

## **Da'i**

### **The Honorable Returning of Bodily Wastes**

When I was a young Seeker I had the honor of being guided by Keewaydinoquay, an Elder and Mashkikikwe (Medicine Woman) of the Ojibwe people. She initiated me into the ways and rituals that are collectively called *Da'i* (pronounced *Daa*-glottal stop-*ee*) which means *honorably returning the gifts of life and nourishment received from Earth Mother*. Fundamental to *Da'i* is a personal outdoor area away from things familiar and shared. An individual develops a sacred and intimate relationship with his *Da'i* area as he communes with the energies and winged, furred, scaled, and leafed relations who live there. Visiting one's *Da'i* area is a cherished time of day, as it provides a break in routine, nurtures growth in awareness and attunement, and gives time for quiet and contemplation. Above all, the time can engender a growing connection with the rite of giving and receiving.

Keewaydinoquay explained to me that what we call "bodily wastes" (scat, urine, fingernails, hair, menstrual blood) were viewed by the traditional Ojibwe as sacred offerings to The Mother. Similar to returning nourishment to gardens by placing food scraps in compost piles, the old-time Ojibwe take their fingernail clippings, hair, and other bodily "wastes" to their *Da'i* sites. They are giving the most personal of gifts as a sacramental Thanksgiving for the food, shelter, clothing--and the very life--The Mother so generously and bounteously provides them.

Next to the returning of our bodies to the Eternal Flow, the *Da'i* ritual may be our most intimate connection with the Hoop of Life. We, along with everything from the material to the ethereal, from the minute to the mighty, undergo a constant process of transformation from one form to another. Death is life: even as something comes into being, it is dying; and even while it lives, it is being reborn into something else.

Every time we eat, we change, as the makeup and character of the food becomes a part of our makeup and character. Every time we practice *Da'i*, we shed a bit of who we are, which goes on to become a part of whatever it nourishes. Through our gifting, we literally become our *Da'i* area; and through the plants and animals who gift us, the area becomes us. Here a woman's Moon-blood (menstrual flow) rejoins the Mother; here a child of hers who has Passed Over (died) might be lain to be returned to his First Mother. Thus the child's body gives life to the nuts and berries, which in turn give life to his living siblings.

#### **What have we lost?**

For modern people, *Da'i* is a forgotten ritual. And yet we each yearn for a special place to go and spend some time alone, away from the affairs of everyday life. We may call it our retreat, refuge, sit spot, or meditation place; and yet however we see it, our relationship with it is passive. We have so separated ourselves from the natural realm that all we can take with us to our special place is our hunger, our yearning, for oneness. We go expecting to receive, rather than yearning to give. As passive receptors waiting to be filled, we reenact the roles we have learned so well in front of parents, teachers, and video screens.

How did this happen? When our ancestors lost the desire to perform bodily functions outside and began to tolerate doing it in their abodes. Our shit spot became

merely a sit spot. Rather than natural--and necessary--daily communion, we had to make time. Rather than bringing gifts, we brought our numbness. The toilet was the point of no return. Whether it be a conventional toilet, outhouse, composting toilet, or pit latrine, when we began to favor routine and convenience over a Da'i walk, we unclasped our hand from that of the Mother's. From Christian perspective, we closed the Gates of Eden.

Because Native peoples have an intimate understanding of, and relationship with life's circular ways, some Natives consider the use of toilets, sinks, and garbage cans to be sacrilegious—showing unfeeling disregard for The Mother's welfare. Rather than their way of respectfully receiving and giving back, they see using a toilet as soiling the sacred water--their Mother's blood. They cringe at the thought of garbage being buried in the ground--their Mother's bosom.

When we dispose of something we have been gifted by flushing or burying it below the topsoil, we break the Circle of Life and distance ourselves from it. The ritual communion that keeps us in balance with our relations does not occur, and the nourishment intended for our relations does not reach them. Seeds that would normally pass through us to start a new generation of plants go unscattered, unplanted.

On top of that, our bathrooms make us sick. The 'cleansing' flush sends up a microscopic spray of bacteria that fills the room, contaminating toothbrushes, combs, washcloths, towels, soap, tissues, sink and tub, faucets and knobs, and whatever else is exposed. The toilet's gift: out of sight, out of mind, is merely a myth. (If you feel you must use a bathroom, have everyone using it close the toilet lid before flushing and keep personal care items in drawers or otherwise covered.)

Da'i is among the long list of life-enriching rituals we no longer practice. Some practices, because of disuse, have been lost to time while others retain only a semblance of what they once were. Many have been squelched by conflicting values or by the numbness of progress, and many have been expropriated--taken out of context and revamped to suit our current needs and desires. For example, yoga--a sacred and complete way of life--has become for us a form of exercise; and the way of the shaman--a profound and lifelong calling for which one is anointed at birth--has been reformatted for signup at weekend workshops.

### **How can we get it back?**

Renewing the Da'i ritual may be the most significant thing we can do to return to balance. Along with restoring richness and meaning to our lives, the people-nature barrier will dissolve, and sit/retreat spots will come to life--our life. We are biologically programmed to have this special time and place on the Bosom, so all we have to do is open the door and the Da'i way will come flooding into our lives like sunlight into a dark room.

The most persistent criticism I hear of the practice of Da'i is that it is not convenient. In the same way a nearby garbage can discourages recycling, some find it easy to just go and "sit on the pot." On the other hand, the inconvenience of not having a ready toilet can encourage people to hold it in--a very unhealthy situation. To cause ourselves bodily harm rather than bother going outside is a sign of how disconnected we are. On top of that, most of us already have sludged-up guts because of our processed starch and dairy-based diets, and because we are just too busy to heed "the call of nature."

How paradoxical that we still refer to it as the call of nature when we answer the call by running in the opposite direction.

For the sake of perspective, let's step back and look at our constipation of gut and heart from the vantage point of the Hoop of Life. Because everything is in relationship with everything else, whatever we do or do not do affects something. Convenience, then, is just an illusion, because every convenience must exact its toll. If we are not willing to pay the price, someone else must. Such is the Way of the Circle.

"But convenience is progress," some will reply. Yet where is the progress when we pollute and spread disease every time we use the toilet? If we did not have the convenience of pushbutton heat and fast food, would we freeze and starve? No doubt we would quickly adjust and find other ways to provide these necessities. The same would likely be true if we no longer had a crapper. Our actions are governed largely by habit, and we could establish good and reliable habits in short order if we so chose.

We need motivation in order to change. Following are a few of the many blessings that await us:

- **Health.** The smell, texture, and color of our scat and urine can tell us much about our diet, digestive efficiency, and overall well-being. Regular scat analysis is a vital component of Chinese medicine, which is growing in popularity in the West.
- **Awareness and Attunement.** Regular Da'i walks give the opportunity to develop relationships with our plant and animal relations, and to be in touch with seasonal and weather changes. Peeing outside does the same, even if we don't go as far as our Da'i area.
- **Skills.** Native walking, plant and animal identification, weather forecasting, orienteering, tracking, and wild food foraging are some of the skills you'll be able to learn and practice when spending time outdoors on a daily basis.

### **How to do it in the Woods**

Taking a dump is the most common and least understood way of using a Da'i area. Along with safety considerations and lack of knowhow, those of us who are unaccustomed to being in the natural realm may have trouble adapting to Da'i. As much as The Mother would like to welcome us back home, she--like all mothers--hates to see her children suffer, so when we are not ready for the change she is quick to send us back from whence we came. Here are three steps to aid your transition:

1. **Take it slow.** To begin with, go out on your Da'i area only when it feels comfortable and appealing. Forcing yourself to do something you are not yet attuned to could turn you off to the experience. It is better to be a closet crapper for a while longer than to imperil your awakening.
2. **Think sacred.** On the way to your Da'i area, remind yourself that you are participating in the Gifting Way. Let yourself feel the sun and rain, the cold and warmth. Realize you are the bush whose leaves brush your face and the rabbit crossing in front of you.
3. **Learn how.** Contrary to popular belief, doing things naturally is not inherently uncomfortable. Like us, our ancestors and all Native people have sought comfort. The following guidelines should help.

Every modern child goes through a period of toilet training, which in essence is learning how to resist the natural urge to spontaneously relieve yourself. Additionally, the child must learn not to do it outside--another natural urge--and instead come in for the toilet. Think of the following guidelines as reverse toilet training: unlearning your toddler

schooling and creating space for your natural inclinations to resurface. Here are some suggestions to get you off to a good start:

- **Give yourself enough time** to get to your Da'i area. Start walking as soon as you feel the first signals of an impending bowel movement.
- **Tuck in under** brush or close to trees, and away from where anyone might walk, so your scat will not be stepped on.
- **Take a fern frond or leafy branch** to brush mosquitoes/fly off your bare skin.
- **Squat**, which is the natural evacuating posture, as it facilitates a speedy dump with minimum pressure on sensitive hemorrhoidal tissue.
- **Keep it shallow**. Because of the concentration of digestive microorganisms in the uppermost soil layer (topsoil), bury scat only deep enough to be solidly covered. Two to four inches is usually adequate, depending upon environment and soil.
- **Cover and compress quickly** so that flies can't get at it and spread anything communicable they might pick up from it.
- **Use a board**, piece of bark, or a bucket of sawdust/ash to take a dump on/in if you are sick or the night is too dark to get to your Da'i area. Bury asap.
- **Clarify doubts and questions** with a seasoned Da'i practitioner.

**Wiping materials** are plentiful. To open to the range of possibilities, look not for toilet paper substitutes, but keep in mind that toilet paper came along as a substitute for natural wipes. Sphagnum moss, leaves, grass, sticks, pinecones, smooth stones, and many other items, work well. Whatever you use, keep in mind that moist is best for getting you clean.

Above all, don't use your hands, even if there is adequate washing water. Parasite eggs can be sticky and hard to wash off, and it's difficult to clean under fingernails and sanitize hands in a natural environment.

Those who follow a native diet, which has five times more fiber than the standard American diet, find their scat to be soft yet not goopy, and therefore easy to wipe clean. Women: remember to wipe from front to back to avoid E. coli urinary tract infections.

**Snow** presents unique challenges for those who do not wish to draw attention to their Da'i areas. Make a good track the first time in to your area, because you'll be using it a lot. Walk out on your incoming steps so that it looks like your trail is leaving the area rather than entering. People are less tempted to backtrack a trail than to find out where it is going. The less your straddle, the harder your trail will be for someone to step in. Disguise your dump site and loop through your area, so that your trail doesn't lead right to your scat. This is a unique opportunity for stealth, camouflage and invisibility training.

Snowballs make great butt wipes because they clean well--they're the best of anything I've used. This is important because winter bathing is difficult and you must keep clean. When it is too cold to make snowballs, use crusted snow, ice, or pre-made snowballs.

Even in deep snow, burying scat is possible. Find either unfrozen ground under the insulative snow, or loose ground litter in snow-free areas under brush and conifers.

**Urine** is rich in mineral salts, which when concentrated can kill plants or cause animals to dig up the ground and gnaw the bark off of trees, which may kill them. Pee in a different place each time to spread the nourishment around in concentrations plants can handle. In snow, punch a hole to pee in, then cover to camouflage.