An Interview with Lakota Medicine Man

Pete V. Catches

ZINTKALA OYATE

Sacred Fireplace - The Life and Teachings of a Lakota Medicine Man By Pete S. Catches Sr. (Petaga Yuha Mani) and his son, Peter V Catches (Zintkala Oyate)

www.ocetiwakan.org
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John LeKay: Can you please tell me about your Lakota background and where you are from?

Pete V Catches: My grandfather was Ribsman, a survivor of the Wounded Knee Massacre. He was nine years old as his brother was throwing him into a dry creek bed to run, as he was being shot. He lived with my family until his death in 1968 and I was 13 years old. He was very important to my life. He never learned to speak English. He taught me my first songs. This is my grandfather from my mother’s side. My mother was Amelia. I am Oglala Lakota, one of the bands that is known by many as the Sioux.

We like to be called Lakota. It means the people of peace. My father was named Pete Catches Sr. and known as Petaga Yuha Mani (He Who Walks With Hot Coals). As far as we can count back he was a 37th generation medicine man. In Lakota society, to be a medicine man, it has to be in the blood line, the DNA so to speak. I am the 7th of 8 children.

My father knew before I was born that I was to be the medicine child. So when I was to be born, they prepared the sweat lodge so that he could give me his name and commit me to the Spotted Eagle way of medicine and my grandfather gave me my spiritual name, Zintkala Oyate, which means Bird People. The reason for this is that when a medicine child is born, any real medicine person can come and get that child to raise it in the medicine that they do. This happened. A bear medicine man came after me but my father was ready and told them that he had already committed me to the Spotted Eagle way.

My home is on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

JL: At what age did your medicine training begin and did you have to stay on the mountain for 4 days and nights to receive your vision?

Zintkala Oyate: I was born with it whereas with Dad, it didn't awaken in him till he was in his 40’s.

You are talking about hanbleceya, the best way to describe it in English is the
pipe fast which is a fast without food or water up to four days (how many days you commit to before you start) which is a 4 year commitment and it is one of the seven sacred rites given to the Lakota. It is a beautiful and powerful prayer. Mainstream society calls it a vision quest. One can have a vision but this is not the purpose as there are many reasons a person will go on a pipe fast.

I have my medicine by birthright. It was very different for my father. I have done certain things to be able to do the healing that I do but it is not something I would discuss in an interview.

**JL:** So can any Lakota do this pipe fast or do you have to be a medicine man?

**Zintkala Oyate:** Any human being who believes this way can do this rite if they get a medicine man or spiritual person to create the space for them. Remember Lakota means the people of peace, there is no color attached to it. Race is something that man made up.

**JL:** What does the eagle and the bear represent and why is the eagle feather used?

**Zintkala Oyate:** They are different clans.... the eagle clan, the bear clan, the elk clan, etc. Each way has its own teachings and understandings of the seven sacred rites and the ceremonies within these seven sacred rites.

The eagle feather is used to cleanse the mind and bring you to a higher state. The eagle symbolically is the closest to the heavens; the highest
realm of consciousness.

**JL:** Were Black Elk, Lame Deer and Fools Crow from the bear society or were they from the eagle society, and what is the difference?

**Zintkala Oyate:** Black Elk and Lame Deer were heyoka which means that you literally say and do things backwards in a humorous manner but whose spirit helpers are the powerful thunder beings.

Lame Deer was the last true heyoka. If you look at this world most things flow in a clockwise cycle but you also have that small element in life that goes in the opposite direction. There are things that Black Elk and Lame Deer did and said things in a way to divert the tensions at that time when the pipe way was under attack.

This is a way they used their medicine to help the people. At these times our religion was against the law with 10 years imprisonment and a $10,000 fine. Medicine men were being put in jail, pipe and sweat lodges were destroyed, and so on. This law was till 1979. This is one of the reasons that my dad wrote the book that he did. Now that we had more freedom, the Lakota was coming and learning about themselves from books and they started doing everything backwards.

For a ceremony to have the power it was intended to have to help you, it must be done the way that it was given to you. You can't take a little from here and a little from there and have the same results. Although all prayer is good.

Fools Crow was yuwipi. They use black in their ceremonies. In the Spotted Eagle way, we cannot use black in our ceremonies. We can only use life colors and can only do good with the use of our power. We cannot do something bad in the name of good. Our medicine would be destroyed. It is only to be used to help the people.

**JL:** What is the reason for the number 405 for Fools Crow's stone white men spirit helpers and also Lame Deer mentions 405 and stones that are used in the holy rattle?
Zintkala Oyate: A lot of yuwipi use 405 prayer ties. This is not my way so I can not answer your questions about this.

JL: Does that mean that Black Elk's descendents were also heyoka?

Zintkala Oyate: No, that does not mean that Black Elk's descendents would also be heyoka.

JL: Why was Lame Deer the real last heyoka?

Zintkala Oyate: According to my father, Lame Deer told my father that he tried to pass his medicine on but it was refused, so he died without doing this. If it is truly needed, it will become a reality again.

JL: Does that mean that there are no more thunder beings; or is it because a part of your religion has died, or is of no use any more?

Zintkala Oyate: No, nothing we do here has any affect on the thunder beings or the eagles or any of the spirits that help us. If there was a real heyoka they would show up at a real sundance and do what real heyokas do and I know what they do at a real sundance. They will always show up. It is part of who they are.

JL: Are you a pejuta wicasa or a wicasa wakan?

Zintkala Oyate: Pejuta wicasa uses herbs, what you would call an herbalist. I am an interpreter to the spirits. I work with the spirits. They gave me four roots that I also sometimes use but it is the spirits that is the source of the healing.

JL: Was Crazy Horse a Wicasa Wakan and is it true that the medicine he carried made him impervious to bullets?

Zintkala Oyate: Crazy Horse had a power to protect the people. I call him the deity of the brave.

JL: I have also been told by an Apache medicine man that charging
can be a very serious and dangerous thing to do; even resulting in death. He said he accepts gifts, 4 to be precise, for his services, but not large sums of money. Is this true with the Lakota medicine man?

Zintkala Oyate: This charging things is very interesting and not understood by most people today. Of course a medicine man does not charge. But that does not mean that you are not supposed to pay him for what he does. Everyone has a different circumstances so what one would give would be of a different value to the person who is giving, say someone who had a lot, in relationship to someone who has nothing. There needs to be some exchange of energy so to speak or if not it falls back on the medicine man and he becomes sick.

In the old days there was not money so a person gave something of great value to them for them to help them. Just to talk to a medicine man they would bring him a horse. Later on as blankets were of great value to them, they would give a medicine man some blankets, etc. for helping them. So people hear that you gave him a blanket, now everyone gives me blankets. How many blankets can I use. People aren’t using their heads or their heart.

Today’s form of barter is usually money. What is wrong with that?

In the old days the people made sure that the medicine man had his needs met so that he could do his job. We all have jobs and all jobs should be valued. There is no great mystery about it. It is not my place nor have I ever told someone what value their healing or life is; that is something that has to come from their own spiritual maturity.

That is respect. My father always says you get what you give. In the long run I think this is true in most things in life.

When you ask a medicine man to help you, there are two responsibilities expected from you. One is to realize in order for a medicine man to be able to do his job; people have some responsibility to help him. Prayer is a good way to find what is right here. The other responsibility is that within a year's time, that person has a responsibility to the spirits. The way they fulfill that is to do something for the people; to help the people. This is
how the "giveaway" came about. In the old days, when something happened like a son's life was saved, etc. they gave everything they had away to help the people. Their value was the value of family and love; not this material world. It is just that this material world we live in today has things all mixed up. Materialism is a spiritual disease and it affects everything these days. Anyway, the spirits expect this. What a person decides to do is up to them.

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By
JL: In the introduction of your fathers book, *The Sacred Fireplace*; you mention "this in-between world of worlds", this tangible reality of our known life's and the limits of our comprehension. Were you referring to reincarnation, of past and future existence, or some other realities?

Zintkala Oyate: We are beyond this material world that we live in. Within our heart is a place where we can go beyond in the truth of our spirit. This is the world I'm talking about.

JL: What did you mean about people who do not understand the Red Road of Life, because they crave intellectual knowledge?

Zintkala Oyate: The symbolism of the sacred tree, the tree of life, on there is a whirlwind of the blood that flows thru you from the beginning of time. And it's essence is the red road.

JL: How important is generosity in terms of ones physical and spiritual well-being?

Zintkala Oyate: Generosity is a stepping stone to the spirituality which we must eventually attain.
JL: In *Sacred Fireplace*, your father also talks about how the world for your people has changed; like the sense of value, honesty and truthfulness and how much of your ways have been lost. What do you believe are some of the reasons behind the change and loss and do you see signs of improvement?

Zintkala Oyate: This Act in 1889 outlawed everything that was Lakota. Although it had to go underground during all those years, the essence of Lakota has remained and it is getting stronger year by year.

JL: Do you also believe, like your father, that religion of whatever denomination was used by the government and churches to divide the Lakota people? If this is still the case, what is the solution to this problem?

Zintkala Oyate: In that particular area in time, it had to be that way. We saw that in our prophesy that this was coming. That's why we had that sacred rite, throwing of the sacred ball. And the change is in your spirit is how we want to be in the presence of the Great Mystery and that is imminent in all of us.

JL. Do you think it is impossible for the Lakota to live a traditional life, when they have to wear white men's clothes, eat white men's food and speak their language and live by their rules?

Zintkala Oyate: Transition is a way of life. Being Lakota is always being Lakota. Those are material aspects that you speak of. Because we know of and love the Great Mystery being that we are the people of peace nothing can ever change that.
JL: Does Wakan Tanka and the Lakota spirits recognize and understand English or other languages, or are they limited and only recognize and understand Lakota? In other words, if you pray to them in English, or Spanish for example, would it be a waste of time and energy?

Zintkala Oyate: All cultures from the beginning have a way to pray to the Great Mystery. The Great Mystery gave each culture a way to commune that love the Great Mystery has given that culture. The power that culture holds is how ones spirit approaches the Great Mystery. Being Lakota as I am, I can only recognize it in that way.

JL: What would you say is Hollywood's biggest misconception of a medicine man and what is the difference between a medicine man and a witch doctor?

Zintkala Oyate: That is a world that I don't belong in. If someone wishes to know this way, they will find it in their spiritual heart to find the real thing.

JL: Why doesn't a medicine man fight, raise his voice in anger, or own a rifle?

Zintkala Oyate: That is an untruth.

JL: You said earlier in the interview that anyone can go on a pipe quest. Does that mean anyone can also carry a pipe? Or do you have to be a certain kind of person to be able to do this?

Zintkala Oyate: That is very personal and it belongs to that individual.

JL: When your father said - what you put out is what you get in return - was he talking about cause and effect, reap what you sow, karma etc.?
Zintkala Oyate: Apparently that is the case.

JL: How important is faith for someone who asks for a healing and is it possible to be healed without faith?

Zintkala Oyate: For instance, my grandfather loved me so much that he would give his whole world away, as a child I laid there dying. Does a child have faith? That love of the grandfather will heal you.

JL: What about blood quantum; do you think a full blood is superior or as equal in Wakan Tanka’s eyes as, say a mixed blood?

Zintkala Oyate: There is no such thing as blood quantum. What you believe is what you are.

JL: How should a Lakota pray?

Zintkala Oyate: As anyone prays.

JL: Does the great spirit only dwell in sacred places like the Black Hills and why are the Black Hills sacred?

Zintkala Oyate: This whole world is the Mother of every sentient being and the Black Hills are sacred if you wish it so.

JL: Lakota means peace. Have your people mostly always been a peaceful people?

Zintkala Oyate: Yes

JL: Is it possible for the great spirit to dwell inside someone who is conceited, quarrelsome, angry, deceitful, unkind; or is that an indication of some other kind of spirit etc.?

Zintkala Oyate: There are levels and categories. That individual will have to go to a spiritual place to find that.

JL: Is it ok for the white person to participate in the Sundance?
Zintkala Oyate: It depends on circumstances.

JL: What are your thoughts on people that eat and drink during the Sundance?

Zintkala Oyate: Not very good.

JL: What is a real Sundance as opposed to a fake one?

Zintkala Oyate: I wouldn't know. I haven't gone to other people's Sundance's.

JL: How important is the leader of the Sundance and why should there be a leader to begin with?

Zintkala Oyate: Would you ask Jesus that question? Or Muhammad that questions? Or the President of the United States that question?

JL: No I would not, but I would ask them this; does a Shepard follow his sheep? In other words - who is this leader for? For people who can see, or for people that can't see?

Zintkala Oyate: For both, for people that see to become emissaries for those that can't see.

JL: Do you believe in reincarnation and what is the 7th Generation that Crazy Horse spoke of?

Zintkala Oyate: If you will go to my web site and get the Seven Sacred Rites from the Spotted Eagle Way you will find that answer.

http://www.ocetiwakan.org
JL: How important is the buffalo to your people today? Does it still hold the same significance as in the past?

Zintkala Oyate: Very much so.

JL: Is it true that the Lakota language doesn't have curse words and why can't a medicine man curse, or be critical of others?

Zintkala Oyate: To go into that endeavor pollutes the essence of the spirit.

JL: How does one cleanse a polluted spirit?

Zintkala Oyate: By the first sacred rite of the Inipi; the purification rite.

JL: Is it ok to buy a pipe?

Zintkala Oyate: No.

JL: What is your interpretation of a fake medicine man?

Zintkala Oyate: Let me say it this way. A medicine man has his own songs, he speaks his cultures' language.

JL: What does a medicine bundle usually consist of?

Zintkala Oyate: The reality of one's people.

JL: Where do you get your eagle feathers from?

Zintkala Oyate: They will come to you.

JL: Is Good Lance the medicine man that could bring the eagles round and have you ever done that or split the clouds etc.?

Zintkala Oyate: That question is for others to answer who have seen my work.

JL: What is agito?
**Zintkala Oyate:** Enlightenment.

**JL:** How would one attain this agito and if one did, would they speak of it?

**Zintkala Oyate:** You can be a doctorate in literature or any of the other areas of the profession and still not have agito. That agito comes with the wisdom of self. And no university can teach that. Some person may be living in poverty all of his life and may not speak in the English language or any language and yet through the experiential teachings of nature they have agito. No, they can't teach it.

**JL:** So, if agito cannot be taught, can someone point to the path or a direction to find this wisdom of self?

**Zintkala Oyate:** If someone is a true seeker, they will find it.

**JL:** How important is food as medicine?

**Zintkala Oyate:** John, you wouldn't even last one day without going to McDonalds.

**JL:** (Laughs) What does le yatkan yo a nicisni ktalo mean and how is this applied?

**Zintkala Oyate:** 'Drink this and you will get well.' It is the thought behind it, the resurrection from someone's illness.

**JL:** Do you think the throwing of the sacred ball ceremony will be used in the near future?

**Zintkala Oyate:** Personally yes I do.
JL: Is the Lakota society still matriarchal?

Zintkala Oyate: In some cases.

JL: Do you think alcohol is the greatest evil of this time, or is it the love of money?

Zintkala Oyate: In the greater society money is true. In our life here, on this reservation, alcohol is.

JL: Did your people ever have syphilis or any of the sexually transmitted diseases before the arrival of European colonialism, and can these diseases be cured with traditional medicine?

Zintkala Oyate: To your first question no. To your second question yes.

JL: Can you please tell me about Oceti Wakan?

Zintkala Oyate: Visit our web site and I hope it will tell you all about Oceti Wakan.
It is http://www.ocetiwakan.org

I remain in Wakan Tanka, Zintkala Oyate
A NON PROFIT DEDICATED TO THE HEALING OF NATIVE PEOPLES AND THE PRESERVATION OF LAKOTA CULTURE AND LANGUAGE.

Lakota Spotted Eagle Medicine men, Pete Catches Sr. (Petaga Yuha Mani) and Peter V. Catches (Zintkala Oyate) had a vision of Oceti Wakan. It was in response to events that have devastated the Dakota Nation (Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota), the great Sioux Nation. Their vision was to establish a Healing Center to confront cultural genocide, disease, poverty, alcohol, drugs, and other problems and including cultural and language education. Culture is maintained, evolves and flourishes from one generation to the next by preserving the language. This vision included all peoples.

The Healing Center is the heart of our project. It will have a large ceremonial house with small cabins surrounding it and it will be next to the Sundance grounds, a very special place. We have 19 acres in the foothills of the Black Hills on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The Ceremonial House, with its fireplace in the center, will be a place to get what one needs to heal. That fireplace represents the sacred fire within each of us. Our winters can be severe; we need a place where ceremonies and educational gatherings can take place. We have the land, the architectural drawings; we just need the funds to build it.

Our objective is to continue to develop materials to help revive language and culture, continue educational workshops and develop materials and programs for the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse in young people and develop character education curriculum based on cultural values for the schools.

Our purpose is to preserve the Lakota culture for the generations to come.

CONTACT US: Oceti@gwtc.net