

# **An Introduction to Smudging:**

*This guide represents the teachings of honored elder, Sweet Medicine Nation, who currently lives in Terrebonne, Oregon. Sweet Medicine is of Chickasaw/Choctaw descent and also carries traditional Lakota ways. She is the founder and president of Four Winds Foundation, a non-profit dedicated to preserving indigenous lifeways. This guide was produced by Nicole Tripp of Four Winds Foundation in the summer of 2011.*

“Smudging” is the word we use to describe the ritual act of spiritual cleansing, usually through the method of burning herbs and drawing the smoke over ourselves. In one form or another, smudging has been an act performed by many North American and South American First Nation tribes as a way to cleanse, prepare, and come together in community. Smudging is also about *you* making a transformation, as each element of the smudging ceremony has transformed – sometimes through sacrificing its life – so that we may in turn be transformed.

The ceremony of smudging is a simple, yet complex one. It is a “complete” ritual as it combines all four elements: water, air, earth, and fire. The tools used for smudging are small and can easily be carried with you in your travels. This guide will express the basic properties of these tools, how to honor them, and where to acquire them, as well as describe why we perform ritual and how to perform smudging.

## **The Ritual**

In the modern world, we are typically at a loss for daily spiritual rituals. Part of the reason for this is that we are taught to see ourselves as separate from the earth, the elements, and the resources with which we are blessed every day of our lives. Regular spiritual rituals help to draw us into a place where we can recognize the interconnectedness of all things and *give back* for the gifts that we receive. To perform a ritual is to set aside time, energy, and focus, and to present those gifts to the Earth and to Great Mystery through ritual. Each day, we are given food, clean water, clean air, space, shelter, heat, and many other gifts without which we could not survive. To perform ritual is to express gratitude and respect for these blessings, and to honor those energies that provide for us. Ritual reconnects us to our higher selves, washing away the illusions of daily life and reminding us of our higher purpose and higher truths. It is easy to become distracted and fragmented during our routines, and smudging is one ritual that helps us to remain focused, balanced, and centered. Here is an opportunity for you to look at each meal, each drink of water, each shower, each square foot of roof over your head, each person in your life, each instance of unconditional love in your life as an enormous gift given from a bundle of sacred energies, and to give back in gratitude and intention.

## **The Intention**

Intention is the most important part of smudging, ritual, and of life itself. Each step of the smudging process must be done with intention so that the energies and spirits understand that you are honoring them and not just “going through the motions.” Without honoring and making offerings of gratitude, we have an empty glass that we never fill. It’s there, but we aren’t connected to it and don’t know how to use it.

What are you offering for these tools? For this knowledge? For these ways?

There must always be a giving for the taking. For example, perhaps you paid some money or traded for this guide. That money or those resources were produced by your energy - being expended somewhere, perhaps at your job - and in return you now have this guide. That is a trade. The trade does not always have to be money, but in today's modern world, money is the most highly prized and versatile form of currency. When you are ready to receive your tools for this ceremony or any other, set the intention to receive them in a good and honorable way, honoring them as they appear in your life. Be prepared to make an offering for them. This may be money, for example, if you purchase your herbs rather than harvesting them yourself. If money is what you have to offer, make a blessing with it when purchasing your items of gratitude and intention for the use of those items. In our society, money is important, and the spirits understand that, so give your money in a good way if that is what you need to do.

If the tools come to you in a more natural way, the following are offerings that are appreciated by the spirits and energies providing them: singing songs, making prayers, drumming, leaving strands of your hair or coins behind, offerings of tobacco, etc. Sometimes you have to give what you have readily available, and perhaps that means your voice, singing or giving thanks. Other times, you can return to the place or the person with an offering. Use your heart and it will guide you; that is what intention is all about. *Maintain the intention of honoring the tools whatever your means of acquiring it, whether you find it, are gifted it, or buy it.*

## **Caring For Your Tools**

It is critical to understand that these "tools" as we call them, are pieces of spiritual medicine manifested in this reality. That is to say, they are not inanimate objects that are to be stored thoughtlessly in drawers or on tabletops where others can handle them. We enter into a relationship of honoring and commitment with our tools as we would family members; these objects help us, cleanse us, and prepare us, and deserve honor in return as valued companions on the road of our lives. In modern society, we are taught that things are just things; this is an opportunity for you to un-learn that teaching, and to replace it with one that honors such pieces of the Earth that enter our lives as aids, guides, and tools in connecting with the Divine. Remember, to practice ritual without honoring these things is to have the glass that you never fill.

Choose a special place for them to live, or special containers. Use intention to designate the purpose of those places and containers, and don't use them for anything else. Perhaps it's wrapping your tools in red cloth, or keeping them on a small altar in your home. Revering these items shows the energies your respect and love, insuring the tools' sacred relationship with you. Smudge them occasionally as well, or offer tobacco in gratitude for their places in your life.

## **The Tools and Elements**

The vessel Water element: A large shell is the vessel in which you may burn your herbs. Most commonly used are abalone shells, as they are naturally large and bowl-shaped. Shells are of the sea, representing the water element. We are made mostly of water, and spend the first nine months of our existence suspended in the fluid of our mothers' wombs. Water is about cleansing, the emotions, the ability to move fluidly in your life, the very essence of life itself, and is restorative to our bodies and souls. The shell represents the seas of the world, the seas of our bodies, and our **Grandmother Moon** who tugs at the tides just as she tugs at us in our dreams. Equally as useful would be a heatproof ceramic shell, especially handmade.

Transformation: We honor the life of the animal that once used the shell as its home and only method of protection from predators. This shell is not a beach souvenir; it once was a living thing like you or me, which had to find food, navigate a complicated world, find a mate, and survive. It had a body and a heart. The creature that once owned this shell has transformed from life into death; what once supported and protected a living animal now serves as a tool to connect us to the water element and to the Divine. Honor the sacrifice of this lost life and resulting gift.

The herbs Earth Element: There are several plant medicines commonly used for smudging, including white sage (*Salvia apiana*, not to be confused with sagebrush or *Artemisia tridentata*), sweetgrass (*Hierochloa odorata*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), palo santo wood (*Guaiacum* species), and cedar (variety of species). Each has its own properties and herbs should not be combined without the proper knowledge in knowing how to mix their individual medicinal attributes. The plant people ensure that we as a species can survive on this planet: they create our oxygen-rich atmosphere, provide food for us and for the animals we eat, provide medicine for our ailments, and provide materials for building our structures. Just as we do, plants soak up minerals and water from Earth and reach towards the sky for the blessings of the Sun. These herbs represent our **Earth Mother** and the earth element: that which supports us, provides for us, and gently nurtures us.

Transformation: The plant people, though they cannot move about as we two-leggeds can, stand as quiet observers and retainers of the Earth's wisdom. They are medicines for our bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits. They transform for us in many ways: first, as they are harvested they move from life into death, from fullness and fluidity to delicate dryness; second, they are crushed, rolled, broken, or braided in preparation for smudging; third, the herbs are transformed from leaves into ash by the power of fire and the process of burning. Through burning, they deliver to us their sacred healing breath in the form of smoke. Honor the complex transformations that these plants move through to aid us in the purifying of our spirits.

The Movement Air Element: In smudging, there are two ways to move the sacred smoke over your being: one is to use your hands in gestures that simulate the way we would bathe ourselves with water, and the other is to use a feather, wing, or fan of feathers in the same motion. Oxygen is our primary need. We can survive many days without food and several days without water; however, we cannot survive longer than just a mere few minutes without oxygen. The air element, our **Father Sky**, is the sacred breath, the lightness and easy movement of a feather or a butterfly, and the space in which new ideas are born. To watch a vulture tilt back and forth in the sky, or a hummingbird buzz between flowers, is to watch the magic of the Divine. The movement of either your hands or a feather helps oxygen to flow over the burning herbs, feeding the fire that smolders them into smoke.

Transformation: In using feathers, wings, or fans of feathers, we honor and recognize that either a small piece or an entire life was sacrificed in the making of the tool. Feathers are impossibly light, yet strong enough to hold a ten-pound eagle aloft in the sky. A bird's feathers weigh more than its skeleton and are some of the most complex feats of natural engineering that mankind has seen.

The Burning Fire Element: Fire is the great transformer. It takes nearly any object, natural or manmade, and turns it into something else entirely, releasing its life force into smoke. For two-leggeds, fire has shaped the evolution of our species. We learned to cook with it, making our foods more easily digestible, and learned to harness it to keep us warm in cold temperatures. Today, though we use the artificial fire of gas and electricity, we are still as dependent upon heat for cooking and surviving as we ever were. The main source of this precious element for our planet is

from **Grandfather Sun**, an enormous ball of heat and energy. In smudging, the fire element is represented by matches or a lighter. While perhaps not as earthly as the other elements in its vessel, it is nonetheless just as important: it is the ultimate catalyst for the ritual once all the pieces are assembled. Fire is quick movement, active, protective, and intense. It can be both scary and soothing at once.

Transformation: This element is the catalyst for transforming, rather than experiencing a transformation itself.

## Performing the Ritual

*Use intention and your heart for the following steps.*

1. Assemble your tools: vessel, herbs, fire, and feather if you choose to use one.
2. Place a small amount of herbs in your vessel. Choose on herb to use at a time and allow it to finish burning before using a different herb.
3. With the intention of creating sacred space, cleansing, or whatever you are setting your intention for, light the herbs.
4. Allow them to smolder, not flame, using your feather or breath to pass air over them.
5. As the herbs send up their smoke, use your hands to waft the smoke towards your heart and then up over your head. Bathe yourself in the healing, sacred breath as you would bathe yourself in water; you are cleansing yourself in the same way. You may take the smoke over your face, up and down your arms, to the soles of your feet, and around your back clockwise. Smudge parts of your body that need particular attention, whether it be in the physical, emotional, or spiritual realm.
6. Allow the herbs to smolder out; don't douse or snuff them.
7. When you are finished, you may place the ashes in the soil of a houseplant, outside on the earth, or into a sacred fire. Never throw them away or flush them down the toilet.

## Medicines and Their Attributes

**Mugwort** (*Artemisia vulgaris*) Mugwort, a member of the same family in which our common sagebrush (*A. tridentata*) belongs, is an herb for protection from exterior forces. It is a clearing herb, helping to dispel negative energy and providing for mental clarity. It grows near water and so holds attributes of the water element. Given its medicinal properties, it's an herb with feminine power and is related to Grandmother Moon. Mugwort is also a powerful dreaming herb. Roll mugwort into a ball between your palms before burning.

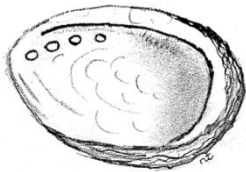
**White Sage** (*Salvia apiana*) White sage is the most common and widely-used smudging herb. It's an arid- climate herb used for purging and clearing. It too clears negative energy away, creating sacred space and clarity. Its thick leaves smolder easily in medium sized pieces. Too small of pieces will make it harder for the herb to burn properly.

**Sweetgrass** (*Hierochloe odorata*): Sweetgrass is the hair of the mother, usually found in fragrant braids. Sweetgrass draws in positive energy and sweetness to the person burning it or the space in which it is used. The scent of this herb pleases the spirits and calls them to join us in a good way during ritual or ceremony. Sweetgrass does not smolder as well as the other herbs, so it be lit in chunks in your vessel or you can light the end of the braid to waft the smoke.

**Cedar** (*Thuja, Calocedrus, Chamaecyparis* species) Cedar is a word used to refer to many members of the *Cupressaceae* (Cypress) family, though none of them are true cedars. Our false cedars have tiny, overlapping scale-like foliage and fragrant wood. Burning dried cedar invokes healing, purifying, and cleansing of an area, particularly if there has been illness. It illuminates, both literally and metaphorically, dispelling darkness and unknowing.

## Resources For Tools

To receive your tools, first set the intention to receive them in a good way and be prepared to make offerings for them when they arrive, even if it is only concentrated gratitude. Treat them-- even a lighter or matches--as something to be cared for and protected. Remember, these are your medicine tools, so the energy you put into them is important if the relationship is to support your highest self.



### Vessels

1. Finding shells at the beach is the best way to come across your vessels, as it takes energy and time to go to the coast and search out a vessel.
2. If you want an abalone shell, look for them first in thrift stores, antique shops, estate sales, and other secondhand places. Abalone are overharvested and demand for them intensifies the harvesting. Finding them secondhand reduces the environmental impact on this delicate species.
3. Create your own or commission one from a ceramic artist.

**Reminder:** Herbs burn HOT and can potentially burn whatever is beneath the vessel. Keep your shell somewhere heat proof while burning your herbs, or acquire a wooden stand (easily found online) or second shell to provide a barrier.



### Herbs

1. Harvesting your own is preferable if you are taught how and where to go.
2. Purchase them through reputable sources. Cedar Mountain Drums in Portland is an excellent place to get herbs, or find them online or in your local community. Online stores such as Mountain Rose Herbs sells smudging herbs.

**Reminder:** When used for ceremony, herbs are harvested in a respectful manner where prayers are offered and permission is asked. Finding stores online that use these practices is rare and will increase the cost of your herbs because it takes more time, focus, and energy than harvesting a

plant without intention. Seek an elder or teacher if you would like to learn to harvest your own herbs.



## Feathers

1. Make the intention and seek your own during your outdoor travels.
2. Ask farmers or friends for feathers or wings of domestic fowl.
3. Purchase them.

**Reminder:** Owning any part of a bird is illegal unless it is a bird used for hunting or eating. Feathers and wings that may be legally kept include turkey, chicken, quail, duck, pheasant.



## Fire

1. Obtain lighters or matches from any source.

**Reminder:** This is sacred fire that should be reserved for smudging and ceremony. Don't use your lighter or matches for anything other than ceremony if that is their purpose.

*Thank you for taking the time to learn about this medicine and ritual, and for opening your heart to it. We hope this guide will help you and encourage you to seek out more of these ancient lifeways so that they may continue to live on.*

*For more information, please feel free to contact Four Winds Foundation.*

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Blessings

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