



Nature's Elements and Healing Ritual:

Ancient Energy Practices *Part 1*

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This two part series explores nature's elements of air, fire, water and earth, as foundations of healing rituals designed to invoke, release, cleanse, embody and integrate energy from cross cultural practices. The first article explores ancient energy practices while the second article, appearing in a future issue, applies these principles to modern energy practices.

My troubles were gently soothed as they lay me down in the cool water, on the soft sand under the dappled light by the river's edge. Each time the water rose and fell, as a breeze touched my skin, a strand of tightness in my muscles washed away, replaced instead by the deep smoothness of a calming balm. The water rocked me and I drifted off, peaceful for the first time since my troubles arrived, sung to sleep with the sound of the lapping water splashing on my skin.

This scene could have taken place long ago or in our own lives just yesterday. The universal quality of being soothed by nature's elements of air, fire, water and earth are as familiar to us as our own names. We are embedded in the natural world, eating the fruits of trees, bathing in cool water and using fire for warmth and light. How natural it must have been to harness the elements of nature to restore health. Over time, nature's elements have been used physically and symbolically through ritual in ceremony.

Ancient energy practices involve the pivotal role of water, air, fire and earth in healing systems. Traditional Chinese Medicine Five Rhythms associate elements with seasons, such as water with winter and beginnings or fire with summer and expansion. The Indian Ayurvedic system links earth with the root chakra (Muladhara) at the base of the spinal column and fire with the solar plexus (Manipura) near the stomach acids which burn up our food. Nature's elements are also found in the First Nations tribes' instruction about how to nourish mind, body and spirit. The heat of flame and steam of water over hot rocks are used in holy ceremony to remove toxins from mind, body and spirit through sweat lodges. When humans function as part of the natural world there is an alliance that forms, enhancing life for all beings.

Most cultures highlight the four elements previously mentioned as the foundation for their worldview, healing ways and connection to the planet. Other elements are seen as influential by some but not all cultures such as metal, wood, ether, light, star and stone. This article will explore how nature's elements have influenced healing rituals. First, earth's elements are described both physically and symbolically, reminding us of our deep ties to nature. Next, five stages of healing rituals are presented, aligning them with nature's elements. Examples of energy healing practices from the four corners of the world are offered as lessons in connecting back to the root of nature.



The Effects of Nature's Elements on Personal and Planetary Energy

Air, though invisible, is our most vital element. We live in an ocean of air, moving through it without noticing, though we can only live a few minutes without air. Air exerts a pressure of 14.7 pounds per square inch on the earth at sea level, which means a section of the body measuring three by three square inches has 132 pounds of pressure on it. Air is also a transporter, carrying life forms like pollen and seeds from place to place. Movement of air through the wind signals changes in weather and season. Our bodies thrive on

ashes. Like the heat of summer, fire can expand to uncomfortable limits and must be treated with caution and respect as it can increase anger and inflammation physically and emotionally. Fire goes beyond the ordinary in search of excitement and novelty and can manifest instantly, turning desires into reality.

Water, our most plentiful element on the surface of the planet and in our bodies, is mandatory for sustaining life. Water feeds the earth through oceans, rain and dew. As a medium of both gentleness and great strength, water smoothes away rough edges and over time can dissolve items many times its

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air, consuming approximately 2,500 gallons of air each day. However, we breathe more than just oxygen and hydrogen. We breathe the life force itself—chi, prana, ruach (Hebrew for wind, breath, spirit)—bringing the divine into the physical. Air in the body, passing through the lungs and vocal cords, creates sound and words and energy. Symbolically, air is the messenger, orator and scholar. Sandra Ingerman notes, “Tribal people believed the wind was the carrier of messages to life forms across the land.” (Ingerman, 2000) The breath of life is holy. It has a magical, etheric quality like in the saying “it came out of thin air.”

Fire and heat in the body and earth keep life new, fresh and in constant motion. Lava ejected from deep in the earth flows to the surface, creating new land. Fire from the sun feeds plants and animals and, in turn, those who consume them. Fire links the earth with human mood, as sunlight lights us physically and emotionally. Heat in the body affects temperature, metabolism and sexuality. Symbolically, fire is the great creator and annihilator. It mediates light and darkness, shape shifting between energy (heat) and form (flame). Fire purifies as it consumes its own fuel and can rebirth itself, like the phoenix rising from the

mass, such as dripping water eroding walls of rock. In our bodies, water brings nutrients to the cells and cleanses toxins. Symbolically, water is associated with emotion reflected in phrases like being as “cold as ice,” “frozen with fear” or “wishy-washy.” Water has been tied to the unconscious, dream material and immortality, such as the elusive fountain of youth.

Earth is our home. Called Gaia by the Greeks, she was the Mother Goddess of the planet. As Denise Lynn recounts, “The earliest cultures honored the Earth, which was worshipped as a living, conscious Being who oversaw life in all its phases...The ancient sensibility was one of living *with* the Earth instead of merely on it.” (Linn, 1995) For humans, the earth element is the physical body proper, housing our emotions, mental space and spirit in form, often without our awareness. Symbolically the earth represents strength, stability, wisdom and power, along with nurturing and healing. It is a compliment to be called “down to earth” or authentic. Earth mothers are seen as giving and comforting, loving with compassion and building bridges between people. However, when taken to an extreme, earth energy can turn into worry or giving to others at one’s own expense, becoming rigid and fixed. It is important to give and receive in balanced measure.



Healing Rituals and Nature's Elements Create Wholeness

What are healing rituals? *To heal* is to make sound or whole, to restore to health, original integrity or purity. When disruptions or troubles weigh us down, we seek to rebalance and reaffirm beauty in life. Rituals were created for this purpose, seeking to turn insanity into sanity. A *ritual* is defined as an established form for a ceremony, any formal and customarily repeated act or service of acts. Rituals can be personal or communal. According to Sobonfu Somé (2004) (keeper of ritual), in the Dagara West African culture, rituals are simple, inviting spirit and setting intention. She distinguishes between rituals which are flexible and not predictable and ceremony which has known and predictable patterns. A marriage ceremony has predictable patterns, but a forgiveness ritual may be unique to each person and setting, flowing with situational requirements and spiritual unfoldment. Ritual acts frame our need for greeting, eating, loving, blessing, atoning, forgiving, acknowledging, celebrating and welcoming back to the self after suffering a shock or initiation.

Although each culture and time has its own healing rituals, certain themes are found cross culturally. They are invocation, releasing, cleansing, embodying and integrating. Each can be paired with one or more of nature's elements to enhance energy healing practices.

Most healing rituals begin with an **invocation**, a call for help or to make a request. Ancestors are beckoned, offering gratitude and asking permission for the healing ritual. The breath is used to issue forth a petition in the form of words, chanting or sounds from the mouth. It is more than just speech for it manifests into reality that which was previously silent. The element of air proclaims a message to be heard and answered. Sobonfu Somé's invocation for study is one such example, spoken in her native language from Dagara and then translated into English.

She calls, "Onto the spirit of this land. The spirit of my ancestors...bring us your wisdom, your guidance, bring us your ways; the ancient ways that we

have sometimes forgotten. Bring it back into our consciousness, into our mind, our spirit and into our soul. Come and shake those bones in us so we can remember."

Once permission has been granted for a healing ritual, often what follows is a **releasing** process. "To release" is from the Latin word *relaxare*, to relax, bringing relief or deliverance from sorrow, suffering or trouble. It is the state of being freed. When asking for change, a clear space must be created, through a releasing ritual. **Fire** can be used, as it destroys the past and clears a path for the future. One can light candles, burn paper with writing or symbols for release, or use holy smoke or incense to restore spiritual and physical health. One method used by First Peoples of North America is smudging—applying smoke and fire that has spiritually purifying qualities. According to Mark St. Pierre and Tilda Long Soldier (1995), in the Lakota tradition (and others of the Plains First Nations) dried cedar, sweetgrass and sage are added to burning embers to create smoke. Healers pass smoke over their faces and bodies, along with ritual equipment, followed by smudging the ritual space and others in attendance to release debris and elevate the spiritual atmosphere.

After release comes **cleansing**. A single person or the entire community can be cleansed from contamination or disease, allowing them to proceed in a spiritually and physically pure state. The element of **water** is often used for this purpose—from ritual bathing, baptism, sprinkling or pouring of water over the hands, washing the feet or wading in flowing waters. In Russia, water cleansing involves throwing large amounts of water over the head from the crown of the head down, standing outside on the earth with bare feet, allowing the water to flow into the earth. This mimics the action of standing under a waterfall and allows the body and spirit to be cleansed from head to toe. Many holy places around the world are built near rivers, allowing supplicants to use the water for cleansing purposes. It is understood that flowing water takes away that which is no longer needed, whereas standing water is stagnant.



Once the preliminary acts are complete, the essential core of healing emerges with rituals designed to open the person or community to a new reality. This involves the full engagement of the body, mind and spirit, hence the term **embodiment**. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines embody as to give a body, incarnate; to deprive of spirituality; to make concrete and perceptible. Interesting to note that the contemporary definition of embodiment removes spirituality from the body. Ancient practices integrate all aspects of life, never separate. The **earth** element most closely resembles the embodiment stage of healing, offering nurturing and growth. Embodiment may take the form of ingesting liquids, herbs or potions to encourage healing, journeying through the spirit body to the upper or lower realms for messages and insights or dancing into a trance state so transformation can manifest.

In the Vedic tradition, static postures and physical movements or asanas are performed to release tension, improve flexibility and maximize flow of energy or prana. Asana—from the Sanskrit word meaning *manner of sitting* and derived from *āste* or *he sits* —strengthens the musculature, creates balance and promotes optimal flow of nerve energy to organs and glands through a supple spinal column, reducing that which disrupts the mind. Asanas lay the foundation for more advanced yoga practices of meditation and breath work. (Frawley, 1999) The idea is to start with the prana and let it create the asana, much like how a cat has the urge to move, and then stretches, rather than the other way around.

The circle of healing rituals closes with **integration** —uniting and blending or forming into a whole. In order for the learning to move forward, the person or community must be able to carry the lessons gleaned from **nature's elements** and the healing rituals in a way that makes sense and apply them in everyday practice.

We are the same today as the ancients were before us because we seek to grow and learn to be happy and healthy. There is a prophecy that our world will walk into an advanced age of understanding and peace when the peoples from the four directions of the East, West, North and South share their wisdom as one.

Reflecting upon age-old healing rituals and nature's elements point us to ways of knowing that are available and effective today. We can adopt these methods in our contemporary world, a topic which will be further explored in part two of this series, when we consider modern energy practices and nature's elements with healing rituals. €



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