

Four Directions

The Four Directions represent the *interconnectedness* of the *universe* and all its *elements*: plants, animals, humans and the environment in which they live. The indigenous perspective views the world as a moving, changing, life force in which birth and death are natural and necessary processes. *Balance* is maintained through the *interdependency* of the life forces. The validity of this view rests on the knowledge of the fundamental relationships and patterns at play in the world. To traditional indigenous peoples, the world is sacred.

Starting with the spirit that is created at the moment of conception, the nine-month journey towards the birth of a baby marks the beginning of entry into the *family* unit. The journey continues with each stage of life as infant, child, adolescent, adult, and elder. Development takes place spiritually, mentally, physically and emotionally throughout the life journey however once you are a parent, you are a parent for life.

However just as a baby is completely dependent on adult care for its survival, adults depend on their children for the regeneration, or continuation, of the life chain. Traditionally the *responsibilities* associated with raising a child belonged to a larger circle of all adults in the community. Today Cree grandparents often continue to act as primary caregivers of their grandchildren once they become youth to impart knowledge and *values*. In this way children view those around them as extended family, creating a strong sense of belonging and kinship.

The life chain of plants and animals are similarly connected in the Four Directions and, with the elements, the planets, the seasons, and the four sacred medicines, provide the nourishment and the conditions to sustain life. Harmony exists when this spider web of interconnecting threads is respected and understood. Life begins in the spirit and returns to the spirit world following death.

Four Aspects of Self

The emotional, mental, spiritual and physical elements of ones' life are referred to as the *Four Aspects of Self* which, when taken together, represent the four parts of one's being. These elements are gifts from the Creator, but each aspect commands responsibility in order to maintain healthy balance of the self in all respects. Neglect of exercising any one element leads to an imbalance of the whole in the traditional indigenous view.

There is a *correlation* between the Four Aspects of Self and the Four Directions in the Medicine Wheel. The Eastern quadrant represents the beginning of a new day - a new life - and just as the sun rotates in a clockwise direction to the south, west and north, movement on the Medicine Wheel flows in the same direction. The baby is represented by the east; youth is represented by the south; adulthood is represented by the west, and *elderhood* is represented by the north. Similarly, the spiritual element of self is associated with the east. The spiritual connection to the baby in the eastern quadrant of the wheel comes from its birth from spirit. The youth's association with the physical aspect of self comes from the growth that takes place during this stage and the natural physical activity of children and adolescents. Adulthood is associated with the emotional aspect of self. Maturity brings the awareness of feelings and the confidence to express emotion. Life experience gives adults a broad perspective to better understand the world and the journey everyone walks. Adulthood provides the gift of recognizing what is important and the skill to provide what is necessary to live well and to be happy and healthy. This knowledge is what enables adults to make good parents. Elderhood is the

fourth and final stage in the cycle of life and is associated with the mental aspect of self. This connection comes from the *wisdom* of age and experience. With less responsibility at this stage of life for looking after children and more time to reflect on life from a philosophical view, elders develop a superior mental awareness.

The energy shifts with each stage of life just as the knowledge and responsibilities change. Just as no one can stay a baby or a child forever, change is a natural process. The stages of life follow a natural flow of sequence, generation upon generation.

The Teepee

Values help guide behaviour through the process of growing up, changing and handling responsibilities. Personal values are what determine a person's decisions and actions. Social values are set by cultural beliefs as to what is important for a community. There are fifteen traditional Cree cultural values that serve as a guide for happy and healthy living. Each value is *honoured* in the construction of a teepee which requires 15 poles - with each pole symbolizing one value:

1. Obedience – accepting guidance and wisdom from others
2. Respect – for self and others
3. Humility – knowing that we are not above or below others in the circle of life
4. Happiness – showing enthusiasm to encourage others
5. Love – love of self and love of others, not things
6. Faith – belief in the spirit world
7. Kinship – relationships and bonds with parents, siblings, extended relatives, knowing one's home community
8. Cleanliness – spiritual cleanliness
9. Thankfulness – gratitude for life and for family
10. Sharing – sharing knowledge, stories, traditions, for future generations
11. Strength – spiritual strength to do things that are difficult
12. Good Child Rearing – guidance and protection of the sacred gift of children
13. Hope – hope that the women who are the life givers and the nurturers will carry on the teachings to bring healthy spirited people into the world
14. Ultimate Protection – protection of the minds, spirit, emotions and health of the youth
15. Control flaps from winds – balance in life's journey

These are the sacred values that sustain the Cree spiritually, physically, emotionally and mentally. The first three are considered the foundation of the teepee because a teepee will not stand upright with only two poles, a minimum of three are needed - just as you need a child and two parents to make a family.

A ceremony is followed when erecting a teepee, with tobacco given to Mother Earth by a woman in thanks for the use of all the materials to make the teepee, and the doorway facing east. The teepee is symbolic of the sacredness of womanhood as it stands with dignity; it provides warmth, comfort and shelter, and love and care to the family. With the control flaps up, the teepee resembles an old woman standing with her arms extended out in thanks. Women are named after the fire that is built in the centre of the teepee.

The control flaps are used to control the release of smoke and insects from the fire. When they are positioned properly, all smoke and insects flow out through the opening at the top of the teepee. So these flaps represent balance in life's journey.