



The Legend of the Sacred Pipe



Many years ago, the White Buffalo Calf Woman came to visit the Lakota people. Before her arrival, the Lakota were in distress. There was widespread famine and starvation. The Sioux Nations fought amongst themselves, and were in danger of extinction.

Legend says that she first appeared to two Lakota men who were hunting for food. A figure appeared on the horizon, and as it came closer, looked like a white buffalo calf. As the hunters readied their bows, the figure was transformed into a beautiful woman. One of the braves made an improper advance toward the woman.

When he touched her, his flesh melted from his bones.

The other man dropped to his knees before her in prayer. The woman explained to him who she was, the White Buffalo Calf Woman, and would come to visit his people, bringing with her a sacred bundle. She commanded him to return to his village and have the people prepare for her visit. The young man, returning to his village, was able to convince his people to do the necessary preparations.

On the day of her visit, all the people gathered together and formed a circle, as she had instructed, with the elders in the center. From the heavens, an apparition of a white buffalo calf descended on a cloud. As it stepped onto the ground, it became The White Buffalo Calf Woman, carrying a sacred bundle, the Sacred Pipe.

She spent four days among the people and taught them the meaning of the sacred bundle. She taught the elders how to use the Sacred Peace Pipe to avoid bloodshed, and how they should meet their enemies in council instead of battle. She taught the people the seven sacred ceremonies that are still widely practiced among the Lakota; purification, naming, healing, adoption, marriage, vision quest, and the sun dance. She taught them prayer and spiritual songs.

The White Buffalo Calf Woman taught the women many things. They were instructed in the proper storage and preparation of food. At that time, the Lakota were a totally male dominated society. Women learned that as the bearer of life they are equal to the men, are the guardians of their own bodies and have a right to choose who they may wish to share themselves with.

Before she left them, she told the people that if they practiced what she had taught, the Lakota would become a great and prosperous nation. She promised to return one day for the sacred bundle, and if necessary, bring harmony and peace again to the world. As she walked away, she again became a buffalo calf, rolled over on the ground, each time changing color, the four colors of humanity; white, black, yellow and red. Just as she had come, she ascended into the sky on a white cloud.

When The White Buffalo Calf Woman promised to return again, she made some prophecies at that time. One of those prophecies was that the birth of a white buffalo calf would be a sign that it would be near the time when she would return again to purify the world by returning spiritual harmony and balance.

Symbolism of the Sacred Pipe

The bowl of the pipe is of red stone; it is the Earth. The stem of the pipe is of wood, and this represents all that grows upon the Earth.

In the complete ritual of the pipe, there are three phases: the purification with the smoke of a sacred herb; the "expansion" of the pipe so that it includes the entire universe; and finally, what could be called the "identity", which is the sacrifice of the whole universe in the fire.

In filling a pipe, all space (the offerings to the powers of the six directions) and all things (grains of tobacco) are contracted within a single point which is the bowl or heart of the pipe, so that the pipe contains, or really is, the universe. But since the pipe is the universe, it is also man, and the one who fills a pipe should identify himself with it, thus not only establishing the center of the universe, but also his own center.

He so "expands" that the six directions of space are actually brought within himself. It is by this "expansion" that a man ceases to be a part, a fragment, and becomes whole or holy; he shatters the illusion of separateness.

Among the Sioux there have always been three different uses for pipes. The least important kind is one that is used for social purposes. It is filled with regular tobacco and smoked with friends. Anyone can smoke it.

A higher kind is the personal pipe that we use to make and continue friendships, and it is the one that is filled and sent as an offering to a medicine man when his services are needed.

The third and most important kind of pipe is one that is used by its owner for ceremonial purposes, such as the sweat lodge rites, vision quests, and the Sun Dance. It is also the one used by the holy men and medicine men for their private rituals, for healing patients, and as they lead the various tribal ceremonies.

Each grain of tobacco placed in the pipe bowl becomes something Spirit has created, so that when the pipe bowl is filled, all of creation is held within it and made a part of the pipe ceremony. Its sweet smell when burned is welcomed by Wakan Tanka and by Grandfather, and He gladly receives the prayers that go up to him in and with the smoke.

The stem stands for straightness of speech, mind and body. Animals or other creatures carved on the stem stand for, and thus pull into a ceremony, all of the four-legged creatures of the earth. Eagle feathers tied to the stem stand for the winged creatures above. Coloured ribbons stand for the four cardinal directions.

When the ceremonial pipe is used properly it has enormous power. There are fixed rules to be carefully observed in lighting it, passing it from one person to another, in disposing of the ashes, and in doing the pipe ceremony proper, in which the smoked pipe is pointed to the six sacred directions. When these things are done correctly, they release the powers that reside in the directions, where since the beginning of time they have awaited opportunities to promote the good of all creation. When the pipe is used correctly, what happens is like the opening of the flood gates of a dam that contains the water of life, or it is like throwing a switch that releases the power that energizes the universe.

As the Pipe Ceremony is done, the pipe first of all opens the gates to release the powers, and then becomes the very channel through which the powers flow, moving from the six directions to the one who prays, blessing the person, and then through the person and out to bless the rest of creation.



Sacred Pipe Ceremony

This is the Ceremony of the Sacred Pipe:

The pipe holder stands holding the bowl of the pipe in his left hand, the stem in his right, pointing the stem to the East. He sprinkles a small amount of tobacco on the ground as an offering to Mother Earth and The East. As he loads a small pinch of tobacco into the pipe, he will say:

"The East is Red – the Eagle Spirit. The East is where the Morning Star rises, the Star of Knowledge. Red is for the Rising Sun which brings us a new day and another chance to learn. We thank the Great Spirit for each day we are allowed to live upon Mother Earth under Father Sky, Tunkashila. We pray for Knowledge, for from Knowledge comes Peace."

The pipe holder faces the South and again gives tobacco to Mother Earth, continues to load the pipe, saying:

"The South is Yellow – the Wolf Spirit. Yellow is for the colour of Spring and the warm south wind, and the yellow hoop. While we load this pipe, we give thanks for our strength, growth, and healing that is brought forth from the south wind. We use this as a time of planting so that the seeds may grow into a new life."

The pipe holder faces the West and again gives tobacco to Mother Earth, continues to load the pipe, saying:

"West is Black – the Black Bear Spirit. West is where the Sun sets. West is where the Spirit Helpers live and black stands for the Spirit World. We will all go to the Spirit World and we will all know one another and our deeds. We seek our spiritual wisdom in the West and pray for help from our Spirit Guides".

The pipe holder faces the North and again gives tobacco to Mother Earth, continues to load the pipe, saying:

"White is for the North – the White Buffalo Spirit. The White Giant covers Mother Earth with the white blanket of snow. White Buffalo Calf Woman, Ptecincala Ska Wakan Winan, came to us from the North. We stand here seeking endurance, and health from the North".

The pipe holder now touches the stem to the ground, saying:

"Green is the colour of Mother Earth. We are all part of Mother Earth, each rock, each four legged, each two legged, all creatures, plants and minerals. We are all related. We respect our Mother Earth and protect her".

The pipe holder now holds pipe above his head with the stem up at an angle, perhaps at the Sun or Moon:

"Blue is the colour of Father Sky. Father Sky in union with Mother Earth are our true parents. Father Sky gives us energy for our lives and heats our bodies and our lodges. We are thankful for Father Sky".

The pipe holder now holds the stem straight up:

Purple is the colour of the Great Creator. "Great Spirit, Creator of us all, Creator of all things, Creator of the Four Directions, Mother Earth, and Father Sky, we offer this Sacred Pipe to you". Now the pipe is lighted, and passed around the circle sun-wise from East to South to West to North, returning to the East, each person free to offer a prayer or saying if they choose.

On completion of its journey around the Sacred Circle the pipe is capped with sage or bark, and separated, the stem from the pipe, set aside in its pouch until it is smoked again. The typical pipe pouch has separate compartments for the pipe and the stem so that they do not touch when not being used in ritual ceremony.