Three key elements shape the particular shamanic traditions/practices of a people: their land, their myths & stories, and their religious beliefs. In spite of cultural distinctions, all shamanic traditions, no matter where or when they exist, share certain basic characteristics, a common repertoire of spiritual principles and healing principles. This common backbone is called Core Shamanism, a term introduced in the 1960s by famed anthropologist and shaman, Michael Harner.

The principles of Core Shamanism can be practiced successfully on their own, opening shamanic healing techniques to those whose culture does not otherwise incorporate them. Core Shamanism also provides a basic foundation on which a modern shaman can build her own individual practices out of whichever older traditions "resonate" with her. This is especially meaningful and rewarding to those of us who have lost touch with our own indigenous culture: we can re-discover, or re-invent, our own individual "indigenosity". On a larger scale, Core Shamanism has contributed to a world-wide revival of shamanic practices, and the growing recognition of shamanism as an ancient, universal and legitimate form of healing.

**Principles of Core Shamanism**

1. A call to Heal: shamans (men & women) are called to be healers rather than choosing this path
2. Shamans move in two worlds: ordinary & non-ordinary reality
3. A shared conception of Non-ordinary Reality (NOR): the spirit world or "Otherworld"
4. Accessing Non-Ordinary Reality through an altered state of consciousness
5. Sacred objects: shamanic practice harnesses the sacred/healing energies of physical objects
6. A responsibility to the community: to heal and to celebrate the sacredness of life.

**A Call to Heal**
Shamans (men & women) are called to be healers rather than choosing this path; the call often takes the form of a severe illness or trauma which shakes the shaman-to-be’s perception of the everyday world, and opens his mind to a different, visionary perception. For this reason, shamanism is sometimes called the "Path of the wounded healer", for it is through his own suffering that the shaman is brought to the work and learns to excel at it.

**Ordinary vs. Non-Ordinary Reality**
Shamans share a basic conception of ordinary & non-ordinary reality, and they moving in and between these two worlds. "Ordinary Reality" is the everyday world which we all recognize as a common experience. "Non-ordinary Reality" (NOR) is a realm of spirits, accessed by the shaman in a particular way for the purposes of gaining wisdom, knowledge and healing power. Different cultures may articulate their views on the two realities in different ways, but the underlying idea is the same.

**What is Non-Ordinary Reality (NOR)?**
Shamans think of Non-ordinary reality (NOR) -- also called the spirit world or the Otherworld -- as having three main layers, with different sorts of spirits inhabiting each and different types of knowledge/power available there. The Lower World lies below the surface of the everyday world and is entered via caves, tree roots, springs, the sea, and so on; the spirits which inhabit this realm usually appear in animal form. The Upper World lies beyond the sky,
and is reached by rainbows, sunbeams and other upward "flights"; the spirits of this realm are those of our ancestors, historical persons and figures from myth and legend. The Middle World is the spiritual dimension of the Natural, everyday world around us. The doorway to this world might be a mist, a twist in the road, or a passage between unusual rocks --- anywhere the barrier between the physical and spiritual worlds is perceived as "thin".

**Accessing the Spirit World**
Each part of the Otherworld is entered through an altered state of consciousness which is achieved by drumming, rattling or other methods which induce particular relaxed-but-alert brainwave patterns. This altered state of consciousness is referred to by many names: journey, soul-flight, following "dreaming tracks", and similar terms. Different shamanic traditions may emphasize journeys to one world over another, and individual shamans may have a preference or affinity for one over another.

**Sacred Objects**
Shamans learn how to harness the sacred/healing energies of physical objects in their practice. Drums, rattles, stones, bones, feathers, plants, and many other objects aid the shaman in her access of non-ordinary reality and her understanding of it. The choice of objects are often a product of geography and local culture, but may also reflect the personal experiences of the shaman.

**Responsibility to Community**
Above all, shamans bear sacred healing and ceremonial responsibilities for the community. They remove harmful energies causing illness and despair; retrieve lost/stolen souls (or fragments thereof) to restore health and personal power to the ill and dying; interpret dreams and other messages from the spirit world; conduct ceremonies to mark rites of passage and other significant milestones in human life; assist at births and deaths, thereby aiding the arrival and departure of souls to/from this world. A shaman also reminds his community about the sacredness of human life, and how spirit and spirit-power (anima) are found in all things in the Universe, interconnecting them. The shaman respects this interconnection by doing his part to maintain balance and bring harmony to the realms of spirit, so that all things can thrive.

**Who Practices Core Shamanism?**
Not everyone who practices shamanism is considered a shaman. A true shaman undergoes many intense initiations and many years of training to learn how to serve her community. It is only by witnessing the successful, practical results of her work that the community recognizes and honors her as a shaman.

However, shamanism can still be employed by people who are not necessarily called to community service. Shamanic practice offers the individual ways to bring healing to himself, deepen his spiritual awareness, and add sacredness and ceremony to daily life.

The principles of Core shamanism have been developed primarily in the USA & Europe thanks to the work of anthropologist Michael Harner, founder of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies.