

The East Gate: Way of the Visionary

BUDDING OF THE TREES MOON (March 21 – April 19) Week 4: Questing Farther into the Trees

Invocation Blessing Song

Behold Great Mystery, Creative Force, Spirit That Moves Through All! We call to the Seven Directions of the Sacred Wheel!

We turn to the Keepers of the East, direction of the new beginnings, of inspirations, of illumination and creativity, of the dawn and spring, new births and childhood. Be with us, teach us, show us your ways!

We call to the Keepers of the South, direction of vitality, of high noon and hot sun, of summer and vigorous growth, of youth and passion. Be with us, teach us, show us your ways!

We invite the Keepers of the West, direction of introspection, of the evening, of autumn and maturity, deepening and ripening. Be with us, teach us, show us your ways!

We respectfully summon the Keepers of the North, direction of the night, of winter, of wisdom and transformation, of dropping inessentials to reveal the core. Be with us, teach us, show us your ways!

We look up to the sky and call to the beings of the sun, the moon, the clouds, the stars, and the endless blue, and we ask that you bring your spaciousness and mystery to this work. Be with us, teach us, show us your ways!

We put our hands on the ground and ask that the great substance of the Earth give grounding to the work, and that the Earth's beauties give us beauty and that the entire world—the animals and plants and rocks, mountains and rivers and seas, the elemental forces of Earth and Air and Fire and Water, and all the human beings, all the elders, children, teachers, all the red, yellow, black, and white—join in this blessing. Be with us, teach us, show us your ways!

We call to the Sweet Mystery that is the Sacred Center! Hold us and cradle us in your divine protection! Be with us, teach us, show us your ways!

We claim this work to serve, to bless, and to share knowledge for wisdom building and for bringing wholeness to our hearts and to our world. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

(Note: The beginning prayer and final blessing of this lesson appear at the beginning and end of each lesson. These prayers mark the cycle of energy within that lesson and create a circle of connection.)

LESSON PLAN

East Gate Introduction

Be sure to continue doing the daily practices you learned in the introductory lessons, smudging and meditating every day and journaling about your observations and experiences. Familiarize yourself with the correspondences of the East and the aspects of the East Gate, read the introduction to the East Gate, and read the section titled “The Path Through the East Gate.” A Note About Emotional Experience and Expression, Deeper Levels of Truth, Exploring Edges.

Month one: Budding of the Trees Moon

WEEK 1: Read the material for Week 1, the Budding of the Trees Moon, which begins with “Discovering Cycles and Relationships” and includes “Vernal Equinox”; “Spiritual Duty”; “Right Speech, Right Thought, Right Action, Right Relationship”; and “Birth Scripts.” Do Exercise 1 from the study guide and answer the questions for the week. If you are studying for certification, remember to send your answers to the weekly questions, along with your entries in your growth journal, to the Institute via email or your private account. Hand-written journal pages can be scanned and sent as a PDF, and unless you have given your permission in advance, only Gent or Linda will read them. Also, if you are on a monthly contribution, be sure to submit contribution for the next Moon, Frogs Return Moon.

WEEK 2: Continue your daily devotions, and re-read the sections on the correspondences and aspects of the East Gate to make sure you know them well. Read “Discovering the Living Tree,” which includes “Regeneration and Creativity” and the section titled “Change and Choice: The Bowl of Your Creation.” Do Exercises 2 and 3 from the study guide, and answer the questions for the week.

WEEK 3: Continue your daily devotions, which includes daily journaling, and re-read the sections on the correspondences and aspects of the East Gate to make sure you know them. Also, if you have a tradition you follow, or something speaks to your own knowing, feel free to add your own aspects. Read “Quest for Vision,” do Exercise 4 from the study guide, and answer the questions for the week. Please make a note of any glossary terms you would like to see added, and send these to the Institute for review.

WEEK 4: Read “Questing Further into the Trees,” and do Exercise 5. Also, answer the questions for Week 4 of the Budding of the Trees Moon.

GOING DEEPER IN THE VISION QUEST

Sacred Wisdom Circles Institute offers multidimensional Quests that mirror primal traditions in their manner of bringing the seeker into communion with the Numinous. Our process is arranged according to the natural dynamic of the larger life process, and it has four distinct yet interdependent components. The first is severance, in which you prepare to leave your ordinary world to Quest. The second phase is called the liminal time. Here you step across the limitations of ordinary life to face the Sacred. In this stage, you will face the tests that you have created for your Self. The third stage is transformation. It is in this stage that you incorporate, or embody, the essence of the gifts or lessons given. The fourth stage is the reunion, in which you bring the benefits of your Quest for the renewing of Self, your community, the planet, and “the ten thousand worlds.”

What we call the beginning is often the end.
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.
—T.S. Eliot, from “Little Gidding”

The Severance: The Death Lodge

Peoples of old knew that to prepare for the next stages in any process, some things of the old had to die. Former limitations must be released to establish new boundaries. The old must be cleansed if something *healthy* and new is to grow. Indeed, this severance preparation can even be an opportunity to practice your own dying. Primal peoples faced any process of newness first by exploring what must be released. The first release is letting go of suffering and unhappiness, and whatever the discovery, the advantage is to truly know what is no longer of use and what is of true value. In our process, you prepare yourself to Quest by spending time in the Death Lodge. You then enter the liminal time with a cleansed perception that is freed of the burdens of that which is no longer useful; you are cleansed and able to recognize the direction you seek. A Sweat Lodge always precedes a Quest and is the final act of the Death Lodge.

The Liminal Time

When you step into the liminal, you enter the spacetime of the Sacred World—the world of Spirit, although it may not appear to be so. At this stage, the Quester encounters the margin, or limit, of the former self and formally steps beyond it. This stage may or may not be intensely felt. During this time of solitude and fasting, you perform your own ceremonies by using your own symbols, praying your own prayers, and “singing your own songs.” Through fasting, you become a worthy offering ready to receive from the Numinous. The fasting state is one of separation from the everyday world, and the vision state unites the faster with the Sacred. Thus, the vision state involves realization within the transcendent.

Dreaming While on a Quest

Dreams during the liminal time of a Quest are very important. Not only are we dreaming, we are being dreamed by the Ancestors. All dreams contain wisdom by which we can grow and change, and dreams during Quest times contain the power of transformation—they are maps to the Sacred Mountains of your life.

THE VISION

“A very great vision is needed,
and the man who has it must follow it
as the eagle seeks the deepest blue of the sky.”

—Crazy Horse, Oglala Lakota Sioux

In this section on vision, let us begin by reflecting on the words of those who came before us. Below is an excerpt from a book by Steven Foster and Meredith Little, *The Roaring of the Sacred River: The Wilderness Quest for Vision and Self-Healing*:

Many experience—or claim not to experience—” vision.” Few do anything about it. Words, words, words. What power have they, apart from the actual practice of the vision? There are plenty of talkers, and few doers. And what about those who claim to suffer from lack of vision, yet who are daily involved in visionary work? Clearly, vision is not just something one can talk about. Vision is not just something one claims to have or not to have.... Vision is what never goes away, no matter how hard we try to run from it or forget. It is personal conviction in action. It is a sense of mission in the process of being accomplished. It is myth realized through work. It is practicing what we preach.

And while I stood there
I saw more than I can tell,
and I understood more than I saw;
for I was seeing in a sacred manner
the shapes of things in the spirit,
and the shape of all shapes as they
must live together like one being.

—Black Elk, Oglala Sioux Holy Man

TRANSFORMATION

Transformation is an inner experience and is a change that stays changed. Through transformation, a person can be literally made new. Transformation happens because a person has been touched by the Divine, and when it is experienced, it is not possible to go back to the old way. In modern culture, natural childbirth is almost the only time left in which modern humankind can experience transformation. Women can feel the power that moves in them during labor and birth, and fathers who attend births know that they will never be the same again. This is the transformation sense. Warriors in battle, and at other times of stress, promote the ability to be “touched.” It is the stress of going without food and the aloneness of the vision quest that

forces the ego to let go of its hold on our consciousness enough for our divineness to access Spirit.

Your hand opens and closes and opens and closes.
If it were always a fist or always stretched open, you would be paralyzed.
Your deepest presence is in every small contracting and expanding,
the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated as birds' wings.

—Jelaluddin Rumi

Incorporation

It sometimes takes years to fully understand your “vision” experience and what to do with it. You are indeed beginning a great challenge, and the trials and tribulations of the everyday world may crush in on you when you come back. The key is to be able to hold resolve and not lose the vision. You must nurture the flame of your purpose and carry its warmth to the darkest corners. *Above all, you must teach yourself to face the trials of the everyday world and to see them as equally sacred as the vision.*

Sometimes you do not want to do what was indicated during the quest. In such times, know that the experience is always perceived differently with ensuing time. The best choice is often to wait until the action desired is clear. This uncertainty can be very difficult, and the disorientation and difficulty can be eased. During these moments, even simple ceremonies are supportive.

Our Deepest Fear

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God.
Your playing small does not serve the world.
There is nothing enlightened about shrinking
so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine, as children do.
We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.
It's not just in some of us; it is in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine,
we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

—Marianne Williamson

Emergence: Giving Birth to Yourself

Symbolically, you emerge from transformation as newly born, and this time, you are not innocent, naked, or less. Even with the difficulties and uncertainties, you are born into a greater Self with new gifts for spiritual service.

“To avoid making a mess of it, be as careful of the completion
as you were of the beginning.”

—Lao Tzu, from *Tao Te Ching (The Way of Life)*

The Invitation

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living. I want to know what you ache for, and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are. I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dream, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon. I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow, if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shriveled and closed from fear of further pain. I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own, without moving to hide it or fade it or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own, if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful, to be realistic, to remember the limitations of being human.

It doesn't interest me if the story you are telling me is true. I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself; if you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not betray your own soul; if you can be faithless and therefore trustworthy.

I want to know if you can see beauty even when it's not pretty, every day, and if you can source your own life from its presence.

I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine, and still stand on the edge of the lake and shout to the silver of the full moon, “Yes!”

It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have. I want to know if you can get up, after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done to feed the children.

It doesn't interest me who you know or how you came to be here. I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied. I want to know what sustains you, from the inside, when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone with yourself and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments.

—Oriah Mountain Dreamer

A Medicine Name

You can be given a Medicine Name outright during your vision, and sometimes a Medicine Name will come through your Quest guides or Medicine Helpers and will be fulfilled by the story of your Quest. If given a name during a vision or by your Medicine Helpers later, pay attention to whether it is a secret name that should not be shared with others.

“God is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere
and whose circumference is nowhere.”

—Hermes Trismegistus, from *Liber XXIV philosophorum*

Reunion

After the Quest, you enact reunion by sweating away the dust of the aloneness. The Quest begins with a severance sweat and ends with a sweat of reunion. Some Questers will symbolize their resolution to return and not linger in the liminal by washing their hands, feet, hair, or entire body in a stream before they return to the vigil fire. After the ending sweat, the power of reunion is enhanced by changing into new clothes made or bought especially for the ritual.

Communion

Some feel little hunger for the return celebration meal, whereas others are ravenous. It is good to eat at least a little to share with the others the fruits of the Earth, and beware of eating too much when your stomach is shrunk from not eating.

The Give-Away

The next event in the return is a symbolic enactment of your willingness to share your vision. Some bring back power songs, dances, or poems. You will also have a Give-away gift to share with others, for it is incomplete and non-serving to receive without channeling back something in return. You may not feel powerful or holy, you may just feel bushed, and it is the *willingness* to perform the Give-away that matters.

Entering the Everyday World

Civilization often feels artificial and alienating, and the world at large will not know what you have just done. Everyone is scurrying about, intent on their own paths. Upon returning, all the symbols of civilization come rushing back: advertising, freeways, bars, subdivisions, lights, and sounds. It is easy to get into overload and to overdo it—eat too much, buy too much, and so forth. Look instead for “candles shining in the darkness.” These are the little sources of light

found in unexpected places: a child's smile, a beautiful flower, or an amazing sunset. These things nurture us in times of need if we will only notice them.

Home

Entering your home is another landmark of reunion. Do your best to give yourself time to assimilate the experience. An effective ceremony is to keep a candle burning for 24 hours after your return. Sometime during that first 24 hours, return meditatively to your Sacred Quest space, your altar, or your circle of purpose. Envision your Quest circle around you. This is not an act of nostalgia, rather it is a symbolic exercise that will support you to walk with balance and purpose through stormy times. With disciplined effort, the circle can become a balancing tool.

Returning Early from Liminal Time

There is no success or failure in the self-measure of a Vision Quest. When the Quest is over, it's over; you must return. There may be many good reasons for returning early. Foremost among these is your own personal assessment of your health, mental condition, and spiritual well-being. Your facilitators are there to welcome you back and support you to define for yourself and others why you decided to return and what lessons you have learned by participating.

The Vision Quest as Metaphor

We have taken the space here to give a lengthy overview of one kind of actual Quest experience because we wanted you to see its metaphoric parallels to daily life. Life itself is a Vision Quest for those on a spiritual path, and we hope you will glean some support for your life's journey through this week's lesson. When you read the lesson for a second time, please reread it as a metaphor for your spiritual journey, and then complete Exercise 5.

We gratefully acknowledge the elders who contributed to this material.

Sweet Mystery that is at the Sacred Center, and all Divine Energies, thank you for holding us and cradling us in your protection as we bring wholeness to our hearts and to our world! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! It is good.



STUDY GUIDE: BUDDING OF THE TREES MOON

Week 4: Exercise 5 Vision Quest as Metaphor

What you will need: An altar arranged with a candle; a rattle; a bowl; some Earth; a large seashell; a small container of water; a sweeping feather or feather wand; a box of matches (not a lighter or matchbook); smudge herbs such as sage, cedar, rosemary, or lavender; your journal; and a pen

Do not do this exercise until you have re-read the lesson for Week 4 as a metaphor for your life. And whether you are planning a formal Vision Quest out in nature with Medicine helpers or a symbolic one in the imaginal realm, keep a record in your journal. By having a separate entry called "Vision Quest," you can more easily notice the interrelatedness of life with this aspect of your spiritual path.

Begin your Questing entries with the heading called the *Death Lodge*. Under this heading, explore what you desire to release and let go of. This process is supportive if you have an experience in mind. You can ask yourself this: What passage, crisis, or transition do I find myself in now? Am I standing at the doorway of fresh beginnings or conclusions? What life event do I desire to celebrate, mark, or leave behind? Truly ask yourself the above questions, and write them as the beginning entry in the Vision Quest section of your journal. (Suicidal individuals have even used the Questing aspect of their growth journal to find reasons for continuing this life.) After you have selected a real-life issue, journal to explore what you must "let die" for this situation to be true spiritual growth.

After you have explored what you must release, you can further explore the rest of the stages of Questing: the liminal space, transformation, and reunion. Ask yourself again what you want to formalize or celebrate and what are you seeking. Then ask yourself which of the four

Vision Quest stages you are in now in relationship to this situation and whether you want to move on to another stage.

Next, ask whether there is a ceremony that fits within one of the four stages that would support you if you wanted to acknowledge a certain stage or move on in your Quest. Do you want to mark a severance (separation, termination, parting, letting go, or conclusion)? Do you want to mark a liminal time (transition, change, transformation, renewal, adjustment, period of depression, or a shift in role, status, or task)? Do you want to enter transformation (to know and be able to apply the spiritual gifts of this issue)? Do you want to enter reunion (return, joining, union, reestablishment of harmony, new responsibilities, or new beginnings)?

Symbolic actions that would best express your desires will be clearer after you have clarified the nature of these questions. Examples of symbolic acts that can support you in creating a ceremony to acknowledge your process include tying or untying knots, smudging, sprinkling, bathing, creating a threshold and physically crossing over it, heaping up stones, changing your name, making vows, changing clothes, burning, chanting, using candles, nakedness, playing an instrument, cutting your hair, incense burning, crafting a prayer stick or spirit bag, laying a circle, making gifts for a Give-away, burying a symbol, hanging tobacco ties, smoking a Sacred Pipe, painting your face or body, and so on.

Begin now to design a ceremony to honor the place you are at in your spiritual journey or the place that you want to move to. When you become clearer as to what action would be best, you then ask what symbols or objects you desire to use as part of your ceremony. You might even ask what symbols you would want to have with you on the day of your death—these are the symbols that will lend power and meaning to the Vision Quest that is your life. As in life, your ceremony wants to have a beginning, a middle, and an ending. Michael Harner's *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing* is a valuable resource for shamanic ceremonies that can be adapted for your personal use.

The following is a sample invocation and releasing prayer that we offer for the beginning and ending of your ceremony. Use them as is or adapt them to suit your inclinations, and know that you have our blessings for your journey.

Invocation

Begin by lighting the candle in silence, and shake the rattle with your left hand and say the following prayer:

Great Mystery, Creative Force, Essence of All That Is! I invite the Seven Directions into the Medicine Wheel of my Sacred Circle!

Hold the bowl in your left hand, raise your right hand to the sky, then sweep your hand down and over the bowl and say the next prayer:

I look up and call out to the Beings of the sky—the sun, the moon, the stars, and the endless blue—and ask that you come down and bring you spaciousness and mystery to my Circle!

Grasp a handful of Earth and spread it in the bottom of the shell and say:

I put my hand on the ground and ask that the vastness of the Earth give grounding to my Sacred Circle and that the Earth's beauties give my Circle beauty!

Sprinkle water from the bowl onto the Earth in the shell and say:

I invite and invoke the Spirit Keepers of the West, direction of maturity, of evening, of autumn, of mellowing and ripening, of the waters of emotions, of deepening into Self and into relationships!

Hold up the feather wand and say:

I summon the Spirit Keepers of the North, direction of night, of winter and transformation, of the frigid wind that cuts through inessentials to reveal the core, of graceful acceptance of the ultimate mystery, death, and rebirth!

Shake the matchbox and say:

I invite and invoke the Spirit Keepers of the East, direction of new beginnings, of the dawn light, of fire and illumination, and of Spring and of childhood, the direction of freshness and new births!

Pick up the sage, place it into the bowl, and say:

I call to the Spirit Keepers of the South, direction of vitality, of high noon, and summer, and of growth, youth, and passion!

Strike the matches and light the sage, then hold up the bowl and say:

Spirits Keepers of all directions, guides and sages, animals, plants, elementals, and elements of the Universe! Hold and cradle this Circle of purpose that it may be for serving, for blessing, for sharing knowledge, for building wisdom, and for bringing wholeness to our hearts and to our world!

Smudge yourself and say:

*Thank you, keepers of the Seven Directions! Thank you guides, helpers, and all our relatives!
Thank you, Great Mystery!*

Releasing

Say these words while holding your sweeping feather or wand in your right hand, out in front of you, and pointing up:

Great mystery, Creative Force, Spirit that Moves Through All!

I thank the endless bowl of the sky and heavens and the vast body of Earth for containing this Circle of purpose, for giving it space and grounding!

I thank the Spirit Keepers of the East for bringing illumination and new beginnings!

I thank the Spirit Keepers of the South for bringing growth and vitality!

I thank the Spirit Keepers of the West for the maturity and ripeness they have brought to this Circle!

I thank the Spirit Keepers of the North for divesting us of the inessentials and reflecting the truth at our core!

Thank you, all human and non-human friends, guides, and relatives who have supported me!

I thank the Medicine Wheels of the past, the present, and the future for their support and guidance!

I am thankful for the opportunity to serve, and I release this Circle and send all elements to wherever they may go to bring truth, wholeness, and love to the Earth and to the People!

Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! It is Good.

(Extinguish the candle).

QUESTIONS FOR BUDDING OF THE TREES MOON: WEEK 4

If you are seeking certification of any kind, you must submit your answers to these questions, along with your journal, to the Institute via your private account.

1. Why do you think the word “multidimensional” was used to describe the Quest experience?
2. Describe what is meant by the term “severance” as it is used here, and why is it such an important part of the preparatory phase?
3. Describe your understanding of the liminal time.
4. What occurs during transformation, and why would a person welcome change?
5. Why is the reunion phase so important to spiritual growth?
6. What is the worst thing you could do upon returning from your Vision Quest?
7. How does the concept of edges relate to the Vision Quest experience?
8. What is the value of dreaming?
9. Why is incorporation so important, and what would happen if you skipped that part?
10. Why is setting an intention so critical in your preparation for a Vision Quest?

