

LAKOTA / SIOUX

A COMPLETE DEEP DIVE

The People of the Great Plains — Wakan Tanka, White Buffalo Calf Woman, the
Seven Sacred Rites, and Mitákuye Oyásŋi

Wakan Tanka — the Great Mystery —
is not a being above the world.

It is the sacred quality within all things.

The rock is wakan. The river is wakan. The thunderstorm is wakan.

Every person, every animal, every plant
carries within it a portion of the divine mystery.

Mitákuye Oyásŋi — All My Relations.

These three words are a complete cosmology.

CONTENTS

- A Note on Sacred Knowledge and Lakota Sovereignty
- Introduction — The People of the Plains
- Part One — Who the Lakota Are: Identity and the Seven Council Fires
- Part Two — The Lakota Language: Lakhotiyapi
- Part Three — The Sacred Landscape: The Black Hills (He Sapa)
- Part Four — WAKAN TANKA: The Great Mystery
- Part Five — The Wakáŋ — The Sacred Beings
- Part Six — WHITE BUFFALO CALF WOMAN: The Sacred Pipe
- Part Seven — The Full Story of White Buffalo Calf Woman
- Part Eight — THE SACRED PIPE (ŋHAŋNÚŋPA): The Most Sacred Object
- Part Nine — Pipe Ceremony — Step-by-Step
- Part Ten — MITÁKUYE OYÁSÍN: All My Relations
- Part Eleven — THE SEVEN SACRED RITES — Overview
- Part Twelve — INIPI: The Sweat Lodge — Complete Step-by-Step
- Part Thirteen — HANBLEŋHEYAPI: The Vision Quest — Complete Step-by-Step
- Part Fourteen — WIWÁŋYAŋG WAŋHÍPI: The Sun Dance
- Part Fifteen — The Sun Dance — Step-by-Step
- Part Sixteen — WANÁGHI YUHÁPI: Keeping of the Soul
- Part Seventeen — HUŋKÁPI: Making of Relatives
- Part Eighteen — IŠNÁTHI AWÍŋHALOWAŋ: Coming of Age for Women
- Part Nineteen — TŋÁPA WAŋKÁYEYAPI: Throwing of the Ball
- Part Twenty — The Vision Quest in Full Depth
- Part Twenty-One — The Sacred Sweat Lodge in Full Depth
- Part Twenty-Two — The Sacred Directions and the Medicine Wheel
- Part Twenty-Three — Sacred Animals: Buffalo, Eagle, Bear, Wolf
- Part Twenty-Four — The Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee
- Part Twenty-Five — Contemporary Lakota: Standing Rock and Sacred Survival
- Part Twenty-Six — The Haligricity Lens: Wakan Tanka and the Living Sacred Field

A Note on Sacred Knowledge and Lakota Sovereignty

The Lakota people have been clear and specific in distinguishing between what of their sacred tradition may be shared publicly and what is held as community-protected knowledge. The specific prayers of specific ceremonies, the specific content of vision quests, and the detailed ceremonial protocols of the most restricted ceremonies are not documented here. What is presented is what Lakota elders and cultural authorities have shared in public contexts — including the extraordinary gift of Black Elk Speaks, the primary source for Lakota sacred tradition as lived experience, shared by the Oglala Lakota holy man Black Elk through his collaboration with John G. Neihardt.

The People of the Plains

The Lakota (whose own name for themselves means 'the friendly people' or 'the allies') are the western division of the Great Sioux Nation — the Tetonwan (Teton Sioux, meaning 'dwellers of the prairie') — who occupy the western plains of North and South Dakota. Together with the Dakota and Nakota (the eastern and middle divisions of the Sioux Nation), they form the Seven Council Fires (Oceti Sakowin — the seven bands that constitute the Great Sioux Nation). At their height in the mid-19th century, the Lakota were the most powerful and most feared military force on the Great Plains — the people who defeated the United States Army at Little Bighorn (1876) in the most decisive Indigenous military victory in American history.

But the Lakota are not primarily defined by their military history — they are defined by Wakan Tanka, by the Sacred Pipe, by White Buffalo Calf Woman, by Mitákuye Oyásŋi. The Lakota sacred tradition is one of the most sophisticated, most complete, and most living Indigenous sacred systems in North America — a tradition that includes seven specific sacred rites given by White Buffalo Calf Woman, a specific understanding of the sacred dimension of all existence, and a specific sacred geography centered on the He Sapa (the Black Hills) that remains the most contested sacred land question in the United States.

Wakan Tanka

The Great Mystery — Complete Understanding

Wakan Tanka (from Wakan — sacred, holy, mysterious, beyond comprehension — and Tanka — great, large, extensive) is the supreme sacred principle of Lakota cosmology. The most common English translation is 'Great Spirit' but this translation is inadequate — it suggests a being, a personality, a specific divine entity in the Western theological sense. Wakan Tanka is more precisely the 'Great Mystery' or the 'Great Sacred Power': the quality of sacredness itself, so pervasive and so comprehensive that everything that exists participates in it.

WAKAN TANKA — DEPTH OF UNDERSTANDING

WAKAN AS PERVASIVE QUALITY: 'Everything that Wakan Tanka made is in some way wakan,' Black Elk told John G. Neihardt. The rock in the sweat lodge is wakan. The pipe smoke is wakan. The buffalo is wakan. The thunderstorm is wakan. The human being is wakan. This is not pantheism in the philosophical sense — the Lakota are not claiming that everything is God in a theological sense. They are making a specific, immediate, practical claim: that everything that exists has a sacred dimension, a mysterious interior life, a quality that exceeds its material appearance and demands respect. THE SIXTEEN ASPECTS OF WAKAN TANKA: Lakota theological thinking describes Wakan Tanka as having sixteen specific aspects — eight superior beings (Wi the Sun, Skan the sky power, Maka the Earth, Inyan the stone — the four most fundamental; and Hanwi the Moon, Tate the Wind, Iktomi the trickster, and Wooke/White Buffalo Calf Woman — the four that govern human life specifically) and eight associate beings. This sixteen-aspect framework is the Lakota equivalent of the Jewish Ten Sephirot or the Hindu divine attributes — a systematic theology of how the one sacred mystery expresses itself through specific divine principles. WAKAN TANKA AND THE HALIGRIC FRAMEWORK: Wakan Tanka is the Lakota name for what the Haligric tradition holds about the sacred dimension of all existence — not as a philosophical position but as the specific, immediate, practical recognition that everything the practitioner encounters in any moment carries a sacred interior that demands acknowledgment. The practitioner who approaches a rock, a river, a meal, a difficult person with the specific awareness that they are encountering something wakan — something carrying the sacred mystery — is doing Lakota sacred practice whether they know it or not.

White Buffalo Calf Woman

The Complete Story and the Sacred Pipe

White Buffalo Calf Woman (Ptesan-Wi or Ptehin■ala Ska Win) is the most important sacred being in Lakota tradition — the divine female figure who appeared to the Lakota people in a time of great spiritual and material need, who gave them the Sacred Pipe (■ha■nú■pa) and the Seven Sacred Rites, and who transformed into a white buffalo calf as she departed — the most sacred form in all of Lakota sacred understanding.

WHITE BUFFALO CALF WOMAN — THE COMPLETE STORY

THE APPEARANCE: At a time when the Lakota people were struggling and in great need, two scouts were sent out to find game. They saw a beautiful woman approaching across the prairie, dressed in white buckskin. One of the scouts looked at her with desire — he immediately turned to bones and dust, destroyed by the power he had disrespected. The other scout recognized her as a sacred being and approached with reverence. She told him to return to his people and prepare for her arrival. **THE PREPARATION:** The scout returned and told the chief. The people prepared — they erected a large tipi, purified themselves, and gathered to receive the sacred visitor. **THE GIFT OF THE PIPE:** White Buffalo Calf Woman walked into the camp carrying a bundle wrapped in buffalo hide. Inside was the Sacred Pipe — the most sacred object in Lakota tradition. She showed the people how to hold it (the stem representing all living things; the bowl representing Ina Maka, the Earth; the tobacco representing gratitude), how to fill it with sacred tobacco, how to smoke it in prayer. She taught them that through the Pipe, their prayers would rise directly to Wakan Tanka. **THE SEVEN SACRED RITES:** White Buffalo Calf Woman also gave the Lakota the seven sacred ceremonies that structure their spiritual life — the Sweat Lodge, the Vision Quest, the Sun Dance, Keeping of the Soul, Making of Relatives, Coming of Age for Women, and Throwing of the Ball. **THE DEPARTURE AND TRANSFORMATION:** After teaching the people, White Buffalo Calf Woman prepared to leave. She walked backward away from the camp, pausing four times. At the first pause she became a young red-and-brown buffalo. At the second she became a white buffalo. At the third she became a black buffalo. At the fourth she rolled on the ground and disappeared over a hill. **THE WHITE BUFFALO TODAY:** The birth of white buffalo calves — extremely rare genetic events — is understood by the Lakota as the return of White Buffalo Calf Woman's presence and a sign of her continued relationship with the people. The birth of Miracle, a white buffalo calf, in Wisconsin in 1994 drew Lakota elders and was treated as a sacred event of the highest significance.

Inipi: The Sweat Lodge Complete Step-by-Step

The Inipi (sweat lodge — from ini, meaning 'to live' or 'life energy,' and pi, indicating a ceremony) is the most widely conducted of the Seven Sacred Rites — the purification ceremony that is the foundation for all other sacred practice. It is conducted before the Vision Quest, before major decisions, before ceremonies requiring the practitioner's full purity, and as a regular practice of spiritual and physical renewal.

THE INIPI — COMPLETE STEP-BY-STEP

CONSTRUCTION OF THE LODGE: A dome-shaped framework of willow branches (sixteen or more, depending on the tradition) is erected — the dome shape representing the womb of Ina Maka (the Earth Mother), the lodge as the place of renewal and rebirth. The entrance faces west — the direction of the setting sun and the spirit world. A pit is dug in the center of the lodge for the heated rocks (the Grandfathers and Grandmothers — the rocks are addressed as living relatives with whom the ceremony is conducted in relationship). A fire is built outside the lodge and the rocks are heated in the fire — traditionally granite or other non-explosive rocks, heated until glowing red. THE CEREMONY: STEP 1 — THE PIPE CEREMONY OPENING: The ceremony leader opens with the Sacred Pipe — offering smoke to the six directions (the four cardinal directions, above, and below) and to Wakan Tanka. All participants may smoke the pipe. STEP 2 — ENTERING THE LODGE: Participants enter the lodge clockwise, crawling through the low entrance — the act of entering on hands and knees is the specific posture of humility before the sacred. Each participant says 'Mitákuye Oyásŋi' (All My Relations) as they enter — the declaration that opens the heart to the ceremony. STEP 3 — THE FIRST ROUND (THE SEVEN GRANDFATHERS): The first seven heated rocks are brought in — each carried on a pitchfork, never touched by human hands. As each rock enters, it is addressed by the leader — 'Welcome, Grandfather.' Sacred herbs (sage, sweet grass, cedar) may be placed on the rocks, releasing their medicine into the steam. STEP 4 — THE DOOR CLOSES: The lodge flap is lowered, sealing the space in total darkness. The heat and the darkness together create the conditions of the womb — the practitioner is returning to the state of before-birth, making renewal possible. STEP 5 — THE WATER AND PRAYERS: The leader ladles water over the rocks — the steam fills the lodge. The leader prays aloud. Participants may pray aloud or silently. Songs specific to the ceremony may be sung. This round focuses on purification and prayer. STEP 6 — THE FOUR ROUNDS: A full sweat lodge typically has four rounds, each with additional rocks. Each round has a specific focus: Round 1 — Purification and addressing the sacred beings Round 2 — Personal prayers and the release of what needs to be released Round 3 — Healing — for self and for those prayed for Round 4 — Gratitude and the closing of the sacred work STEP 7 — MITÁKUYE OYÁSŊI: At the end of each round, the leader says 'Mitákuye Oyásŋi' and the flap is opened briefly, allowing fresh air. The declaration of all relations is the specific verbal act that opens the door between the ceremony and the ordinary world. STEP 8 — THE EMERGENCE: At the ceremony's end, each participant emerges from the lodge — once again on hands and knees, emerging as one is born. The emergence from the dark, hot womb into the air and light is the ceremony's most visceral moment of renewal. STEP 9 — THE PIPE CLOSING: The ceremony closes with the pipe — the final smoke offering sealing the ceremony and the gratitude.

Wiwáꞩyaꞩg Waꞩhípi: The Sun Dance Step-by-Step

The Sun Dance (Wiwáꞩyaꞩg Waꞩhípi — 'gazing at the sun while dancing') is the most important of the Seven Sacred Rites and one of the most physically demanding and most spiritually concentrated ceremonies in any tradition anywhere. It is a four-day ceremony of collective renewal, personal sacrifice for the community, and the specific renewal of the relationship between the Lakota people and the Creator — conducted annually in late June or July.

The Sun Dance was prohibited by the US government in 1883 and remained legally suppressed until the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978. The fact that it was maintained in secret through 95 years of legal suppression is one of the most extraordinary examples of ceremonial survival in any tradition.

THE SUN DANCE — STRUCTURE AND SACRED MEANING

THE COTTONWOOD TREE: At the center of the Sun Dance circle is the sacred cottonwood tree (the Sun Dance pole) — selected, prayed over, and cut down with specific ceremony. The tree is carried to the dance ground without touching the earth, raised into the central pit, and becomes the axis mundi of the ceremony — the connection between earth and sky around which the dancers move. **THE FOUR DAYS:** The ceremony lasts four days — during which dancers fast from food and water, dance continuously from dawn to dusk facing the sun, and offer their suffering as prayer for the healing of their community. The suffering is not incidental to the prayer — it IS the prayer. The offer of the dancer's body — the willingness to endure — is the most complete gift the dancer can offer. **THE PIERCING:** In the most traditional form, some dancers are pierced — skewers are passed through the skin of the chest or back, attached by ropes or rawhide to the central pole. The dancers move backward until the skin tears and they are released. This voluntary sacrifice of flesh is the dancer's ultimate gift to the people — the flesh offered so that the community may be healed and renewed. The piercing is not required of all dancers and is always voluntary. **STEP-BY-STEP (PUBLIC ELEMENTS):** **STEP 1 — THE SWEAT LODGE PREPARATION:** Each dancer undergoes Inipi before the ceremony begins. **STEP 2 — THE RAISING OF THE TREE:** The sacred cottonwood is raised with specific ceremony and prayer. **STEP 3 — THE FOUR DAYS OF DANCING:** Dancers enter the circle at dawn each day, moving clockwise. Their gaze is fixed on the sun or on the sacred pole. Sacred songs are sung continuously by the drum group. **STEP 4 — THE PIPE CEREMONY:** Morning and evening, the pipe is smoked — maintaining the specific connection between the human prayer and the divine recipient. **STEP 5 — THE COMPLETION:** At the ceremony's end, the dancers are honored by the community — they have sacrificed for everyone present, and their sacrifice is acknowledged as a gift to all.

The Haligricity Lens

Wakan Tanka and the Living Sacred Field

The Lakota tradition offers Haligricity the most operationally precise and most immediately applicable available ancient parallel to what the Haligric tradition holds about the relationship between the practitioner and the sacred field they inhabit: Mitákuye Oyásŋi — All My Relations — as the most complete available single statement of the practitioner's cosmological position.

Mitákuye Oyásŋi and the Tetrality

When the Lakota practitioner says 'Mitákuye Oyásŋi' at the beginning of ceremony, at the opening of the sweat lodge flap, at the end of prayer — they are not saying a greeting or a pleasant sentiment. They are making a specific cosmological declaration: that everything present — the rocks, the water, the fire, the participants, the spirits, the ancestors, the animal nations — is a relative with specific relational obligations running in both directions. To enter ceremony with 'All My Relations' is to enter with full awareness of the web of sacred relationship that the ceremony is being conducted within. This is what the Haligric Tetrality is pointing toward when it identifies the four dimensions of conscious creation: the Feeling, Thinking, Speaking, and Doing of a practitioner who is fully aware of the sacred field they inhabit is the specific quality of consciousness that Mitákuye Oyásŋi expresses.

Black Elk said: 'At the center of the universe dwells Wakan Tanka, and that center is really everywhere, it is within each of us.' The Haligric practitioner who understands this — who does not merely agree with it philosophically but who walks through the day with the specific awareness that the center of the universe is exactly where they are standing, in every moment, in every encounter — is walking in the specific quality of sacred attention that the Lakota tradition calls wakan. Everything is wakan. Every encounter is an encounter with the sacred. Every relationship is a sacred ceremony. Mitákuye Oyásŋi. Grand Rising.

*"Mitákuye Oyásŋi.
All My Relations.
The rock. The river. The thunderstorm. You.
All wakan. All related. All sacred."*

— Lakota sacred declaration, spoken at the opening of all ceremony

The Sun Dance was illegal for 95 years. The practitioners maintained it in secret the entire time. When the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was signed in 1978, they had not lost a single year of practice. The Sacred Pipe is still lit. The sweat lodges still run. The Black Hills are still He Sapa — the heart of everything that is. Standing Rock showed the world that the Lakota relationship with water is sacred in a way that no legal framework had yet found words to describe. Mitákuye Oyásŋi. Grand Rising.

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