

What is Shamanism?

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Shamanism is the oldest spiritual path, with estimates of its origins ranging back 20,000 years or more. The term “shamanism” derives from the word “saman” in the language of the Tungus people in northern Asia, although these same practices may be found among the original peoples of nearly every continent. The original shaman was an expert in specific magical techniques, particularly hunting magic, healing, divination, ritual magic, and psychopomp work: guiding the dead to the next world.

Modern shamans retain these magical specialties, although often in ways far removed from their predecessors among the early peoples on this world. Shamans today still lead ritual for the community, perform healings, and guide the souls of the departed. Hunting magic is still a component among traditional indigenous peoples, though among more modern communities the focus is less on providing food and more on personal connections with animals as teachers and guides. A major focus of Neopagan shamanic work is self-healing and personal growth, in order to be of better service to the community and the world at large.

It is important to note that shamanism, as it is expressed in modern times and particularly by Westerners, is not an unchanged tradition from Paleolithic times. This is a dynamic path that grows and adapts to best serve its people. Our experience of the world is very different from that of our ancestors. Our relationships to the spirit realms and our individual needs have changed. Therefore, while we carry on the core elements and some of our ancestral shamanic traditions, the path itself has changed in necessary ways that have allowed this path to continue for tens of thousands of years.

For those on a shamanic path, everything that exists is imbued with Divine energy. We tend to be animistic and pantheistic, as well as polytheistic. We are a vital and interconnected part of this great Web of existence and are able to interact directly with the spirit realm, which is not nearly as distant as most modern people would like to believe. Our power flows through us from beyond the stars, beneath the stones, and from deep within everything that exists. The individual that lives his or her shamanic path, the spirits are merely a step away, and sometimes quite a bit closer than that.

Most modern people consider the defining element of shamanism to be the shamanic journey. This is not merely an ecstatic trance or an active meditation. During a true shamanic journey, the free soul of the shaman is believed to leave the physical body and travel about the other worlds. The ability to journey is innate. We all journey during dreaming. Children are often masters of this spirit traveling, until modern society manages to suppress that natural ability. We are all able to work with our guides in the spirit realms to gain deeper insight into ourselves and our relationships with all that exists. But the shaman is the specialist in using this ability along with a particularly close relationship with spirit allies to fulfill the traditional roles of the original shamans.