance of a practicing shaman anywhere from a day to five years or more.

In Western culture, most people will never know a shaman, let alone train with one. Yet, since ours is a literate culture, you do not have to be in an apprenticeship situation to learn; a written guide can provide the essential methodological information. Although it may seem awkward at first to learn basic shamanic techniques from a book, persist. Your shamanic experiences will prove their own value. As in any other field of learning, of course, it is enhancing to work firsthand with a professional. Those who wish such an experience may participate in training workshops (see Appendix A).

In shamanism, the maintenance of one's personal power is fundamental to well-being. The book will introduce you to some of the basic shamanic methods of restoring and maintaining personal power, and using it to help others who are weak, ill, or injured. The techniques are simple and powerful. Their use does not require "faith" nor changes in the assumptions you have about reality in your ordinary state of consciousness. Indeed, the system usually does not even require change in your unconscious mind either, for it only awakens what is already there. However, while the basic techniques of shamanism are simple and relatively easy to learn, the effective practice of shamanism requires self-discipline and dedication.

In engaging in shamanic practice, one moves between what I term an Ordinary State of Consciousness (OSC) and a Shamanic State of Consciousness (SSC). These states of consciousness are the keys to understanding, for example, how Carlos Castaneda can speak of an "ordinary reality" and a "nonordinary reality." The difference in these states of consciousness can perhaps be illustrated by referring to animals. Dragons, griffins, and other animals that would be considered "mythical" by us in the OSC are "real" in the SSC. The idea that there are "mythical" animals is a useful and valid construct in OSC life, but superfluous and irrelevant in SSC experiences. "Fantasy" can be said to be a term applied by a person in the OSC to what is experienced in the SSC. Conversely, a person in the SSC may perceive the experiences of the OSC to be illusory in SSC terms. Both are right, as viewed from their own particular states of consciousness.

The shaman has the advantage of being able to move between states of consciousness at will. He can enter the OSC of the nonshaman and honestly agree with him about the nature of reality from that perspective. Then the shaman can return to the SSC and obtain firsthand confirmation of the testimony of others who have reported on their experiences in that state.

Observation with one's own senses is the basis for the empirical definition of reality; and there is no one yet, even in the sciences of ordinary reality, who has uncontestedly proven that there is only one state of consciousness that is valid for firsthand observations. The myth of the SSC is ordinary reality; and the myth of the OSC is nonordinary reality. It is extremely difficult for an unprejudiced judgement to be made about the validity of the experiences in the contrasting state of consciousness.

To understand the deep-seated, emotional hostility that greeted the works of Castaneda in some quarters, one needs to keep in mind that this kind of prejudice is often involved. It is the counterpart of ethnocentrism between cultures. But in this case it is not the narrowness of someone's *cultural* experience that is the fundamental issue, but the narrowness of someone's *conscious* experience. The persons most prejudiced against a concept of nonordinary

reality are those who have never experienced it. This might be termed *cognicentrism*, the analogue in consciousness of ethnocentrism.

A step in the direction toward a solution of this problem may well be for more persons to become shamans, so that they may experience the SSC for themselves, and on their own terms. Such shamans, as they have done from time immemorial in other cultures, can then communicate an understanding of that nonordinary reality to those who have never entered it. This would be comparable to the role of the anthropologist who, by undertaking participant observation in a culture other than his own, is subsequently able to communicate an understanding of that culture to people who would otherwise view it as alien, incomprehensible, and inferior.

Anthropologists teach others to try to avoid the pitfalls of ethnocentrism by learning to understand a culture in terms of its own assumptions about reality. Western shamans can do a similar service with regard to cognicentrism. The anthropologists' lesson is called *cultural relativism*. What Western shamans can try to create, to some degree, is *cognitive relativism*. Later, when an empirical knowledge of the experience of the SSC is achieved, there may be a respect for its own assumptions. Then the time will perhaps be ripe for unprejudiced analysis of SSC experiences scientifically in OSC terms.

Some might argue that the reason we humans spend most of our waking lives in the OSC is that natural selection intended it that way because that is the *real* reality, and that other states of consciousness, other than sleep, are aberrations that interfere with our survival. In other words, such an argument might go, we perceive reality the way we usually do because that is always the best way in terms of survival. But recent advances in neurochemistry show that the human brain carries its own consciousness-altering drugs, including hallucinogens such as dimethyltryptamine. In terms of natural selection, it seems unlikely that they would be present unless their capacity to alter the state of consciousness could confer some advantage for survival. It would appear that Nature itself has made a decision that an altered state of



consciousness is sometimes superior to an ordinary state.

We are only beginning in the West to start appreciating the important impact the state of the mind can have on what have previously been too often perceived as questions of purely "physical" capability. When, in an emergency, an Australian aborigine shaman or a Tibetan lama engages in "fast traveling"—a trance or SSC technique for running long distances at a rapid rate—that is clearly a survival technique which, by definition, is not possible in the OSC.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, we now are learning that many of our finest athletes enter an altered state of consciousness when they are making their greatest achievements. All in all, it seems inappropriate to argue that only a single state of consciousness is superior under all circumstances. The shaman has long known that such an assumption is not only false, but dangerous to health and wellbeing. The shaman, using millennia of accumulated knowledge as well as his firsthand experiences, knows when a change in state of consciousness is appropriate and even necessary.

In the SSC the shaman not only experiences what is impossible in the OSC, but does it. Even if it should be proven that all the shaman experiences in the SSC is purely in his mind, that would not make that realm any less real to him. Indeed, such a conclusion would mean that the shaman's experiences and deeds are *not* impossible in any absolute sense.

The exercises presented in this book represent my own personal distillation and interpretation of some of the millennia-old shamanic methods that I have learned firsthand from South and North American Indians, supplemented by information from the ethnographic literature, including that from other continents. I have adapted the methods so that Western readers, regardless of their religious or philosophical orientations, may use the techniques in daily life. The methods are for those in good health as well as those "dis-spirited" or otherwise ill. From the viewpoint of shamanism, personal power is basic to health under all conditions of one's life.

To benefit seriously from the book, you should be

Careful to undertake the exercises or experiences precisely in the sequence presented, not attempting a subsequent exercise until success has been achieved with the preceding one. Sometimes it is possible for a person to attain all these stages in a few days; more commonly it takes weeks or months. The important thing is not speed but constant personal practice. As long as you proceed in a disciplined way to practice the methods you have learned, you are in the process of becoming a shaman. And at what point *are* you a shaman? That status can only be conferred on you by those you attempt to help in matters of power and healing. In other words, it is recognized success in shamanic work that determines whether you have indeed become a shaman.

You will have the opportunity to find that, completely without the use of drugs, you can alter your state of consciousness in classic shamanic ways and enter the nonordinary reality of shamanism. There in the SSC, you may become a seer (*see-er*), and undertake personally the famed shamanic journey to acquire firsthand knowledge of a hidden universe. You can also discover how to benefit from your journeys in terms of healing and health, using ancient methods that both foreshadow and go beyond Western psychology, medicine, and spirituality. In addition, you can learn nonjourneying methods through which one maintains and improves personal power. It is not unusual for Westerners to approach shamanic exercises for the first time with some trepidation. Yet in every case I know, anxieties have soon been replaced by feelings of discovery, positive excitement, and self-confidence. It is no accident that the term *ecstasy* commonly refers both to the shamanic "trance" or SSC and to a state of exaltation or rapturous delight. The shamanic experience is a positive one, as has been verified through thousands of years, and as I have seen again and again in my training workshops, in which the participants have represented a wide spectrum of personalities.

The SSC, it can be said, is safer than dreaming. In a dream, you may not be able to extricate yourself voluntarily from an unwanted experience or nightmare. In

contrast, one wills himself into the SSC and, since it is a conscious waking state, is able at any time to will himself out of it, back into the OSC. Unlike a psychedelic drug experience, there is no chemically determined length of time that one must be in an altered state of consciousness, and no possibility of being locked into a "bad trip." The only significant dangers I know of connected with the practice of shamanism are social or political. For example, it was obviously dangerous to be a shaman in Europe during the time of the Inquisition, and even today among the Jivaro it can be dangerous to be accused of being a "bad" or bewitching shaman, a practitioner of a type of shamanism not taught here.

This is essentially a phenomenological presentation. I will not be trying to explain away shamanic concepts and practices in the terms of psychoanalysis or any other contemporary Western system of causal theory. The causality involved in shamanism and shamanic healing is, indeed, a very interesting question, and a question worthy of intensive research, but causality-oriented scientific research is not essential to teaching shamanic practice – the main objective here. In other words, Western questions as to why shamanism works are not necessary in order to experience and employ the methods. Try to suspend any critical prejudgments as you first practice shamanic methods. Simply enjoy the adventures of the shamanic approach; absorb and practice what you read, and then see where your explorations take you. For days, weeks, and perhaps years after you have used these methods, you will have ample time for reflecting on their meaning from a Western point of view. The effective way to learn the shamans' system is to use the same basic concepts they do. For example, when I speak of "spirits," it is because that is the way shamans talk within the system. To practice shamanism, it is unnecessary and even distracting to be preoccupied with achieving a scientific understanding of what "spirits" may really represent and why shamanism works.

The books of Carlos Castaneda, regardless of the questions that have been raised regarding their degree of

fictionalization, have performed the valuable service of introducing many Westerners to the adventure and excitement of shamanism and to some of the legitimate principles involved. In the pages that follow I will not recapitulate the materials in Castaneda's works, nor have I set myself the task of showing equivalences between his concepts and the ones presented here. For most readers of his books, however, many of the parallels should be fairly obvious. One of the things I should note, however, is that Castaneda does not emphasize healing in his books, although this is generally one of the most important tasks of shamanism. Perhaps this is because his don Juan is basically engaged in the warrior (or sorcerer) type of shamanism.

The main focus here is to provide an introductory handbook of shamanic methodology for health and healing. There is much more that I could write, and perhaps I will in the future, but the basic essentials are here for anyone who has the capacity and inclination to start becoming a shaman. A knowledge of shamanism, like any knowledge, can be used for different ends, depending upon the way it is employed. The way I offer you is that of the healer, not of the sorcerer, and the methods given are those for achieving well-being and health, and for helping others.

Finally, I should state, if it is not already obvious, that I practice shamanism myself; not because I understand in OSC terms *why* it works, but simply because it *does* work. But don't take my word for it: truly significant shamanic knowledge is *experienced*, and cannot be obtained from me or any other shaman. Shamanism is, after all, basically a strategy for personal learning and acting on that learning. I offer you a portion of that strategy and welcome you to the ancient shamanic adventure

