

PTSD & Purification

*“One of the most powerful ritual practices of purification is the Native American sweat lodge. Its Lakota name is **inipi**, which has various meanings. It is called the place of the spirits because, in the inipi, we leave secular space behind and drop the ordinary barriers that stand between us and the spirit world. In the inipi, we may have visions and be entered by spirits, or, if you prefer, awaken archetypal energies and images.*

The inipi is also called the purification lodge. Its heat is so intense that it cleanses and purifies us body and soul. In the inipi, a person cannot tell a lie. We are purified by standing before the Divine in truth. And yet another name for the inipi is the stone lodge, or the stone people's lodge. In Native American teachings, everything—rocks, air, water, and the earth itself as well as all plants and animals—is alive. When heated, the stones in the lodge awaken and give their lives for us so that we can purify.

The sweat lodge is both a place and a ceremony. Everything is done in a reverential manner, carefully designed to restore balance and order as the primary ingredients of health. When we follow the order of the ritual, the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual cleansing is quite intense. In contrast, veterans in our modern society stress the extreme degree to which they feel dirty, sinful, impure, and immoral, and they can carry this sense of being soiled for the rest of their lives. Our culture has no means to help veterans purify from their combat experiences before reentering civilian culture. They take the energies and emotions of war directly back into ordinary life with neither cleansing nor transition. This state of affairs is confusing and dangerous both to returning vets and to the community welcoming them home. Sometimes, as evidenced by the higher than normal homicide and suicide rates among vets, it proves to be deadly.

Lack of purification also helps explain why alcohol abuse is common among veterans. Alcohol temporarily anesthetizes the impure feelings and energies that veterans carry. But being a depressant and a potentially addictive substance, alcohol is not a purification agent and cannot provide the true physical, moral, and spiritual cleansing needed.

Especially orchestrated for veterans, the sweat lodge can be a powerful tool for purification in several respects: To begin with, the inipi is a safe place; entering it is symbolic of entering Mother Earth's womb. It is a place where we are held and embraced and can feel protected. And because of the inipi's status as a place of change, it can provide veterans with a much-needed symbolic transition from the

combat zone back to a world at peace. The inipi can serve as a tunnel of return, transporting vets from the interior war zone they still dwell in through the inner and spirit realms and then back into our common world cleansed.

The inipi is also a place that, literally as well as figuratively, melts away the defenses that the soldier by necessity had to develop during combat. In the intense heat, and with other participants as witnesses all around, the prayers are sincere. A person cannot help but be open, honest, and vulnerable. Psychic numbness eases so that true feelings can be reactivated. Since veterans' numbness is chronic and severe, such measures that counteract closure and defensiveness can be especially effective.

Further, the inipi is a communal experience. Everybody is a brother or sister in the lodge and each just as vulnerable as the other. We turn everything over to the Divine, in whose eyes we are all equal and whose plans for our lives we cannot see. No person or experience is judged or shunned. It is important for vets to feel like equal members of a circle of vulnerable and open people. In the inipi, anything they say is respected. They can feel accepted in ways they need and may not have experienced.

Finally, the inipi is sacred space. After we have dropped our defenses through ritual and sensed them melt away through steam and heat, we may connect with energies of nature or spirit we cannot ordinarily experience. We seek these connections in a sincere and reverential manner. Veterans feel that they have lost their souls, their grace, and their relationship with divinity. Telling them otherwise does no good. They need to experience a connection for themselves.

They need to feel their souls alive inside their bodies. Through the inipi, they may have visions or energetic infusions that can help reawaken their souls and bring them home. Through such a radical ritual, they can begin to feel an order and a purpose and compassion in the universe that includes them.”

From 'War and the Soul'