

# The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian

by

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For centuries the American Indian peoples have been involved in a struggle that has taken on the proportions of a tragedy. It is a double tragedy, for it is ours as well as theirs, and it is still being enacted today. These original Americans have had, and fortunately still do have, great riches in human and spiritual resources. Yet these riches are either being swept aside and forgotten, or are being consciously and actively destroyed by a civilization that is out of balance precisely because it has lost those values. We give credit to the Indians for the discovery and development of foods, narcotics, and tobacco, yet we choose to forget what they never forgot, that we cannot live by bread alone. By ignoring or denying the spiritual legacy left to us by the Indians we have contributed to their impoverishment, and we have cut ourselves off from the possibility of an enrichment we desperately need.

Our consciences are relieved by a belief in such concepts as “progress,” “manifest destiny,” or the inevitability of our own way over all other life patterns, many of which have brought fulfillment, beauty, and dignity in a measure we cannot know so long as we continue in our present direction. In the history of humankind this conflict between cultures may be inevitable. And yet it is not inevitable that the American Indians give up the spiritual values and ritual practices of their ancient religions. Many Indians today, even among their young people and in spite of tremendous pressures brought against them from all sides, still find strength and meaning in their own religious beliefs and ceremonies. Those who remain faithful should be given every possible encouragement, because they are helping to keep alive a rich and truly American heritage that can be found nowhere else in the world, and that can provide values sorely needed by a culture seeking purpose and direction.

For the American Indians themselves, striving to adjust to new patterns of thinking and living, it is of crucial importance to rediscover and reaffirm their own heritage, for people cannot cut themselves off from what they really are without becoming as a tree without either roots or nourishment. Among the many forces at work to mold the Indian into a new image is our educational policy, which has been perpetuating a grave error in omitting from school curriculums almost everything that could and should affirm a heritage of great value; it could even be said that the policy was intentionally designed to destroy this unique heritage, and has thus risked creating people lacking either roots or purpose.

During the early contacts between Europeans and American aborigines the Indian was either depicted as a brutal savage, without civilization and possibly without a soul, or else was painted as an innocent child of nature, a type that is non-existent for the simple reason that humankind as a whole has lost the goodness of “paradise.” The strictly ethnological accounts are of course more accurate and objective, but being a relative and specialized science, ethnology by its very nature is limited. An objective description of religious rites, social customs, or ritual paraphernalia may help us to catalogue and deduce certain conclusions but cannot give an insight into the spirituality many of the Indians knew and expressed in all facets of their culture.

As Frithjof Schuon, writing with great depth of understanding about the American Indian, has said recently:

The fascinating combination of combative and stoical heroism and priestly bearing gave the Indian of the Plains and Forests something of the majesty of the eagle and the sun. This powerful and unique beauty of the Red Man contributes to his fame as a warrior and martyr. . . . If none of the so-called primitive peoples have given rise to as lively and lasting an interest as have the Red Indians, and if the Indian incarnates a certain nostalgia of ours

which it would be wrong to call puerile, there must be some cause for it in the Indian himself, for “where there is smoke there is fire.”<sup>1</sup>

There are times, to be sure, when our unfamiliarity with their symbolical forms, coupled with our own ethnocentricity, cause us to doubt whether American Indians had what we call “civilization,” or whether they were developed enough to worship a Supreme Being approaching that which Christianity refers to as God. With our own overemphasis on mental activity we are apt to think that the Indian, without any written language, lacks something important or necessary in not possessing a scholastic or dialectical type of doctrinal presentation. However such a “lack” may have prevented *us* from understanding the completeness and depth of their wisdom, it represents for the Indians a very effective type of spiritual participation in which the essential ideas and values, reflected by a world of forms and symbols, are spontaneously and integrally *lived*. Undoubtedly Saint Bernard expressed something of the Indian’s perspective when he said:

What I know of the divine sciences and Holy Scripture, I learnt in woods and fields. I have had no other masters than the beeches and the oaks. Listen to a man of experience: thou wilt learn more in the woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach thee more than thou canst acquire from the mouth of a magister.

A further barrier to our understanding is our deep-rooted prejudice against the nomadic way of life many of the Indian groups followed. We are so blinded by the perspectives of our own society that we cannot realize that complex material achievements of the type we possess, or rather by which we are often possessed, are usually had at the expense of human and spiritual values. A minimum of material possessions does not necessarily mean a corresponding poverty in mental and spiritual achievements. The nomadic type of culture offers valuable lessons to the contemporary industrial person who is in danger of being crushed by the sheer weight of civilization, and who therefore often sacrifices the deepest and most meaningful values of life by identifying with an endless series of distracting and often destructive gadgets.

The material that is presented in this chapter is drawn from the traditions of the Indians of the Great Plains. The tribes of the Plains, with their unusual intellectuality, and with the great beauty and dignity of their cultural forms, represent an especially rich development among Amerindian peoples. It is not without reason that whenever the typical American Indian is to be represented it is usually the Plains Indian, with his magnificent fringed buckskin, eagle feathers, and quill decorations—all making for one of the most noble, dignified, and spectacular costumes to be found anywhere in the world. Another lifelong student of the American Indian, Hartley Burr Alexander, also emphasizes their unique position: “Under the great tutelage of Nature, noble and beautiful ceremonies were created, having at their hearts truths universal to mankind; and nowhere in America were such mysteries loftier and more impressive than among the tribes of the Great Plains.”<sup>2</sup>

A second reason for concentrating on the Plains Indians is simply my familiarity with them. For over a year I had the opportunity of living with an old man, Black Elk (*Hehaka Sapa*), who was a Lakota Sioux of the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. During this year Black Elk and his close friend Little Warrior freely told me about their religion and gave me the keys to the spiritual meaning behind the forms of their rites and symbols. This new understanding made clear to me why these old men, and others among their people, manifested in their being and in every act a nobility, serenity, generosity, concentration, and kindness that we usually associate with the saints of the better-known religions. Indeed it is in these two personalities that we have proof of the efficacy and reality of the Indian’s spiritual methods and values.

I first learned of Black Elk through a remarkable book recorded by John Neihardt under the title *Black Elk Speaks* (1932). But it was not until 1948, after many months of travel, that I was able to find him living with

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<sup>1</sup> “The Shamanism of the Red Indians,” in *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1990), pp. 40-41, 41n.

<sup>2</sup> *North American Mythology*, The Mythology of All Races series, vol. X (Boston, 1916, 1937), p. 77.

his family in a little canvas tent in a migrant potato-picking camp in Nebraska. I well remember him as he sat on an old sheepskin hide, ill and pitiful, with his almost totally blind eyes staring beyond that which surrounded him. I sat beside him for some time, and still without speaking offered him a stone pipe filled with tobacco and *kinnikinnik* in the manner that I had been taught by old men of other tribes. We smoked in silence until finally, with a soft and kindly voice, he spoke in Lakota. His son translated. He surprised me by saying that he had anticipated my coming, was glad that I was there beside him, and asked if I would remain with him, for there was much that he would like to tell me before, as he said, he would “pass from this world of darkness into the other real world of light.” I therefore returned with him to his log cabin on the reservation, lived with him and his generous family for almost a year, and from him and his friends I learned about the religion of his people. Every day he talked for several hours until a veil of silence fell in which one could sense that he was so absorbed within the realities of which he was speaking that words no longer had meaning. Indeed, the greater part of what I learned from Black Elk was not what he said, as valuable as this was, but what he was from his very being, which seemed to hover between this world of forms and the other world of the spirit. In all that he was there radiated an atmosphere that made one feel that one was in the presence of a holy man.

Although this sanctity and wholeness was evident in other old people among the Sioux, there was in Black Elk some special quality that set him apart from his people. From the early age of nine he had received visions with an unusual frequency and intensity, so that under their power he lived with the burning compulsion to help his people by bringing back to life the “flowering tree” of their religious heritage. This tree had once flourished and borne fruit at the center of their nation, but now it had withered and Black Elk knew not what to do.

With tears running, O Great Spirit, Great Spirit, my Grandfather—with running tears I must say now that the tree has never bloomed. A pitiful old man, you see here, and I have fallen away and have done nothing. Here at the center of the world, where you took me when I was young and taught me; here, old, I stand, and the tree is withered, Grandfather, my Grandfather!

Again, and maybe the last time on this earth, I recall the great vision you sent me. It may be that some little root of the sacred tree still lives. Nourish it then, that it may leaf and bloom and fill with singing birds. Hear me, not for myself, but for my people; I am old. Hear me that they may once more go back into the sacred hoop and find the good red road, the shielding tree.<sup>3</sup>

Because of this mission to keep alive his religious heritage, Black Elk wished to pass on to his people and to the world those aspects of his religion that were recorded in *Black Elk Speaks*, and in the book I recorded for him in 1953, *The Sacred Pipe*. It is in keeping with his wish, and for the sake of the values themselves, that I present the following material.

One of the symbols that expresses most completely the Plains Indian concept of the relationship between human beings and the world of nature surrounding them is a cross inscribed within a circle. The symbol is painted on a number of ritual objects, and on the bodies and heads of people who participate in tribal ceremonies. Its form is reflected in the circular shape and central fire of the tipi, the Indian’s home; its pattern is found in the Sun Dance and purification lodges and in many of the ritual movements. For example, in the Hako ceremony of the Pawnee, the priest draws a circle on the earth with his toe: “The circle represents a nest, and is drawn by the toe, because the Eagle [symbol of the Great Mysterious] builds its nest with its claws. Although we are imitating the bird making its nest, there is another meaning to the action; we are thinking of *Tirawa* making the world for the people to live in.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Black Elk, as told to John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (New York, 1932), pp. 279-280. Reprinted in paperback by the Bison Series of the University of Nebraska, 1961.

<sup>4</sup> Alice C. Fletcher, *The Hako: A Pawnee Ceremony*, annual report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, XXII, ii, 1904.

In complaining that the Indian must now live in a *square* log house, a form without power to the Indians, Black Elk once said:

You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop, and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The east gave peace and light, the south gave warmth, the west gave rain, and the north with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance. This knowledge came to us from the outer world with our religion. Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves. Our teepees were round like the nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children.<sup>5</sup>

At the center of the circle, uniting within a point the four directions of the cross and all the other quaternaries of the Universe, is a human person. Without the awareness that they bear within themselves this sacred center, human beings are in fact less than human. It is to recall the virtual reality of this center that the Indians have so many rites based on the cross within the circle.

One of the most precise ritual expressions of this "centrality" is found in one of the rites of the Arapaho Sun Dance, in which their Sacred Wheel is placed against each of the four sides of a man's body, starting from the feet and moving to the head, and is then turned sunwise four times, until finally it is lowered over the head, with the four attached eagle feathers hanging down over the man's breast, so that he is ritually at the center, a vertical axis to the horizontal wheel.

This concept of the vertical axis explains the sacredness of the number seven to the Indians, and it is interesting to note that their interpretation is identical to that found in other major religions. In adding the vertical dimensions of sky and earth to the four horizontal ones of space, we have six dimensions, with the seventh as the point at the center where all the directions meet.

To realize this symbol in its fullness we must conceive of three horizontal circles inscribed with crosses, all three pierced by the vertical axis of humanity itself. For the Indians understand that human beings are intermediate between sky and earth, linking the two, with feet on the ground and the head, or intellect, at the center of the firmament. The middle disc, like the vertical axis, represents humanity, for in joining sky and earth, it is neither pure spirit nor gross matter, but a synthesis of both. This particular symbol may be found among the Crow in the three rings they often paint around the sacred cottonwood tree at the center of their circular Sun Dance lodge. It was further explained to me by an old Crow priest or medicine man that these circles represent the three "worlds" that constitute human beings: body, soul, and spirit, or again: gross, subtle, and pure.

Once this concept of humanity and its relationship to the universe has been understood, one is able to understand the Indians' approach to the forms of virgin nature that surrounded them, and which they knew so intimately. In most of the great religious traditions of the world people built centers of worship in the form of cathedrals, churches, or temples, and in these centers and in the many symbolical forms introduced into them, people expressed their image of the universe. It is certainly not difficult to sense this totality, or to feel that one is actually at the center of the world when one is inside the great medieval cathedrals of Europe. For the Indians, however, the world of nature itself was their temple, and within this sanctuary they showed great respect to every form, function, and power. That the Indians held as sacred all the natural forms surrounding them is not unique, for other traditions (Japanese Shinto, for example) respect created forms as manifestations of God's works. But what is almost unique in the Indians' attitude is that their reverence for nature and for

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<sup>5</sup> *Black Elk Speaks*, pp. 198-200.

life is *central* to their religion: each form in the world around them bears such a host of precise values and meanings that taken all together they constitute what one would call their “doctrine.”

In my first contacts with Black Elk almost all that he said was phrased in terms involving animals and natural phenomena. I naively wished that he would begin to talk about religious matters, until I finally realized that he was, in fact, explaining his religion. The values I sought were to be found precisely in his stories and accounts of the bison, eagle, trees, flowers, mountains, and winds.

Due to this intense preoccupation with the forms of nature, Indians have been described as being in their religion either pantheistic, idolatrous, or downright savage. It is hardly necessary to reply to the two latter terms, but the more subtle charge of pantheism, which involves equating God with manifested forms, requires some clarification.

In the extremely beautiful creation myths of the Plains Indians, which are amazingly similar to the biblical Genesis, the animals were created before human beings, so that in their anteriority and divine origin they have a certain proximity to the Great Spirit (*Wakan-Tanka* in the language of the Sioux), which demands respect and veneration. In them the Indian sees actual reflections of the qualities of the Great Spirit, which serve the same function as revealed scriptures in other religions. They are intermediaries or links between human beings and God. This explains not only why religious devotions may be directed to the deity *through* the animals, but it also helps us to understand why contact with, or from, the Great Spirit, comes to the Indian almost exclusively through visions involving animal or other natural forms. Black Elk, for example, received spiritual power (*wochangi*) from visions involving the eagle, the bison, Thunder-beings, and horses; and it is said that Crazy Horse, the great chief and holy man, received his power and invulnerability from the rock, and also from a vision of the shadow.

Although these natural forms may reflect aspects of the Great Spirit, and eventually cannot be other than the Great Spirit, they are nevertheless not identified with He “who is without Parts,” and who in His transcendent unity is above all particular created forms. The Indian therefore cannot be termed a pantheist, if we accept this term in the usual sense. Black Elk has formulated well this mystery in the following statement:

. . . We regard all created beings as sacred and important, for everything has a *wochangi*, or influence, which can be given to us, through which we may gain a little more understanding if we are attentive. We should understand well that all things are the works of the Great Spirit. We should know that He is within all things; the trees, the grasses, the rivers, the mountains and all the four-legged animals, and the winged peoples; and even more important, we should understand that He is also above all these things and peoples.<sup>6</sup>

To make these distinctions more precise, it should be noted that in the language of the Sioux (Lakota), the Great Spirit may be referred to as either Father (*Ate*) or Grandfather (*Tunkashila*). *Ate* refers to the Great Spirit in relation to His creation, in other words, as Being, whereas *Tunkashila* is the non-manifest essence, independent of the limitations of creation. These same distinctions have been enunciated by Christian theologians using the term God as distinct from Godhead, and in the Hindu doctrines that differentiate between Brahma (the masculine form) and Brahman (the neuter form).

In recalling the symbol of the circle, cross, and central axis, we can now see that although humans were created last of all the creatures, they are also the “axis,” and thus in a sense the first. For if each animal reflects particular aspects of the Great Spirit, human beings, on the contrary, may include within themselves all the aspects. A human being is thus a totality, bearing the Universe within himself or herself and through the intellect having the potential capacity to live in continual awareness of this reality. As Black Elk has said: “Peace . . . comes within the souls of men when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the Universe dwells *Wakan-Tanka*, and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma, 1953), pp. xx, 59.

<sup>7</sup> *The Sacred Pipe*, p. 115.

The Indian believes that such knowledge cannot be realized unless there is perfect humility, unless human beings humble themselves before the entire creation, before the smallest ant, realizing their own nothingness. Only in being nothing may an individual human being become everything, and only then realize the essential kinship with all forms of life. A human being's center, or Life, is the same center or Life of all that is.

Because of humankind's totality and centrality it has the almost divine function of guardianship over the world of nature. Once this role is ignored or misused people are in danger of being shown ultimately by nature who in reality is the conqueror and who the conquered. It could also be said, from another perspective, that in the past humans had to protect themselves from the forces of nature, whereas today it is nature that must be protected from humans.

Nothing is more tragic or pitiful than the statements of Indians who have survived to see their sacred lands torn up and desecrated by a people of an alien culture who, driven largely by commercial interests, have lost the sense of protective guardianship over nature. Typical are the words of an old Omaha:

When I was a youth, the country was very beautiful. Along the rivers were belts of timberland, where grew cottonwood, maple, elm, ash, hickory, and walnut trees, and many other shrubs. And under these grew many good herbs and beautiful flowering plants. In both the woodland and the prairies I could see the trails of many kinds of animals and could hear the cheerful songs of many kinds of birds. When I walked abroad I could see many forms of life, beautiful living creatures which *Wakanda* had placed here; and these were, after their manner, walking, flying, leaping, running, playing all about. But now the face of all the land is changed and sad. The living creatures are gone. I see the land desolate and I suffer an unspeakable sadness. Sometimes I wake in the night and I feel as though I should suffocate from the pressure of this awful feeling of loneliness.<sup>8</sup>

Too often statements such as this are passed off as nostalgic romanticism, but if we understand the full meaning of the world of nature for the Indian, we realize that we are involved witnesses to a great tragedy, whose final act is still to be seen.

The remarkable spiritual development to be found among many of the Plains Indians derives not only from their close contact with nature, but also through rigorous participation in a multitude of rites and symbols of a supernatural origin, which are often of great complexity. Through participation in these rites, which have been faithfully transmitted from generation to generation, the Indian comes to know, to understand, and then to seek those values reflected in the great mirror of nature. Far from being simple and passive "children of nature," the Indians have dynamic personalities of great force, courage, and intelligence, and often undergo intense suffering and sacrifice in becoming what they are and in preserving what they have.

Through people such as Black Elk, Little Warrior, Standing Bear, *Ohiyesa* (Charles Eastman), and others, we are able to understand the wisdom in their rites and cultural forms. We know of the sacred power they individually received when they made their religious retreats (*hanblecheyapi*), alone on high mountain tops, going for four days or more without food or water, and praying continually that the Great Spirit might hear and in compassion send one of His messengers in a vision.

In the religious retreat the Indian as an individual sought spiritual renewal, whereas in the rites of the annual spring Sun Dance (*Wiwanyag Wachipi*) the entire tribe gathered to ensure renewal not only of the participating individual, but of the tribe itself, of the world, and of the Universe. This four-day ritual dance is also still practiced by most of the Plains Indians, even though many of the forms have been modified and simplified under pressures from missionaries and the "civilizing" influences of our modern world. The essential power and functions of the Sun Dance, however, are still present, and anybody who has observed the complete three- or four-day ceremony cannot but be impressed, and deeply moved, by the otherworldly beauty of the sacred songs, by the powerful rhythm of the great drum struck simultaneously by many men, by the directness in the geometry of the ritual movements of the dancers (which again is based on the relationship between the circle and its axis or center), and by the aspects of duration and sacrifice.

To illustrate in some detail at least one of the Plains Indians ceremonies I have chosen the purification rites

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<sup>8</sup> Melvin R. Gilmore, *Prairie Smoke* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), p. 36.

of the sweat lodge, the *Inipi*. These rites are carried out in preparation for all the other major rites, and actually are participated in prior to any important undertaking. They are rites of renewal, or spiritual rebirth, in which each of the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water—contribute to the people’s physical and psychical purification.

A small dome-shaped lodge is first made of bent willow saplings over which are placed buffalo hides, which make the little house tight and dark inside. Within the lodge, and at its center, there is a small pit containing rocks that have already been heated in a fire outside the lodge to the east. When the leader of the ceremony sprinkles water on these they give off steam, so that soon the lodge becomes intensely hot, and also fragrant from the aromatic sage strewn on the floor. Each of the materials in the lodge has its symbolic value, as does every detail of design and ritual usage.

Black Elk, among others, has explained that the lodge itself represents the Universe, with the pit at the center as the navel in which dwells the Great Spirit with His power, which is the fire. The willows that form the frame of the house represent all that grows from Mother Earth.

These too have a lesson to teach us, for in the fall their leaves die and return to the earth, but in the spring they come to life again. So, too, men die but live again in the real world of *Wakan-Tanka*, where there is nothing but the spirits of all things; and this true life we may know here on earth if we purify our bodies and minds, thus coming closer to *Wakan-Tanka* who is all-purity.<sup>9</sup>

The rocks represent the earth, and also the indestructible and everlasting nature of *Wakan-Tanka*. The water, too, reflects values for the people to learn from:

When we use water in the sweat lodge we should think of *Wakan-Tanka* who is always flowing, giving His power and life to everything; we should even be as water which is lower than all things, yet stronger even than the rocks.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to note that to the Plains Indian the material form of the symbol is not thought of as representing some *other* and higher reality, but *is* that reality in an image. The power or quality, therefore, that a particular form reflects may be transferred directly to the person in contact with it, and there is no need, as with modern Western people, for any mental or artificial “reconstruction.” It may even be said that the Indian can be passive to the form, and is thus able to absorb, and become one with, its reflected power.

During the four periods of sweating within the lodge, prayers are recited, sacred songs are sung, and a pipe is ceremonially smoked four times by the circle of people. At the conclusion of the fourth and last period the door is opened so that “the light enters into the darkness, that we may see not only with our two eyes, but with the one eye which is of the heart, and with which we see and know all that is true and good.” Going forth into the light from the house of darkness, in which all impurities have been left behind, represents human liberation from ignorance, from the ego, and from the cosmos. The person is now a renewed being entering symbolically into the world of light or wisdom.

There is in these rites an amazing completeness. In other great religions one, or sometimes two, of the elements are used for purification or consecration. Here four of the elements are present (one could include the fifth “element”: ether) in such a powerfully interrelated manner that one cannot but believe that for each participating individual the goal, in varying degrees, must be achieved.

As a thread binds together, and is central to, each bead of a necklace, so is the sacred pipe central to all the Plains Indian ceremonies. The pipe is a portable altar, and a means of grace, that every Indian once possessed. He would not undertake anything of importance unless he had first smoked, concentrating on all that the pipe

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<sup>9</sup> *The Sacred Pipe*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>10</sup> *The Sacred Pipe*, p. 31.

represented, and thus absorbing a multitude of powers. It could in fact be said that if one could understand all the possible meanings and values to be found in the pipe and its accompanying ritual, then one could understand Plains Indian religion in its full depth.

The origin of the pipe is expressed in various myths of great beauty. In the Sioux myth a miraculous Buffalo Cow Woman brought the pipe to the people, with explanations concerning its meaning and use. Pipes used in historical times, and still used today, are made with a red, or sometimes a black, stone bowl, a stem usually of ash, and—at least with the large ceremonial types—ribbon decorations representing the four directions of space, and parts taken from sacred animals or from nature. These pipes represent the human being in his totality, or the universe of which humankind is a reflection. The bowl is the heart, or sacred center, and each section of the pipe is usually identified with some part of the human being.

As the pipe is filled with the sacred tobacco, prayers are offered for all the powers of the universe, and for the myriad forms of creation, each of which is represented by a grain of tobacco. The filled pipe is thus Totality, so that when the fire of the Great Spirit is added, a divine sacrifice is enacted in which the Universe and humankind are reabsorbed within the Principle, and become what in reality they are. In mingling life-breath with the tobacco and fire through the straight stem of concentration, the person who smokes assists at the sacrifice of the self or ego, and is thus aided in realizing the Divine Presence at his or her own center. Indeed, in the liberation of the smoke one is helped not only to find God's presence within, but to realize that oneself and the world are mysteriously plunged in God. The smoke that rises to the heavens is also, as it were, visible prayer, at the sight and fragrance of which the entire creation rejoices. The mysteries of the peace pipe are so profound that the rite of smoking for the Indian can be compared to the Holy Communion for Christians. It is therefore not without reason that it is commonly called a "peace pipe," and was always used in establishing a relationship, or peace, between friends and also enemies. For in smoking the pipe together each person is aided in remembering his or her own center, which is now understood to be the same center of every other person, and of the Universe itself. It would be difficult to imagine a rite that could more aptly express the bond that exists among all forms of creation.

All true spiritual progress involves three stages, which are not successfully experienced and left behind, but rather each in turn is realized and then integrated within the next stage, so that ultimately they become one in the individual who attains the ultimate goal. Different terms may be used for these stages, but essentially they constitute purification, perfection or expansion, and union.

If union with Truth (which is one of many possible names for God) is the ultimate goal of all spiritual disciplines, then it is evident that what is impure cannot be united with that which is all-purity. Hence the necessity for the first stage of purification. Expansion follows because only that which is perfect, total, or whole can be united with absolute perfection and holiness. One must cease to be a part, an imperfect fragment; one must also realize what one really is so as to expand to include the Universe within oneself. Only then, when these two conditions of purification and expansion are actualized, may one attain to the final stage of union. All the great religions attest that there is no greater error to which human beings are subject than to regard the real self as nothing more than the body or the mind. It is only through traditional disciplines, such as those that have been described for the Plains Indian, that people are able to dispel this greatest of all illusions.

The pattern of the three stages in spiritual development may be recognized in one form or another in the methods of all the great religions of the world. It is evident that the American Indian, or at least the Plains Indian, also possesses this same threefold pattern of realization. If this spirituality has not as yet been fully recognized as existing among the Indians, it is due partly to a problem of communication, since their conceptions are often expressed through symbolic forms that are foreign to us. If we can understand, however, the truths the Indians find in their relationships to nature, and the profound values reflected by their many rites and symbols, then *we* may become enriched, our understanding will deepen, and we shall be able to give to the American Indian heritage its rightful place among the great spiritual traditions of humankind. Further, if Indians themselves can become more actively aware of this valuable heritage, then they may regain much of what has been lost, and will be able to face the world with the pride and dignity that should rightfully be theirs.