

Meet James' Sweat Lodge

Spiritual Warrior · September 2007

At the time I gave it 0 out of 10.

—Connie Joy

I joined the group for breakfast in the dining hall. All I could find that I would eat was a piece of bread. The peanut butter was already gone. I really didn't care about the food anymore; what I really needed was water and sleep. Neither was going to happen since it was time to return to class. Once there, we were released from silence. We celebrated our return to the living and shared our vision quest experience with our small groups. After that, we were warned not to eat much of anything for lunch (again, no problem there) because that afternoon, we were going to have our final activity—a sweat lodge. Yeah! I had not been warm much since arriving in Sedona except for when I wrapped up in my sleeping bag to save myself from the mosquitoes. I love saunas and steam rooms. I sit in a 170-degree sauna for 20 minutes almost every day at my exercise club. I hoped the heat in the sweat lodge would help my back relax.

Our instructions from James were simple: drink water between now and then; avoid food; wear a bathing suit and/or old pair of shorts that we will not mind getting very dirty; and bring the tobacco pouches we made during the vision quest, along with our stone we infused with what we wanted to be rid of in our lives. When we entered the lodge, two rows would surround the inner pit; an outside row and, when that filled with people, an inside row. Super-heated rocks would be placed inside the pit. We were instructed that it would be dark and crowded, so don't try to get up during a round and watch out not to fall into the pit with the hot rocks. We were also told that we could only move clockwise inside the lodge, both when entering and leaving. James said it would be very hot in the lodge and we may be tempted to leave, but we were more than just our physical bodies. Resist the urge to leave. We were in there to detoxify through sweating. We might not think we could make it to the end, but we had to face our fears and overcome them.

I do not remember any discussion from James or his staff about leaving before the sweat lodge was over, and I am certain there was no discussion about returning for those who left early. I do remember being told by James that when the ceremony was over we were to exit moving only clockwise around the lodge. We were to keep writing in our notebooks until it was time for the sweat and then bring them with us.

When we arrived at the lodge, a raging fire burned next to it. A Native American Indian (so we were told) watched another man tend the fire. We made a circle around the fire and placed our stones into the flames so it could be purified of what we had put inside them and returned to Mother Earth. Next, we took our notebooks, and our writings we had worked on all week, and added them to the fire, releasing their contents from our lives.

We formed a line behind James. As the Native American drummed and chanted, we headed into the lodge.

We circled around clockwise. James stopped at the right side of the door, then told us to sit as close as possible to each other and to the tent wall, but not to put any weight on the tent itself. After the outside row filled up, the inside row formed with people packed tightly next to each other, their backs just in front of our knees, which we pulled up against us. No one could move. I knew I was going to have serious issues with my back. I kept shifting my legs around while trying not to bump anyone in front of me; it was pure agony. I started to hope this was going to be over quickly.

Several people who were there told me later, from start to finish, our group spent a total of three hours in the sweat lodge.

After everyone was in and seated, James called for the first batch of super-heated stones, which we called grandfathers. When asked by the men outside of the tent how many he wanted, I believe he asked for eight to ten stones. One at a time, they used a pitchfork to pass a stone to Joan, seated on the left side of the door. She took the stone in her pitchfork and placed it in the pit. Each time, we said, "Hail Grandfather," to acknowledge the stone had joined us. This continued until all of the requested stones glowed in the pit. Then Joan took a five-gallon white painter's bucket filled with water and poured it all onto the stones. As soon as she backed up to her spot and sat down the people outside dropped a cover over the doorway.

Round One began.

The lodge was pitch black. Scalding hot steam moved along my body and scorched my mouth and throat as I inhaled. This was far hotter than any sauna or steam room I'd ever entered. This was nuts! James led us in a chant. Frankly I was not interested in chanting since I wanted to minimize the amount of steam I inhaled. Later, other participants told me, according to their watches, each round lasted around 20 minutes.

About halfway through the first round, I started to grow dizzy. In the darkness, I had nothing I could focus on which worsened my dizziness. The week of limited sleep, little food, and insufficient water had caught up to me. The good news was it took my mind completely off my back.

When the first round was finally over and they opened the tent flap, I tried to focus on anything to stop the dizziness, but it was not working. I grew more nauseous by the second. Concerned I would get sick on the people packed tightly around me, I covered my mouth and got up and worked my way through the bodies to the door. Richard said something to me about it only being round one. It didn't matter: I was out of there!

Once outside, a Dream Team member, Liz Neuman, sprayed water on me with a hose and directed me to the water. As I drank, I started to feel better immediately. The nauseous feeling still came and went but I was not so dizzy. Liz suggested I try to throw up so I would feel better. I walked by a large woodpile and waited to see if I could vomit. I leaned over and waited. After a few minutes, I threw up a little bit of water. I did not have much in my stomach; other than the one piece of bread from that morning. I had not eaten in three days. I forced myself to drink more water.

The second round was well under way when Liz came over to check on me. She said something that surprised me—when I felt better, I could go back in. The thought of going back in never crossed my mind. Why would I want to? I told her something was wrong; it was way too hot in there. I explained I spend a lot of time, just about every day, in a very hot sauna, but that this was far hotter—and not safe. I told her she needed to let James know it was too hot. She

replied James wanted it this hot to really challenge people, and that it was still safe. She reminded me that he conducted sweat lodges every year and no one got hurt.

Maybe it was just me. In my tired state, maybe I was more susceptible to the heat than usual. Maybe I was just getting sick.

After a couple of more rounds, the tent flap opened. A group of people rushed out. What I saw alarmed me. They were disoriented, throwing up, and after they were sprayed with water, a couple of people were shaking on the ground. It wasn't just me; it was way too hot in there! After a minute or two, more people staggered out in the same or worse condition....