

Yoga and Shamanism

By Reva

I wanted to share with you some of my thoughts about yoga and shamanism, both of which have played and continue to play a significant role in my life. Although on the surface they may look like they are very different spiritual traditions, in my experience I have found that there are many connections and similarities, some of which I have discussed here. Like yoga, shamanism is an ancient tradition. There are different paths and lineages but generally a shamanic practitioner works in partnership with Spirit teachers or guides to bring healing to an individual, a place or community. Different tools are used to shift consciousness so that we can step between the veil that separates this reality, ordinary consciousness, and non-ordinary reality where what may not usually be seen or known comes into our awareness. Both traditions stretch us beyond our comfort zone, supporting us to move more into our authentic self so that we can live our soul's purpose.

Origins

Yoga and shamanism are two spiritual traditions that both bring about balance, harmony and wellbeing. Archaeological evidence points to shamanism being 30,000 years old and yoga was first linked to the Vedas approximately 10,000 years ago. It is likely that yoga was born out of shamanism, but of course it is difficult to know this with certainty. Both traditions pre-date any notion of religion and offered our ancestors a methodology to feel connected to, and in the flow with existence; to feel fully alive. Evidence points to shamanism originating simultaneously across different cultures, whereas yoga originated in India and then spread to other continents when yogi teachers began to travel. In both traditions there are different schools, lineages and regional differences but the core essential teachings and practices are found cross-culturally.

Connection with Nature

As with many spiritual traditions, one honours nature and perceives it as a great teacher. This is the case in both shamanism and yoga, although this element may be less obvious in yoga today. Examples of this are still found in modern day yoga practice such as *Surya Namaskar* (Sun Salutation) and the *Gayatri* mantra. The sun is recognised as the life giver, sustainer and pranic source. In shamanism, more than in western yoga, other planets also are acknowledged and honoured, particularly the moon in terms of her feminine qualities and cycles. In shamanism the elements, cardinal directions and animals are also actively worked with in partnership. The teachings of shamanism and yoga point us towards recognising that there is no separation between the individual and the collective or our environment.

Web of Energy

Both yoga and shamanism view that all things are interconnected. This is represented in stories from our ancestors in many traditions about *Grandmother Spider* weaving her web of creation and destiny. We can see elements of this in yoga in deity archetypes, such as, *Kali Ma* or *Brahmin*. These myths point towards how dharma, or our life's path, is created by Her grace and countless cycles of

death and creation. Ultimately everything is energy and Spirit presents itself in a form that we can relate to and learn from.

Physical postures or asanas are the main focus of much western yoga practice, but looking deeper many of the other practices are energetic, and are not dissimilar to shamanic practices that use the breath, will and imagination to move energy through subtle pathways. In yoga this would correlate to the nadis and prana or life force, used in practices such as *Pranya Vidya* and *Kriya Yoga*.

Both yoga and shamanism require a willingness to put the 'I' or ego to one side. In shamanism we aim to become a 'hollow bone' in order to allow *Spirit* to use us as a vessel as needed for *Spirit* or Consciousness to offer what is needed. In yoga we practice bringing more awareness and identification to the underlying Consciousness or Self that underlies the egoic 'I' so that eventually the sense of duality ceases and we are able to truly be in Service.

Healing Tools

Shamanism works in partnership with loving spirit guides or tutelary spirits who wish to bring healing and information. When we become unwell or dis-eased we are out of balance, we may have lost a part of ourselves (soul loss) or have some intrusion that is blocking or not supporting us. The core shamanic practices of *Soul Retrieval* and the extraction of intrusion or energy blockages are considered corner stones to shamanic healing. In yoga the process of letting go of habitual patterns, beliefs and concepts moves us towards being more connected to the qualities or virtues of love, compassion, courage and discipline. The practices purify and cleanse the mind and body so we are able to more readily contain the energy of awakened *Kundalini* and Grace, or in shamanic language Spirit.

Shamanism uses different tools to reach altered states of consciousness- drumming, rattle, shaking, dancing, dream work and voice. To an extent this is also true in yoga. Chanting, meditation and pranayama alters one's state of consciousness so that we are more open in our awareness. If we look at some of the footage from when yoga was first introduced by Indian swamis in the 1970's and 80's it looked very shamanic indeed! Nowadays the outward expression of ecstasy in yoga is less dramatic but the internal experience is not diluted. The yoga tradition also uses fire (*havan*) as a symbol of transformation; the fire offers a bridge between earth and sky, matter and spirit. The spirit of fire or Agni is awakened through chanting and offerings are made. Our ancestors, as we do today, have always enjoyed the presence of fire, warmth, light, connection, aspiration and change. The *Aghora* yogi or yogini sadhus traditionally would have been in the *chagrin* (cemetery) with her *dhuni* (fire), much like the shaman who watched and listened to the flames for teachings and guidance traversing the smoke to non-ordinary reality.

In shamanism animal guides are called upon for support and guidance and to bring the particular qualities of that animal into our lives. In perhaps all spiritual traditions the serpent is used as a symbol for transformation and this is true of yoga and shamanism. Furthermore calling to an animal guide could be seen as similar to focusing on a teacher or deity in yoga, for example in meditation focusing on one's Guru, to develop and aspire to their qualities.

Present Moment

Both traditions emphasise the importance of being in the present moment; the present moment is all that there is. When our minds are focused on the past or the future it is immersed in a story based on expectations related to our past or beliefs about our identity. The mind takes us away from the specific present moment. One of the other common factors is the recognition that life is a preparation for death. Through both yoga and shamanism we can begin to accept death, both at the end of our physical embodied lives but also in the continuous process of loss and death. Whether it is the end of a film, a relationship, a meal, a walk, a job, a conscious awareness of death as being an active part of life informs and helps us appreciate and live life more fully and with greater awareness.

The Teacher

Both traditions encourage the seeker to learn through experience. It is not about knowledge from the outside, an intellectual understanding from an external teacher, but rather an experiential knowing that leads the individual to health and truth.

In yoga we would not usually think of connecting with *Spirit*, in terms of tutelary helpful spirits that wish to guide us. However, some yogi and yoginis do focus on the personal relationship to a teacher or Guru who may be dead or a deity such as *Kali, Shiva or Krishna*. This isn't talked about much these days, but traditionally this was more alive in terms of yoga practice. In yoga we acknowledge that there is some power in the lineage of teachers and teachings and that collective, supportive energy is accumulated in spiritual places. Often when people visit the Ashram they comment on the energy of the place. We can speculate that this is due to the accumulation of effort and discipline of spiritual practice by individuals over the years that make Grace or Presence more palpable.

We often associate the wise woman or man (the Seer) with shamanism. This is based on wisdom and understanding born from intuition and in some cases transmitted from teacher to student. In yoga this knowing is considered as being primarily located in the third eye, or *Agya* chakra. In both traditions when this energy centre is awakened the individual is more open and available to see Truth and wisdom which can be used for the individuals' journey but also to support and inform others, whether this be via teaching, satsang or community.

Some people take the position that only certain individuals will have the blessings of deep spiritual teachings - perhaps this is based on karma, previous preparation and experience that lead to a moment of readiness, connection to lineage or contact with a teacher. It is a mystery as to when the blessings of Grace to become a seeker and student of sacred teachings may come to fruition. In my view the teachings are available to everyone who has the aspiration and longing, but insight comes when the individual is able to make use of and comprehend the wisdom imparted either from the internal or external teacher, whether this is within ordinary reality or from behind the veil.

In my own journey I have found that yoga and shamanism offer valuable tools, practices and supporting philosophies to help guide me. At times one is more helpful or more relevant than the other, but both are compatible and central in offering much appreciated spiritual sustenance.

Reva trained as a shamanic practitioner with The Sacred Trust and as a yoga teacher with Mandala Yoga Ashram accredited by BWY. She is conducting a Yoga and Shamanism retreat celebrating the Spring Equinox in March 2019 see mandalayogaashram.com for more details.