

**THE SHAMAN'S BODY:
A New Shamanism for Transforming Health, Relationships, and the Community
by Arnold Mindell**

**Chapter Excerpt from Chapter One
The Shaman's Body**

Indigenous healers have taught me that the quality of life depends upon body sensations that are linked to dreams and the environment, to what I call the shaman's body. According to medicine people living in native settings around the world, and to mystical traditions, the shaman's dreamingbody, when accessed, is a source of health, personal growth, good relationships, and a sense of community.

The shaman's body (or dreamingbody) is a name for unusual experiences and altered states of consciousness that try to reach your everyday awareness through signals such as body symptoms and movement impulses, dreams, and messages from the environment.

The methods I present in this work for gaining access to the dreamingbody come from personal experiences I have had with Native American teachers in the United States and Canada, witch doctors in Kenya, Zen masters from Japan, healers from India, and aboriginal healers from the Northern Territory, Australia. In every instance, I have studied the effects of these shamanic experiences, developed related methods, which I discuss in this book, and tested those methods over the past twenty-five years in my therapeutic practice, extreme-state and chronic-body-symptom clinics, and international conferences.

According to warrior shamans, health problems, problems with relationships, and community difficulties are all aspects of your dreamingbody, peak life experiences that appear otherwise only near death, when you're on drugs, or in mystical rituals. Access to the dreambody is a key to your physical health and insight into the nature of the world. This book tries to make the dreambody less mysterious and more readily accessible so that you can use it to transform mundane reality into that special place where life feels deep and meaningful. It is based not only upon experiences with indigenous healers, but also upon my own background as a physicist, my earlier practice as a Jungian analyst, and my present work in process-oriented psychology and conflict resolution. The exercises and methods in the book combine modern psychology and ancient shamanistic practice and have been tested by thousands of people.

Yet this book is neither an academic study of shamanism nor a scientific proposal for a new psychotherapy. It is meant to be personal, and it recommends practical methods for gaining access to your own dreamingbody and ways to work on body problems and dreams. Finally, it explores the effects such innerwork or shamanism can have on the world.

Shamanism is meaningful for me because it illuminates not only personal experience, but also a cultural path toward a future, more sustainable world than our present one.

Elements of peak and shamanic experiences, such as prolonged trance states, spiritual awakenings, sudden healings, meetings with ghosts, and other paranormal events, are often foreshadowed by various types of inner experiences, or "callings," such as serious illness, near-death experiences, periods of near insanity, or "big" dreams of wise spirit figures. Mircea Eliade, in his seminal book, *Shamanism*, presents these callings as one aspect of shamanism worldwide. Without them, the path to shamanism remains incomplete.

In the indigenous traditions in which I have taken part, shamans still teach about the importance of such callings. Some readers will remember Carlos Castaneda's don Juan figure, who says that the spirit determines how you identify yourself, whether you remain an average person, and whether and when you become a seer or a warrior, capable of sensing and following the signals and powers of the earth.

The daughter of my Australian aboriginal healer told me that she prepares for and yet does not seek to learn witchcraft or to transform herself. She must wait as her ancestors did for her mentor, her father, until she reaches the age when such teaching is "allowed." She said she could not specify what age this would be, but she mentioned that her father was seventy-eight. He told me that he, too, had not sought to become a healer, but had waited until his parents taught him in their advanced old age, just before death. I shall talk further about the calling to become a shaman in a later chapter.

I have seen in my practice how many shamanic abilities appear when you stop doubting the reality of the spirit. In this moment, something in you transforms, and you develop a deep attention, a steady focus on irrational events. This basic shamanic tool is attention to the dreaming process. When your inner life calls and you stop doubting, a personal transformation begins. But all of this is not up to your will. You can work at transforming your personal life to make it more meaningful, but success with your attention is like a blessing that cannot be produced at will. Inner or outer teachers may spur you on, but it is finally up to the spirit to move your assemblage point -- the way you identify, assemble, and conduct yourself, and your sense of reality.

Waiting for this special move is both sobering and challenging. Perhaps everyone has shamanic or intuitive abilities, yet few are able to use this capacity at will. Shamanic ability, like other talents, is not entirely at your disposal. You cannot simply determine when you are going to have important and healing experiences, though you can prepare for them through various practices, some of which I discuss in the following chapters.

The community in which one lives also plays a role in the shaman's calling. Of my many meetings with shamans, witch doctors, and healers, my most memorable healing experience was some years ago in Kenya. Other indigenous peoples have seemed more dissociated through contact with European or Western culture. In Africa, however, it

became clear to me that the shaman or witch doctor cannot be studied independently of her or his relationship to the group, the tribe.