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The Celtic Shaman  
John Matthews

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## About the Author

John Matthews has been studying the Celtic traditions for over thirty years, and has written more than fifty books on these and related subjects. He currently lives in Oxford with his life-partner Caitlín Matthews and their son Emrys.

Also by John Matthews

*The Encyclopaedia of Celtic Wisdom*

*The Quest for the Green Man*

*The Winter Solstice*

*The Summer Solstice*

*Taliesin: Shamanism and the Bardic Mysteries in Britain and  
Ireland*

*The Western Way*  
(written with Catlín Matthews)

# The Celtic Shaman



A Practical Guide

John Matthews



RIDER

LONDON · SYDNEY · AUCKLAND · JOHANNESBURG

*For all the Clans.*

Shamans transmit to their people in sign, song and dance the nature of the cosmic geography that has been revealed to them in the process of initiation trances and soul journeys. Map-makers and myth-dancers, shamans live internally in a multi-dimensional realm continuous with so-called ordinary reality.

JOAN HALIFAX – SHAMANIC VOICES

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## *Introduction*

# THE SHAMAN'S WORLD

*'Every one born on this earth's soil is a native person now and must learn to live in harmony and balance.'*

*THE CEREMONIAL CIRCLE*  
SEDONIA CAHILL & JOSHUA HALPERN

SHAMANISM IS VERY probably the oldest known spiritual discipline in the world. Visible signs of its practice have been discovered in Australia, the Americas, Siberia and parts of Europe, dating back to the dawn of history. Rock paintings, ancient carved stones and painted shells, originating from sites as far apart as Scotland, France, South and North America, the Arctic Circle and the Australia Bush, have given us glimpses into the life and practice of the shaman.

These ancient disciplines are still taught in many parts of the world, and contemporary practitioners of this tradition add a living dimension to the artefacts. The world thus revealed, for all its constant overlapping with the inner realms of the spirit, is at times an overwhelmingly substantial one, possessing a universality which enables modern shamans to talk essentially the same language irrespective of background or race.

Because it is not an organized religion as such, but rather a spiritual practice, shamanism cuts across all faiths and creeds, reaching deep levels of ancestral memory. As a primal belief system, which precedes established religion, it has its own universal symbolism and cosmology, inhabited by beings, gods and totems who display similar

characteristics although they appear in various forms, depending on their places of origin.

This book is an attempt to suggest the form once taken by the native shamanism of Britain and Ireland. Every technique and exercise can be traced back to some aspect of Celtic life or culture, and though it finds certain analogies in other shamanic traditions, such as North American, Uralian, or Lapp, it does not borrow from any of these. The traditions outlined are purely Celtic in inspiration.

Celtic is here taken to refer to the traditions and ways of people native to the British Isles. In fact, the Celts are no more 'British' than the Saxons or Normans who came after them. They were themselves incomers from the Indo-European world, and incorporated their own practices with those of the indigenous people, thereby honouring the sacredness of the land they had come to dwell in.

The Greek historian Herodotus mentions incidentally the *Keltoi* as living in and around the Danube about 550BC. The reference apparently needed no qualification or explanation, from which we may surmise that the Celts were well established by this time, and had already had some interchange with the Greeks. Certainly they had reached Britain and Ireland by this date and had subjugated the previous inhabitants, a shadowy folk sometimes identified as the Picts in the north of Britain, and as the Fomorians in Ireland.

These peoples left little indication of either their culture or beliefs, though these may well have influenced the incoming tribes, and thus helped create our powerful Celtic traditions. The term 'Celtic' has thus come to stand for a path that is recognizably of the lands of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Therefore this book deals with 'Celtic' (as opposed to native American, Australian or Siberian) shamanism, specifically in its location and in its utilization of known methods and practices native to this part of the

western hemisphere. But it is not intended to be exclusively for use by those of Celtic blood and culture; just as many western practitioners of alternative belief-systems have found native American or Aboriginal shamanic practice useful, so it is hoped that people from all parts of the world will find inspiration in our native Celtic shamanism.

A full historical account of how the system and methods of working described herein were arrived at will be found in my *Taliesin: Shamanism and the Bardic Mysteries in Britain and Ireland* (Inner Traditions, 2002). The contents of the present volume are purely practical, and the historical background has been kept to a minimum.

The shamanic tradition of the Celts never completely disappeared, despite long periods in which it was virtually forgotten. Practices such as scrying, second sight, spiritual healing, prophecy, poetic invocation and communication with the Otherworld, have been maintained - often in fragmentary form - in most of the Celtic countries. But a degree of cultural isolation has made the tradition's occasional forays into the world short-lived, misunderstood or misinterpreted. We still have to work hard to recover what has been lost; fortunately sufficient material remains to enable us to restore many of the old traditions so that they work for us today.

To give an idea of the *feel* of Celtic shamanism, here are two old stories in which the threads of native British shamanic tradition can clearly be seen. The first originates from Wales in a very ancient past; although the version we know today was not written down until medieval times, the antiquity of the themes is undeniable.

### **THE STORY OF TALIESIN**

A young boy named Gwion Bach (Gwion the Little) is set to watch over a cauldron prepared by the Goddess Ceridwen. The brew distilling within it is intended for her son, the hideously ugly Afagddu (Utter Darkness);

when drunk it will give him all knowledge, and the wisdom to use it. But while Ceridwen is absent three drops of liquid splash out of the cauldron on to Gwion's finger. Sucking it to alleviate the pain he imbibes the wisdom meant for Afagddu. But with this comes danger. Ceridwen, aware by her magic of what has occurred, comes in pursuit of Gwion, who flees from her in the shape of various animals, birds and fish. Each time he assumes one form, Ceridwen assumes that of its natural predator. Finally, after a long chase, Gwion becomes a grain of wheat in a heap of chaff and Ceridwen, in the form of a red-crested hen, eats the grain. Nine months later she gives birth to a beautiful boy, whom she cannot bear to kill and so sets adrift in a leather bag on the sea. Eventually the bag fetches up in the salmon weir of Gwyddno Garanhir, where it is discovered by Gwyddno's hapless son Elffin. On opening the bag he sees the bright forehead of the child and exclaims: 'Behold, the radiant brow!', whereupon the child answers 'Taliesin be he called' (*Tal-iessin* = shining brow). He then proceeds to give forth an extraordinary stream of inspired poetic utterance, prophecy and wisdom, the products of having imbibed the brew of inspiration. Taken back to Elffin's home he becomes a famous bard and shaman, later serving at the court of Arthur.

The shamanic nature of this story, which disguises an account of initiation and rebirth as changes into animal, bird and fish, is beyond doubt. The initiation itself gives rise to great wisdom, which was afterwards encoded in the poems attributed to Taliesin. There we read not only of his transformation into other creatures, but also his symbolic relationship with the whole of creation. This is a major objective of shamans everywhere, and in the figure of Taliesin and the teachings which have grown up around him, the primary elements of Celtic shamanism are preserved.

In the second story, that of Suibhne, which derives from ancient Irish sources, we again have a tale of transformation and poetic inspiration; but this time with the added dimension of inspired madness, which is also an integral part of world-wide shamanic tradition.

### **THE STORY OF SUIBHNE GEILT**

Suibhne was a king and poet who ruled over the Dalraidhe. One day, after he had been cursed by a Christian saint, the sight of the carnage of battle sent him mad and he lived for a long time in the wilderness, sleeping in the tops of trees. He wore a cloak of feathers and could fly

from tree-top to tree-top. During these periods of inspired 'madness', he made prophetic statements which later proved to be true. On one occasion he had a contest with the Hag of the Mill who fell to her death when she was unable to match a great leap made by Suibhne. Several times, friends sought him out and tried to persuade him to return home, but each time something happened to drive him further into 'madness'. In the end he met death in a bizarre manner: a cook at the monastery where Suibhne's confidant, St Molling, entertained him to supper, grew jealous of his wife's affection for the mad exile and stabbed him with a spear.

This story, though very different from that of Taliesin, betrays many aspects of Celtic shamanism. When 'mad' or 'inspired', Suibhne composes poetry, flies like a bird and utters prophecies: all three disciplines common to shamans world-wide. His contest with the Hag of the Mill is like Taliesin's shape-shifting contest with Ceridwen, a way of describing a shamanic initiation. It is also reminiscent of various accounts of the struggles between rival 'sorcerers' in South American shamanism. The nickname 'Geilt' (which is applied to Suibhne) is generally taken to mean 'madman'. The Irish equivalent is the Welsh *gwylt*, meaning 'wild'. It was attached to the figure of Merlin, who shares many of the shamanic attributes of Suibhne. It is more than possible that the word 'geilt' or 'gwelt' is the Celtic equivalent of the word shaman: an inspired, flighting madman who could foretell the future and who lived in close communion with animals.

These far-away tales may not seem to have much to tell us today, but studied in the proper way and in the context of world-wide shamanic practice they reveal a great deal. They also illustrate the general method by which the various techniques and methods set forth in this book were arrived at. Following hints and clues from the whole range of Celtic myth-lore, poetry and literature, it has been possible to identify much of the original Celtic shamanic practice.

It might well be asked why, in the early twenty-first century, it should be considered desirable to adopt the

methods and beliefs of the oldest spiritual discipline on the planet? The reasons which might be given are numerous. For instance, shamanism has informed every other spiritual discipline, and in the parts of the world where it is still practised in a more or less unbroken tradition, the messages which call out to us, in the modern Western metropolis, are as vital and urgent now as they have ever been. Celtic shamanism was, and is, a living thing. It teaches us respect for the rest of creation – a theme which, in our destructive age, is of the utmost importance – and it shows us new approaches to living: ways beyond the linear time-lines with which we bind ourselves: out of the realm in which we see without seeing, hear without hearing; touch without feeling and breathe the air without tasting or scenting the news it brings us of our world. Shamanism can teach all of this. But above all it restores a quality to our lives which many of us have missed for a long time. This is the sense of wonder, and of an ability to pass beyond this three-dimensional world into a fourth dimension: the Otherworld of which the Celts knew so much and of which they have left so eloquent a testimony.

But perhaps the best answer, in the long run, is that shamanism is a way of working with the self, with the elements from which we are all constructed, and that it thus cuts across all the self-imposed barriers of race, religion and culture. No matter what your persuasion or religious instinct, shamanism reaches beyond these to a point where all are one.

I first became aware of shamanism in the sixties when, drifting away from the drug-culture of the time, in common with many young people, I began to look for other ways to achieve 'enlightenment'. At the time Carlos Castaneda's best-selling books were beginning to appear, and were the only ones available on the market which dealt with shamanism at a popular level. Though I found them fascinating, I instinctively felt they were not for me. I knew

little, then, of the doubts cast upon Castaneda's work by anthropologists working in similar areas; today I would say that they present a number of fascinating aspects of the shaman's art and that, ultimately, it is not important whether they are 'true' in the proper sense of the word. They still give a remarkably powerful impression of what it means to be a shaman.

Then I moved away from the whole question of shamanism into other disciplines - Sufism, ritual magic, wicca, and finally, Catholicism. None of these was wholly satisfying, though each contributed something to my search. Eventually I was drawn back to the old religions of Britain, and to the Celtic myths which embodied them. I experienced an intensive period of training with a group celebrating the ancient mysteries of the year (I have written about this in *Voices from the Circle*, edited by Caitlín Matthews). But once again I moved on, becoming at this time aware of North American shamanism, discovering *Black Elk Speaks* and Frank Walters' *Book of the Hopi*, both of which I devoured. I felt a sense of recognition in the traditions of these visionary people, and sought to read more about the Amerindians and their way of life.

Finally I made it to America, and it was indeed like 'coming home'. During my stay I experienced the kind of intense dream states which happen only rarely: a vividly lucid awareness in which I met and talked with an Indian shaman who called himself simply Old Man. I had experienced this kind of inner contact before, and knew enough to tell a genuine vision from a wish-fulfilling dream.

Old Man was astonishing. His humour was like nothing I had encountered before, and he was quite ruthless in making me see the old stereotypes of my life with new eyes. Before I returned to Britain he told me that he would keep in contact, but that I must seek out my own native shamanism, despite the difficulties I would encounter.

Back home I became aware of the similarities between *all* kinds of shamanism, whether North American, Siberian, Australian, Esquimaux or whatever, and that the native myths which I had studied and worked with for over twenty years were themselves the last vestiges of Celtic shamanism. This realization, and a prolonged and intensive period of study, resulted in my two books on Taliesin, a Welsh bard of the sixth century, in whose writings I discovered the bones of the shamanic practice. I learned a new sense of awareness in this time, a closer relationship with nature, and an understanding of my place in the unthinkable vastness of Creation. Old Man kept his word and has remained with me, offering a rare vision and sometimes revealing my own tradition through his eyes.

The word 'shaman' is of Tungusic origin (*saman*) and originates in the region of the Altai mountains of Siberian Russia. It is only one of a number of words used by various cultures to denote someone who, through trance and ecstasy, enters other states of being to that in which he or she usually lives, returning with news from which all of humanity (as represented by the tribe) can benefit. The word shaman can be translated as meaning 'to burn up, to set on fire', and this refers to the ability of the shaman to work with the energy of heat. This is the same skill which enables fire-walkers to remain unhurt and yogis to sit naked in the snow for several days without dying of exposure through the expert understanding and manipulation of energies and temperatures within the body. We can also see here a reference to the feverishness of inspiration with which the shaman works: indeed, anyone who has ever suffered from a fever, whether it be simple 'flu or something more serious, already knows what it means to feel like a shaman. In the twilight place of non-being, *between* the worlds, the insights, wisdom and understanding of the shaman are born.

Other meanings of the word 'shaman' are 'one who is excited, moved, raised up'. It has also been traced to the Indo-European root word meaning 'to know', or sometimes 'to heat oneself'. Thus at base the word refers to what its most famous explorer, Mircea Eliade, refers to as 'an archaic technique of ecstasy'; a way of perceiving one's place in creation, and of finding the active role one can play in it. The emphasis is, above all, on the word *active*. Shamans are continually working on themselves: shaping, honing, planing their spiritual selves in such a way as to develop better and more lasting ways to encounter and interact with dimensions of the sacred.

A word about the general use of the word 'shaman'. In the Tungusc language the word *saman* refers to people of both sexes, and I have therefore generally adopted it as such throughout, occasionally using the word shamanka, and varying the use of the pronouns 'he' and 'she'.

But the purpose of this book is not to examine the history of shamanism, nor even its specifically Celtic aspects. It is intended to provide a series of techniques for its practice in the modern world, based upon Celtic sources, or in line with what we know of Celtic belief-systems from the earliest times. It is thus neither a source-book nor a historical-anthropological survey, but a reflection of a *living tradition* - and of the supremely practical approach to life which is the essence of shamanism.

There are twelve basic steps towards becoming a working shaman or shamanka. These, which constitute a glyph which I have termed 'The Shaman's Ladder', will be dealt with fully in [Chapter 5](#). For the moment we may summarize them as follows:

1. *The First Realization*: An awakening to shamanic awareness.
2. *Opposition*: The difficulties encountered at the beginning of the journey.

3. *Death*: The first rite of passage in the making of a shaman.
4. *Awakening*: The discovery of individual potential.
5. *Meeting*: The first encounter with inner reality.
6. *Travelling*: Passing within and exploring the Otherworld.
7. *Totems*: Discovering and learning from the totem beasts and power animals.
8. *The Inner Shaman*: Encountering an inner guide and teacher.
9. *Spirit World*: Learning to move at will through the place of the spirits.
10. *Acceptance*: Second rite of passage and the beginning of outer work.
11. *Vision*: The ability to see into the inner realms and to divine future events.
12. *The Second Realization*: The integration of inner work into outer life.

Implicit within this larger structure are five clearly defined principles which constitute shamanic awareness. These are:

1. The discovery of your relationship to all created beings, animal, vegetable and mineral.
2. Becoming aware of the shape and dimensions of the cosmos around you.
3. Becoming conversant with alternative states of being, learning to make contact and work with the totem beasts and power animals who dwell there. (These concepts are fully explained in [Chapter 4](#).)
4. Contacting your inner shamanic teacher, who will take you on to the next stage of your training.
5. The ability to journey into the Otherworldly realms, where you will encounter the gods and begin a more advanced stage of training.

The first four chapters of this book are designed to enable you to become fully conversant with all of these principles, and to prepare the way for the ascent of the Shaman's Ladder. Chapter 5 marks the turning point, in which you will learn to master the technique of journeying to and from the inner realms. Chapters 6 to 9 expand upon this foundation by showing how the basic shamanic principles discussed earlier can be applied to everyday life.

One of the most important legacies of both the Celtic and the Amerindian peoples is their holistic world-view, which implies no division between flesh and spirit, no inferiority between the sexes, no feeling that because they 'own' the world they can use it as they like. To most of us living in the West today, the whole of life, including its spirituality, is based on an ethic which has separated people from the rest of creation, divided spirit from flesh, mind from matter. To the shaman this was never so; he, or she, inhabited a world in which there were no such divisions. Everything was sacred, every action religious (which had a reaction in the inner realms). The shaman or shamanka operated as a medium between the inner and outer worlds, as well as those of spirit or flesh, *which were seen as having no separate existence*. For them, the reality of the Otherworld was always accessible.

The shaman, then, is the servant of the sacred, rather than its priest. The shaman operates, as he or she has always done, as an agent of the numinous, plying his or her way between one world and the other. To understand this, which is crucial to the practice of shamanism, we must learn to see with eyes other than those we normally use, to view creation as a totality, not as something divided into realms of matter and spirit, or indeed of inner and outer. This book is thus about ways of learning to live in harmony with everything in creation: the elements, the animals which walk the land, the birds which fly in the air, the fish which swim in the seas and rivers, the myriad mineral and plant

life forms. We are all part of a single creation, and by separating ourselves off we have caused irreparable damage to ourselves and our environment.

If we begin by acknowledging this, we have taken the first step towards becoming shamans and shamankas. We cannot, of course, do so in exactly the same way as our ancestors did. Time has moved on: things have changed as much in the last few hundred years as in several thousand before, and we are no longer the same people. Even the most rurally situated practitioner of shamanism, though possessing a distinct advantage over his or her urban counterpart, is still more urbanized than the least skilled practitioner in the jungles of South America.

Nevertheless, I still think that we can learn a vast amount from shamanism, and that it is a mistaken belief that it can only take place in the wilds, or at an ancient site where people have worshipped for centuries. Those who live in cities know as well as anyone what it means to be born into a world to which we have done so much harm. In fact, it is almost a positive advantage to live in such a place. The effort involved in encouraging an awareness of the natural world in the concrete forests of our large cities can help focus our energies and our intent most effectively. The harbouring of earth energies, of the few parched stretches of green we call parks, is as much a part of shamanic activity as building a circle or worshipping the old gods at an ancient site.

The true learning begins when we acknowledge our place in the scheme of things, which may be a less central one than we have believed in the past, but which is no less important for all that. This done, we have to learn to be part of the natural world again, by working with the energies present both in ourselves and around us. Once these have been brought into proper alignment, the new age eagerly anticipated by so many people will begin to dawn. By working in harmony with the natural forces which govern

Creation, we may begin to see beyond the age of darkness through which we are still, perhaps unwittingly, passing.

I am very well aware that shamanism cannot be taught, especially through the written word. The best that can be done is to impart some sense of the kind of world the shaman inhabits, which is just as relevant to contemporary human beings as to the people of the past. It is my hope that by following the exercises and meditations contained herein this world will become more accessible to the prospective shaman or shamanka. From that point the real work begins, inner training commences, and the journey to the furthest extent of the universe can be undertaken. Ideally this book should be regarded as a jumping-off point, a spring-board to the infinite, where the newly fledged shaman or shamanka will learn to fly in earnest.

It should also be understood that reading this book and practising some or all of its teachings will not automatically make you a shaman. It will almost certainly improve the quality of your life, though the process includes a radical breaking down of the structures with which we surround ourselves, which is often painful and far from easy. You must be prepared to work very hard indeed, and to embrace the general 'philosophy' of shamanism, that everything has life and is part of a sacred whole. After this, a minimum of two years' work with an inner teacher is required. Even then you may not attain an experience of the inner worlds, which is a necessary adjunct to these teachings. However, if you persevere and practise hard you will, in time, find yourself transformed.

Finally it should be noted that two aspects of the shaman's life overlap: the exploration of inner, non-physical realms, and the practice of the healer's art. In this book I shall deal primarily with the former. This is not to say that the ability to heal is not important, but it requires a more specialized discipline and cannot be learned from the pages of a book. Nor can one begin any shamanic work until one

has travelled in the inner realms and learned to become familiar with the dimensions of the Otherworld. Therefore, while some examples of simpler healing methods will be described ([see Chapter 7](#)), more advanced techniques, requiring formal training, should not be attempted until the practitioner has been working shamanically for *at least a year*. Another kind of healing - that of the earth - will be dealt with at greater length and in more detail. And since in healing our mother the earth we also heal ourselves, a lesson of great importance will be learned along the way.

Writing this book has been in the nature of a personal visionary journey. I have learned much about my own tradition in the process and look forward to continuing my explorations of the inner worlds. It is also my foremost desire to strike up a continuing dialogue with those other cultures which possess a largely unbroken shamanic tradition, to show how they harmonize, and to bring them closer together. It is my hope that one day we may see again a universal network of shamanism, which will embody some of the same benefits and blessings it once brought to a younger, less tired, less soul-sick world.

JOHN MATTHEWS

### Note to the Reader

This book constitutes an exploration of ancient shamanic techniques normally undertaken with a qualified teacher. The reader is therefore solely responsible for his or own action in undertaking the training offered herein. It should also be clearly understood that the methods and techniques described in this book are not a substitute for either psychological or medical treatment.

Part I

THEORY



# 1



## RECOVERING YOUR SENSES

*'The power of solitude is great and beyond understanding.'*

A. RASMUSSEN

### THE SHAMAN'S VISION

IN THE WEST we have been taught to believe we are corrupt and fallen beings, separated from the spiritual realms, the natural state of Paradise and grace. This is so entrenched that even those professing no religious belief are deeply influenced by it. The way of the shaman, on the other hand, is based on a fundamental understanding that people are an integral part of the natural world, which is neither corrupt nor fallen. We are in continuous contact with the spiritual realms quite simply because they are all around us, and we are part of them.

The Western passion for material wealth is more damaging than we realize. The tribal peoples of North or South America, or the Aborigines of Australia, enjoy a far richer life than we can ever hope to possess. They live under a continuous spiritual tradition which has never strayed from the premise that they are part of creation. The Celts, too, understood this; it formed the basis of their traditions and rituals. In trying to recover the way of the Celtic shamans we must come to terms with this way of

seeing and feeling, and must abandon much of what we know as a 'normal' way of life in the early twenty-first century.

This is not, of course, intended as an outright denigration, or rejection, of modern technocentric culture and civilization for the sake of it. We have discovered many good things, many benefits which should be preserved. What I am proposing is not that we should discard all we have learned, but that we should try to regain the freshness and inner power of the shaman's vision. Once we grasp the essential understanding that everything is part of us, as we are a part of it, and that it is not necessary to believe in a linear progression from 'A' at birth to 'Z' at death, having accomplished (for which read 'acquired') as much as possible on the way; once we begin to see life as a spiral rather than a straight line, we have achieved one of the fundamentals of the shaman's way. From here we can begin to explore the true realm in which we live, follow the network of radiating lines from a central point (at best ourselves, or at least where we stand in relation to the universe) into the deepest (or highest) planes of the spirit.

We have taught ourselves to believe we are alone in a hostile world. Instead we should begin to see that we are co-workers with Nature, that we are interdependent with and upon it. We must realize that we are its defenders, not its enemies; its caretakers, who look after it so that it can continue to provide for us.

The shamans see all of this because they have learned to travel within the natural world, which is also the realm of the spirits, of the animal helpers they are able to summon in times of need. This understanding makes them unique, but we are all capable of attaining this state if we really want to. We have to re-learn much that we have forgotten, but the heritage that is ours for the asking has always been there; we simply have to learn how to explore it. We must reject our current materialistic society, and remind ourselves of