

Perception and Shamanism

Perception operates at every level of your awareness and at the same time helps to create the very awareness within which it is operating. Most people who study a shamanic path fail to fully appreciate the role perception plays in moving them from point A to point B.

Shamans learn to handle perceptual awareness with a subtle grace, which is often ignored by the neophyte, or worse, mistaken for something entirely different. Those marked for, or who choose, to pursue the shamanic must come to grips with an ever-changing perceptual awareness and yet remain balanced in this world. Learning to handle perception is one of the major steps in learning the way of the dream walkers.

The first question we have to ask of course is, "What is this thing called perception?" Defining perception seems easy on the surface; we perceive the world through our physical senses and therefore "assemble" a reality within which we can function. This reality has certain basic rules upon which we have all agreed, up is up, down is down and humans are hairy anthropoidal bipeds with a fondness for chocolate and sex, not necessarily in that order. We have even made room in our perception of the world for the unusual and even the unexplainable: ghosts, demons, trans-dimensional communication, and the ever-popular duck billed platypus. Perception is rarely if ever viewed as a physical sense in itself and one that can be controlled and manipulated to expand our worldview and, in fact, make other realities available to us. Our ability to perceive is the true sixth sense and the one that unifies all the others.

Our perception locks us in a virtual prison for most of our lives. Depending, as most people do, on the five senses, taste, sight, sound, tactile, and smell, they assemble a world that is familiar and above all has rules everyone can depend on to work. This is not to say that reality itself is a mushy extrapolation of human intent. You can die here, obviously and you can die elsewhere, not quite so obviously. But by locking ourselves in a perceptual prison we largely ignore the elsewhere unless it intrudes itself upon our present perceptions of reality. Even then we make excuses and pass those things off as merely aberrant events produced by forces we can explain and keep within our perceptual framework. We are still left, however, with the question of exactly what is perception and how do we control it?

Perception operates at every level of your awareness and at the same time helps to create the very awareness within which it is operating. Reason drives your perception and awareness in this reality. Where does reason come from? Reason is a systematic series of actions and reactions created over a period of time, a framework, upon which you peg the daily reality of living. Anything that ?flies in the face of reason? is generally defined as insane or promptly ignored. Reason is the bullying guard at the gates of perception. How do we get around this guard without destroying him, because we do need him to function here. Do we bribe him, "Oh, let me perceive this and I'll watch ten episodes of Jeopardy", or do we try to lull him to sleep so we can sneak past him in the night. Some people think ingesting substances, which wreck our current physical perceptions, is the answer, but all this accomplishes is a frontal assault on our

guard of reason. So while you may gain glimpses of the possibilities he is standing there punching you in the face at the same time. Not a very productive method when you really stop and consider it. Your brain really is trying to kill you.

Another alternative exists which is as simple as occupying our guard of reason with other activities. In other words trapping your own attention. Think of it as giving your guard a toy to play with and while he is totally occupied with the new toy you catch a glimpse of the unknown. He gets bored easily, so at first you may only be able to look past him, but in that brief glimpse there lies an eternity of possibilities. Eventually, with practice, he will get more used to your doing this and begin to lose interest even in you getting by him, he will no longer, in his own perception, see it as a threat. You will pass by him into a new and undiscovered country.

Discussion of just how to trap your attention would have to be keyed to the individual since we all structure our perception differently. We can only speak in generalities here. Some people use drumming, some use other forms of music, some use physical activities. All of these are valid, but the make up of your particular perceptual biases makes it a highly individual endeavor. The only thing to keep in mind is that once your perception grows and changes you must still drag these new "visions" back past your guard of reason. This filtering back through the temporal window of reason creates our biggest problem. How do we know that what our brain is telling us is, in fact, what we have really witnessed?

The first shift in perception created by these methods is generally confusing, or may even be blocked out by reason entirely. As our worldview grows, however, the nature of what we are perceiving becomes, or seems to become, clearer to us. Now is the true danger point, reason will step back in and tell you that you have perceived this or that, it will seem amazingly clear to you, it will not, however, necessarily be correct. These visions can be intricate and logical and sometimes they are even correct. So how do you tell the difference? Easy, you keep looking closer and closer until finally everything has disappeared except the energy itself. Once you can perceptually grasp energy at this level you can work backwards to a point where your reason can put a face upon it that is recognizable to you in this world.

See how easy it all is, yeah, right...I know it was a fairly clumsy attempt at covering the basics of perception. But what do you expect from an old backwoods shaman - Shakespeare? :)