

# [A Year of Living Shamanically](#)

## **Part 1: The Medicine Wheel**

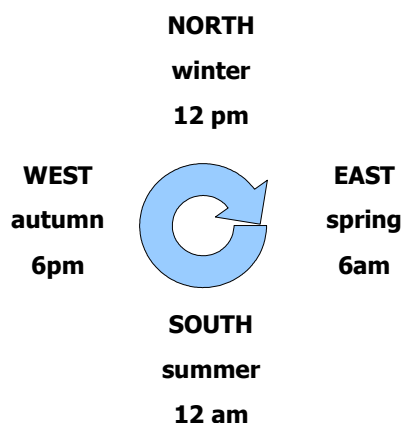
Most shamanic cultures have some version of the 'medicine wheel'. The wheel is a model that maps out how processes flow in cycles. It shows us the order of things, and how things fit together into a whole. It can be used in many ways. For instance, it can help us to live more in harmony with natural cycles and processes – not just times of day or the seasons of the year, but the stages of human life, and the stages we go through in learning something or moving through a process. It can help us to pay more attention to what is around us, and so to feel more connected to life and nature. It can be used when we feel stuck with something, by helping show us where we are in the cycle and what we need to do next to move on. It can help show us what resources we can draw on when we need help and support. It is both a human psychological map, and a map of external, natural processes.

The basic structure of the medicine wheel comes from divisions of four. The starting point being the four directions of north, south, east and west. From this structure, the rest of the map unfolds. Amongst all the myriad cultures that use the wheel, what else is associated with each of the directions is sometimes common to all cultures, but sometimes varies from culture to culture. So there are many different versions of the wheel. This is as it should be, for the wheel is a map, and as such needs to be appropriate for the culture and environment it is used in. For example, in the northern hemisphere (from which I am writing this) we would tend to associate the south with warmth and so with summer. The other seasons would then automatically fall into place (winter=north, spring=east, and autumn=west). In the southern hemisphere though, the situation would be reversed, with the south being associated with winter, and so the north with summer. Along the equator of course, there would be no clear cut association with the directions and the seasons, and so we would expect to see a lot of variation between different cultures who live in this region, which in fact is exactly what we find. Similarly, in terms of times of the day, most cultures would associate summer with mid-day and winter with mid-night, but which animals are attributed to which season would vary from culture to culture.

What I wish to show you is the wheel I use. Feel free to change it or adapt it according to where you live, or what feels right or makes sense to you. One of the things I love about shamanism is that there are no sacred texts or dogmas! It is all about what works for you.

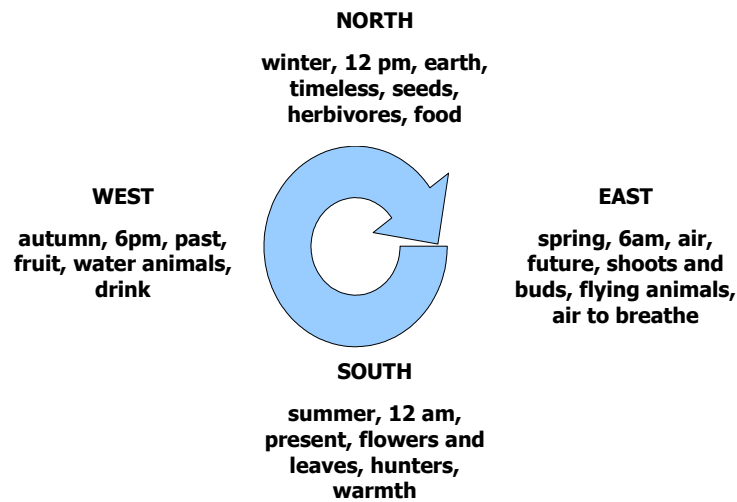
### **The wheel**

Lets start with the four directions and the four seasons (for a northern-hemisphere wheel), and times of day...



This gives us our basic structure. We can now start to add other things in...

- For the elements, earth would be in the north, fire the south, so air would be in the east, and water the west.
- Fiery people tend to live in the present, watery people in the past, airy people plan and worry about the future, and earthy people live in a kind of timeless state where things don't change.
- In terms of the stages of a plant, generally, seeds are winter, shoots and buds spring, flowers summer, and fruit autumn.
- For animals, airy animals in air (so, in the east), hunters are fire (south), water animals in the west, and the herbivores in earth in the north.
- In terms of what we need to live, we already have air in the east, warmth (fire) in the south, drink (water) in the west, and then food is the north.



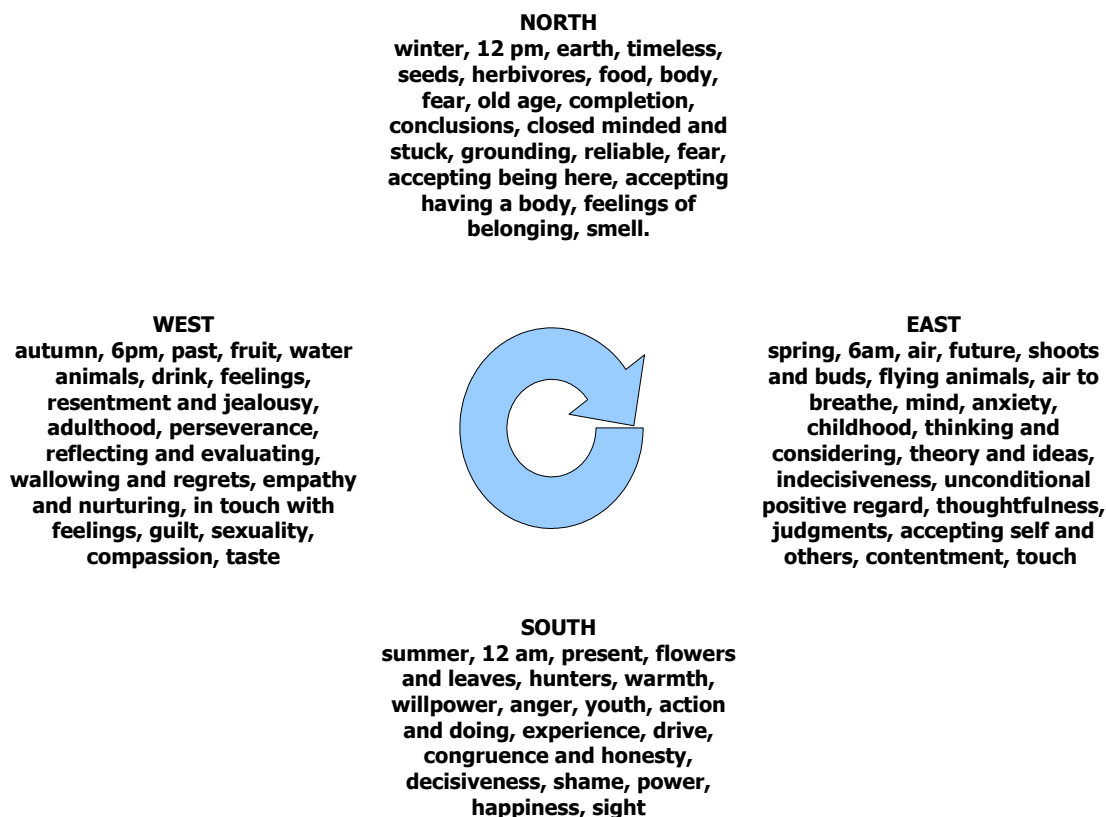
We can now add in more specifically human things...

- The mind is airy (east), the will is fire (south), feelings are water (west) and the body as a whole is earth (north).
- The elements also give us the position for the difficult feelings: anxiety = air, anger = fire, resentments/jealousy = water, fear = earth. For the positive feelings: balanced air brings contentment, fire happiness, water compassion, and earth a sense of belonging.
- Childhood = spring, youth = fire, adulthood = water, old age = earth.
- In terms of actions, considering things is air, fire is action, water is perseverance, and completion is earth.
- In terms of the stages of learning: theory and ideas is air, action and experimenting is fire, reflection and evaluation is water, and the conclusion is earth.
- In terms of where we get stuck: indecision and being unable to decide is air, fire can either lose momentum (burn out) or never move always rush on to the next thing and so never persevere and finish things (water then earth), water can wallow and get bogged down, and earth can get stuck in old ways and not be open to new ideas (air).
- In terms of the core conditions for a healthy relationship with others: 'unconditional positive regard' (valuing) is about our beliefs and judgments, so, air. Fire is congruence and honesty, water is empathy, and grounding and safety is earth.
- In terms of positive qualities: air is thoughtful, fire decisive and motivated, water in touch with feelings and emotions, and earth is realistic and grounded.
- In terms of wounds: air is judgments, shame damages fire, guilt damages water, and fear damages earth.
- The elements also show us different psychological challenges: accepting self and others from air;

accepting how to wisely use power, from fire; accepting our emotions and sexuality from water; and accepting being here and being in a body, from earth.

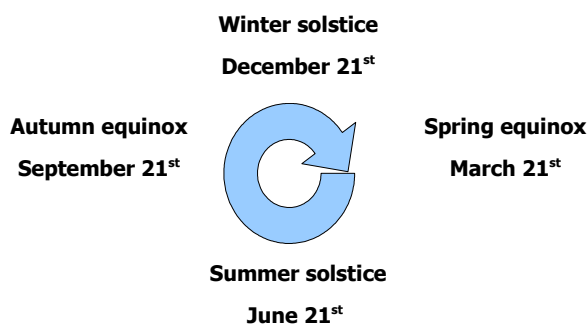
- Lastly the elements relate to the senses: air is touch, fire is sight, water is taste, earth is smell. Hearing is ether, the fifth element that permeates the whole of the wheel.

This now gives us...




[This information is also arranged in another form in the appendix at the end of this article, to help make things visually clearer.]

In the articles that follow, we will explore the practical use of the wheel, how to use it in our daily life, and specifically how to spend a year using the wheel to 'live shamanically'. Before doing that, there is one last thing we need to add in – the sabbats. Midwinter is marked by the winter solstice, the shortest day (and longest night) of the year. This falls on December 21<sup>st</sup>. This gives us...



These are important stages in the year, and are marked as festivals known as the sabbats. Importantly, there are four other sabbats, which mark the midway points between the equinoxes and solstices. These are at the north-east, south-east, south-west and north-west points of the wheel. They form four cornerstones...

<b>Samhain (Halloween)</b> <b>November 1st</b>	<b>Winter solstice</b> <b>December 21<sup>st</sup></b>	<b>Imbolc</b> <b>February 1<sup>st</sup></b>
<b>Autumn equinox</b> <b>September 21<sup>st</sup></b>		<b>Spring equinox</b> <b>March 21<sup>st</sup></b>
<b>Lammas (Harvest)</b> <b>August 1st</b>	<b>Summer solstice</b> <b>June 21<sup>st</sup></b>	<b>Beltane (May day)</b> <b>May 1st</b>

Indeed in the pagan tradition, these four cornerstone sabbats are called the greater sabbats, and are hugely important. What they represent are transitions, where one way of being (one season, one element, one stage in life etc) gives way to another. They are hugely important psychologically as, since they are points of transition, they show us we need to be let go of, and what needs to happen next.

In the next article I am going to explore Imbolc, the time for planning new beginnings, and thinking about what it is you want to 'plant' in your life in spring, and be 'harvesting' later in the year. The following articles will take us through each of the remaining stages of the cycle. We can then use this process to spend a year 'living shamanically'.

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# Appendix

