

Protocol for The Bear Lodge at Lena, Miss.

(Also see: The History of the Native American Sweat Lodge)

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There are a few rules and courtesies that are requested for people invited to participate in The Bear Lodge (Sweat Lodge) at Lena, Miss., to follow. It is not a "public" sweat lodge and is by invitation only.

First, a little background.

The sweat lodge (Inipi) is a Bear Lodge. It was initiated by a Bear Dancer and Pipe Carrier under the guidance of a tribal elder and spiritual leader for the Santa Rosa Rancheria, Tachi Yokut tribe of California. (See History of Tachi Yokuts Tribe.)

Unlike a Lakota (Sioux) lodge, the Lodge is under the medicine of the Bear, not the Buffalo. Since I was trained and initiated as a water pourer in this Tule River/Tachi Yokut way, those ceremonies are followed and honored.

Some practices differ. For several years, I have carried a pipe (canunpa) which was blessed by a Lakota (Sioux) holy man, and I use this pipe in ceremony with the Lodge. Other practices reflect Cherokee (Asi or "Hot House") and other tribes with whom I have ties and affiliations. Additionally, my shamanic training incorporates practices from several traditions, including Siberian, Central and South American, Tibetan Bon Po, and other cultures.

So, if you are looking for a traditional Lakota sweat lodge, look elsewhere.

The Lodge is a Bear Medicine Lodge, and it is dedicated as a healing center, which reflects the spiritual nature of the Lodge Leader.

Rules:

Sacred Area: The Circle outlined by the flags of the Four Directions is a Sacred Circle. When ceremonies are under way, those outside the Lodge and within the Circle should be in prayer or Silent

Meditation, with no chitcat, unnecessary activity or noise of any kind. The Sacred Area between the Altar and Fire is Holy and should be respected. The Firekeeper oversees any activity within the Sacred Circle when ceremonies are under way. Nothing is to be placed in the Sacred Fire except by the Firekeeper, and the Sacred Fire must only be tended by the Firekeeper or a designated helper. Do not litter. Pick up any debris. No drugs or alcohol allowed; participants are expected to be sober and respectful of others at all times.

Women in the Moon Time are not allowed within the Sacred Circle or Lodge, since their Power at that time is so great.

Altar: The Lodge Leader places his/her Pipe and/or Sacred Bundle on the Altar on the North side; gifts to the Lodge Leader are placed on the South side of the Altar; the West side of the Altar is kept open for foot traffic; the East side is open for items to be blessed by the ceremony.

Pipes may be placed on the altar, bowl toward the West, with the Lodge Leader's furthest North. Staffs may be planted East of the Lodge Leader's.

Do not step over the Sacred Altar/Sacred Fire Path; cross only between the Altar and the Lodge or on the East side of the Sacred Fire. Only the Firekeeper may step between the Lodge and Sacred Fire.

Dress: Those participating in the Lodge Ceremony should be dressed modestly. For women, this usually means a simple cotton dress to the mid-calf or ankle; for men, shorts, shirts not required. Towels are allowed to be taken into the Lodge. Any other item should be discussed with the Lodge Leader. No metal should be worn in the Lodge.

Entering The Lodge: Before entering, take a pinch of tobacco from the can next to the Altar and, clockwise, offer it to each of the Four Directions, starting at the East, and sprinkling a little on the Altar. Then, gift tobacco to the Sacred Fire before presenting yourself at the entrance to the Lodge to be smudged by the Doorkeeper with sage.

After being smudged, kneel at the door and thank the Earth Mother at the entrance to the Lodge, asking the Lodge Leader if you may enter; the Lodge is entered on one's knees, clockwise as far as a seat is available.

The ceremony includes four rounds, with each round usually getting hotter. It is acceptable to leave after one round or two if the heat is too intense, or for health or other reasons. Some may not wish to enter the Lodge. If so, do prayer ceremony outside the Lodge on the South side of the Altar. You are still very much a participant there within the Sacred Circle.

If you must leave the Lodge, please wait until the current round is over, then ask the Lodge Leader for permission to leave. Once one has left the Lodge, one cannot return to within the Lodge without the Lodge Leader's permission. Only the Doorkeeper may touch the door at any time.

Ceremony: The Lodge Leader chooses the type of ceremony and how it should be conducted. Silence is to be maintained unless the Lodge Leader says otherwise. If moved to speak, ask: "Permission to speak, Lodge Leader?" When finished, signify by saying "Aho," "Amen," or "Mitakuye Oyasin." Often, the Lodge Leader will call upon individuals to speak, or ask if they would share their thoughts, or if they would like to sing a Sacred Song. When finished, signify the same way. Only the Lodge Leader and Firekeeper handle the Grandfathers.

The ceremony lasts as long as Spirit directs. There is no timeclock. There are four rounds, usually with more Grandfathers added at each round. Between rounds, the door will be opened for fresh cool air to enter.

It's not unusual for Spirits to enter the Lodge during ceremony; in fact, they are specifically invited to enter. Odd or unusual colors, shooting lights and sounds are often heard. The intense heat provides doorways to perception outside of thinking. The best way to "beat the heat" is just to pray harder, "get out of your head and into your heart," with prayer. This allows visions and insights not normally experienced. Pray out loud, cry, wail, if it helps. Remember to breathe.

The Lodge is not meant to be an endurance test. Those inside the Lodge are sacrificing themselves for healing and visions; they are not inflicting pain upon themselves for the sake of suffering. The intent is not to harm anyone, but help everyone – including all in our Sacred Circles, all Beings, indeed, the Greatest Sacred Circle, our Earthly Mother and all her Children.

Regarding Gifts: It is customary to give the Lodge Leader a gift, but by no means required. Food to share with others after the Lodge is always welcome. Since the most used items in ceremony are tobacco and white sage (and lots of wood or money for wood – up to a third of a cord is used per sweat lodge ceremony) these are appropriate and much appreciated. There is no charge at all for sacred ceremony, and no gift is expected. But gifts or donations, if guided to do so, are welcome. Generally, regular participants are expected to bring food for the pot (for feasting after the ceremony), cold drinks to share, some wood for the fire (if possible) and a Grandfather (stone), if they have one they believe would add good spirits.

Preparation: Most who do ceremony are there for an intense spiritual experience, so they may fast or pray for a day or two prior to the ceremony, but it's not required. A light meal several hours before the ceremony is OK, but it's not advised to have a heavy meal. Since the ceremony involves sweating, it is a good idea to drink plenty of liquids the day of the ceremony, but not immediately beforehand, since the ceremony can last for hours.

We pray this experience will for the highest good, filled with love and sharing.

Tsi wo ni sv. Gus dii dada dv ni!