

# *A Traditional Ritual for Spiritual Cleansing*

By [Kim Hagen](#), published Oct 23, 2006

Have you ever felt uneasy moving into a new home? Does there seem to be an air of lingering negative feelings or an unclean atmosphere in some area of your abode? Historically, Native Americans used locally found herbs to cleanse themselves and their living space. Change a bad start of the day or week to your favor and improve your attitude. With the proper respect and a sincere attitude, you too can enjoy the benefits and general self-improvement associated with a smudging ceremony.

Native Americans consider sage, cedar, sweetgrass and tobacco as the Four Sacred Herbs. Sage is found across North America, with white sage being the most potent and gray sage found in many northern areas where the gray will not over-winter. Cedar and sweetgrass also are indigenous to this continent. Tobacco can be found in many forms; however for this ceremony *Nicotiana Rustica*, or a similar dried tobacco leaf, native to America is preferred. Cigarette tobacco contains a lot of chemical additives that are not conducive to the ceremony's purpose.



It's important to set a proper stage and attitude for your ceremony. A recording of Native American flute music may help to focus your thoughts. Set a time where you won't be interrupted by people, telephones, or other distractions. The earliest part of the morning can be best to establish good feelings for the rest of the day. If you've had something troubling you throughout the day, perhaps a time late in the evening could help facilitate a relaxed night's sleep. Some individuals use an elaborately carved smudge bowl, but a simple abalone shell or even a flat rock with a small center indentation works as well. You may also select a feather to fan the smudge as the herbs are burned.

<< Sage Bundle burning for smudging  
Credit: Stephanie Young Merzel,  
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The first sacred herb, Sage (Sakodawabuk in the Algonquin language), is burned to take away any negative lingerings surrounding the home, person, or a specific area. The sage has a strong, spicy aroma and "white sage" is the most concentrated and often used by shaman or a medicine man. It can remove negative thoughts, feelings, or a bad spirit associated with a person or place. Sage is associated with the western direction, and is believed to purify. As you burn the sage, concentrate on its purpose and let go

of any negativity as it smolders. Ground sage will burn slowly, almost like a little natural coal for the rest of your ceremony.

Cedar (Kee-zhik) is next. The fresh, piney smell of cedar is familiar to all who live in the North Woods or at higher elevations. The cedar is often gathered by the women of the tribe and is also burned to purify an individual and the area. Cedar refreshes and cleanses your home, your thoughts, and your purpose. It represents the southern direction and the soul. The scent, whether fresh or burned, is refreshing and clean - similar to the purpose of the plant.

Sweetgrass (Weengush) is often described as "the hair of Mother Earth." The three parts of a sweetgrass braid represent the body, mind and spirit. North America is home to several varieties of sweetgrass, whose Latin name is "Hierochlōe odorata." It may be presented as a gift, woven into baskets, and used to trim quill baskets and mats of birch bark. Sweetgrass, whether burned or fresh, has a wonderful vanilla scent and is thought to bring a positive influence to the area, your thoughts and feelings, and people. It's said to bring "good spirits" and a happy atmosphere; indeed, sweetgrass's pleasing scent puts everyone in an upbeat mood. Sweetgrass is associated with the North. As you complete your ceremony, each person should fan the sweet grass smoke, first to the heart, to the mind, around the body and finally, again return the smoke to your heart.

Finally, Native American tobacco (Say-ma) is burned. The tobacco we use was grown by Native Americans in Canada, and is the type found in America when western Europeans first arrived. It has a stronger scent, but is uncontaminated by the chemicals and additives found in cigarettes. If smoked, it is harsher than regular tobacco. Tobacco is associated with the east, and the rising sun. Native Americans believe the scent of this tobacco is pleasing to the Creator, and so will help fulfill the purpose of your smudging ceremony. The tobacco also helps lift your prayers to the Creator.

It's also customary to lift your smudge bowl, shell, or rock (be sure to use a natural material) to each of the four directions in turn. Focus and concentrate on the meaning of each sacred herb. The order and the routine help to reinforce the venting out of the negative, purification/cleansing, and the bringing in of good thoughts and feelings. Over time and with repetition, you will find this ceremony can help dispel lingering doubts and negativity, and can give you a fresh perspective to begin (or end) your day. It is very peaceful and calming, and you may also find your friends are interested and appreciative of the ritual.

The herbs used in the ceremony may be purchased locally or through on-line sources.

Many people find the Native American spirituality to be positive and uplifting. Their closeness with their environment and belief system was established for thousands of years, before the coming of the modern age and associated problems. This simple smudging ceremony, using natural herbs, is available to all. It is important to approach smudging with respect for the beliefs and customs of Native American people. If available, a tribal elder in the area can be approached for guidance and further information on the smudging ritual.