

The 7 Lessons of the Medicine Wheel



ACCENT
ENVIRONMENTS

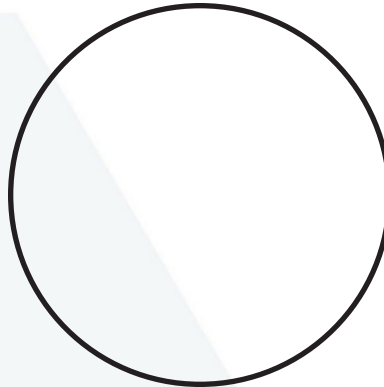
The Seven Lessons of the Medicine Wheel

There are seven common teachings associated with the medicine wheel in many First People's cultures. These teachings vary by tribal customs and by the elders relating their own heritage and stories in the slight variations of their own lineage and traditions. However, there are a lot of common themes that can be taught and discussed in lessons that are very relevant to modern life and can be proudly taught as evidence of the high level knowledge in things cosmic, related to seasonal changes, time keeping, use and respect for animals, plants and the elements.

There is no right or wrong way to use the medicine wheel as teaching tool. It is both a universal symbol and a personal mnemonic tool for various cultures and individual stories. Inviting elders to relate their associated learnings about the medicine wheel is an important way of preserving and passing on culturally important knowledge. The knowledge vested in elders should be honored and respected.

Colour	Yellow	Red	Black	White
1. Direction	East	South	West	North
2. Season	Spring	Summer	Fall	Winter
3. Elements	Fire	Earth	Water	Wind
4. Animals	Eagle	Buffalo	Wolf	Bear
5. Plants	Tobacco	Sage	Sweetgrass	Cedar
6. Heavenly Body	Sun	Earth	Moon	Stars
7. Life Stage	Birth/Childhood	Youth/ Adolescence	Adult/Parent	Death/Elders & Grandparents

The Medicine Wheel - Lessons & Discussions



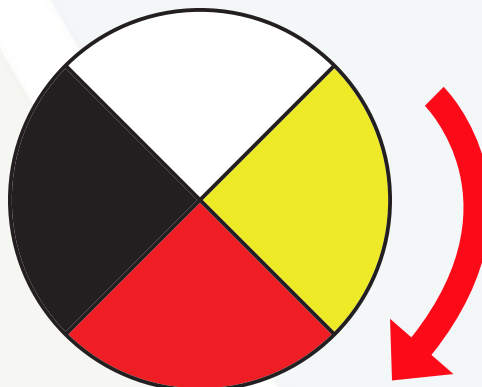
Using the Medicine Wheel in Teachings - The Circle

The circle or wheel shape is a common symbol in many cultures and represents several elements to the First Nations. The circle acknowledges the connectedness of everything in life, the four seasons, the four life stages, the four winds etc. and represents the continuous cycle and relationships of the seen and unseen, the physical and spiritual, the cycles of life from birth to death, and the daily sunrise and sunset.

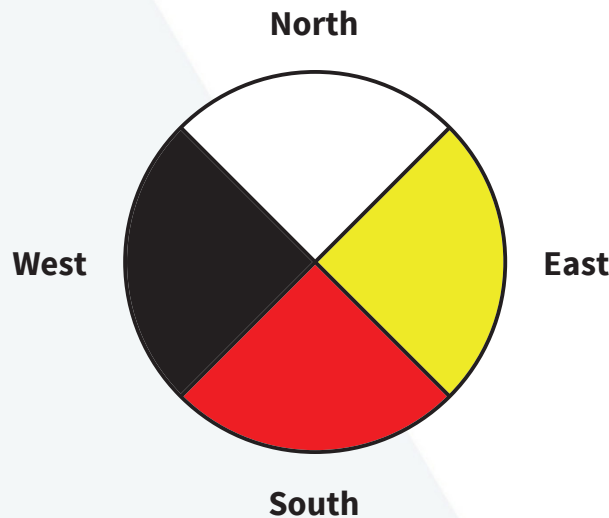
Question: Many shapes in the world are round can you name some?

Answer: The moon, the sun, the sacred hoop, the connections of all things.

The circle is divided into four coloured quadrants. The colours can vary but the symbolism remains similar amongst the first peoples. The direction of the wheel is clockwise and the teachings are always begun at the yellow or east quadrant.



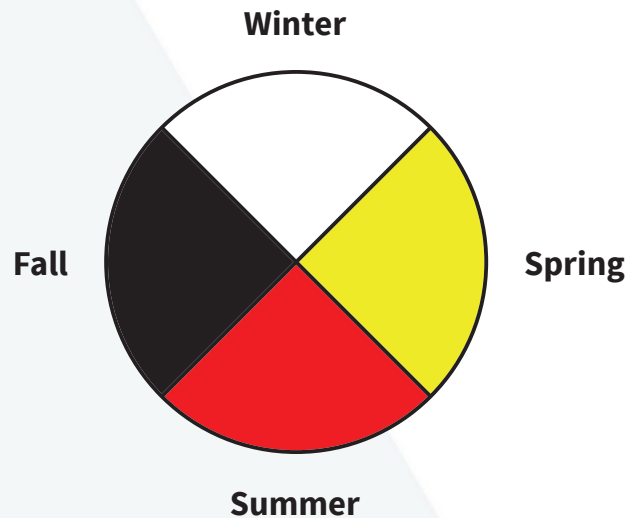
Lesson #1: The Cardinal Directions



The four quadrants of colour on the medicine wheel can represent the four directions. The teachings of the four directions are discussed starting with the East or yellow quadrant and run clockwise around the circle. Red is symbolic of South and Black is West in direction. White is the colour of the North. These colours also relate to the other teachings of seasons, elements, animals, plants, heavenly bodies and a person's life stage.

How to teach the four directions: To show students an easy way to remember the directions a game can be played. The teacher stands facing due North and holds out their arms pointing first with their right and telling the students that this is always due east; then the teacher lowers the right arm and points with the left and shows that this is always due west when facing Northward. Then the teacher can indicate and show that south is directly opposite north. The Medicine Wheel shows this in the colours where Yellow for East, Red for South, West is black and North is the White quadrant. Students can practice this with someone calling the directions randomly and everyone moving or pointing to the direction as quickly as possible.

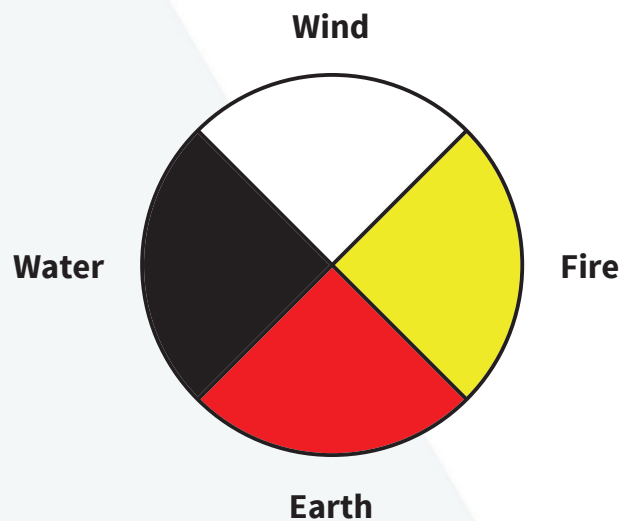
Lesson #2: The Four Seasons



Yellow is symbolic of spring, and we start the seasons with spring when life is renewed and the time of planting and births. Red is summer and a time of abundance when ripe red berries are picked and fresh food and fish is preserved. The fall is represented by the black quadrant where harvest takes place and plants mature. In the west or black zone there is a setting of the sun to the darkness of evening. White symbolizes the winter season when there is completion of the life cycle.

Students can name the seasons and talk about why yellow would represent spring. Can they name some of the first yellow coloured flowers that appear in early spring? What colour are most of the berries when they are ripened? Why would the white colour represent winter etc.?

Lesson #3: The Elements

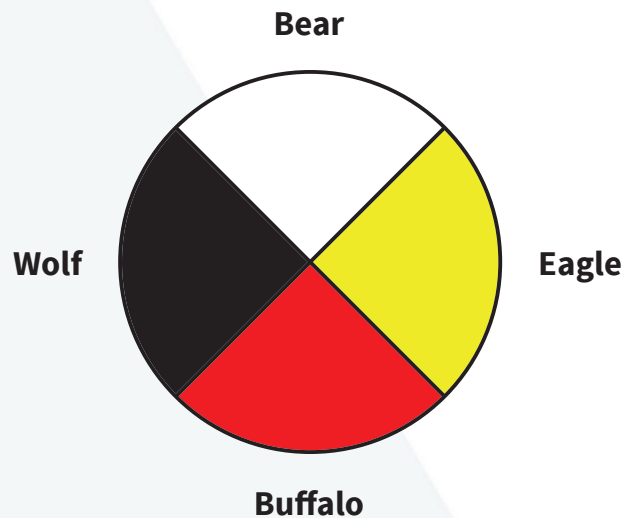


In the teaching of the elements the yellow quadrant represents fire. The earth is a red area and water is the black. The wind is shown as white or without color. From fire we receive warmth and light. From the earth or the red symbol we receive the food we eat and the medicine we need to live it is our life blood.

The element water is shown as black and is essential to our bodies and flows to all the plants and animals on the earth. Wind as represented by the white quadrant is the air we need to breathe; it is oxygen and the life-giving force we cannot see.

An elder or teacher can discuss how necessary the four elements are to our existence as humans and the role we play in the world.

Lesson #4: Animals



There are no firm rules about the animals associated with the medicine wheel or what quadrant of the wheel they must be shown in by the teacher as this is a matter of choice and tradition. However, there are some common spirit animals that are frequently associated with the wheel and these are discussed here.

The eagle is most often shown in the yellow section and represents the eagle's vision, power and ability to see the bigger picture of the world from above. The eagle is the bird that flies closest to the creator and is the messenger between the people and their creator.

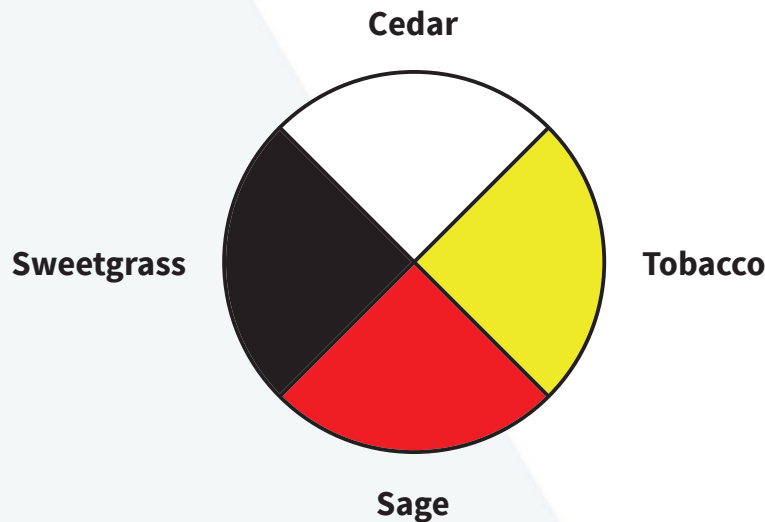
The buffalo is represented in the red or south quadrant most frequently but is also often seen as part of the white or north where the sacred white buffalo calf is shown. The buffalo spirit animal is a provider, a strong spirit with great endurance and emotional courage.

Red can also symbolize the mouse or rabbit. Symbols of these spirit animals are associated with abundance and busy working.

The wolf or coyote is shown in the black or west. The coyote is a spirit animal that is playful, adaptable and may be characterized as a jokester. The wolf spirit animal is intelligent, has strong instincts and demonstrates freedom as an essential way of living. The wolf can also provide symbols of distrust and fear of being threatened.

The white or north quadrant is frequently associated with the bear who is a brother to the people. The bear is strong and confident and is a powerful image of healing both the physical and emotional aspects of the people. The white or north is also often associated with the white buffalo calf which is a sacred animal to the people.

Lesson #5: Plants



The medicinal plants associated with the medicine wheel are all those that can be used to smudge. The plant associated with the yellow or eastern section of the medicine wheel is tobacco. Tobacco is a sacred plant used to honor the creator. It was the first medicinal plant given to the people. It is often offered as a gift to other medicinal plants and to honor the spirits or to begin a personal conversation with the creator.

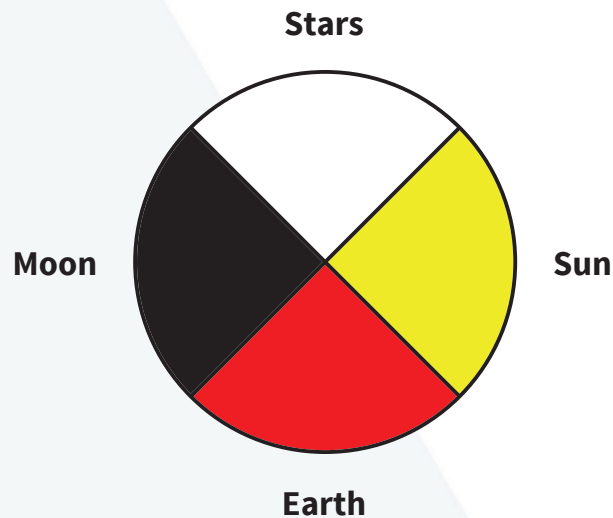
The plant of the south is sage. Sage is used often in ceremonies as a smudge to remove negative energies and to cleanse the mind ready for the ceremonies and teachings.

Sweetgrass is the black area or the west and is a calming smudge and is used for purification prior to important ceremonies.

Cedar is represented by the north or white part of the medicine wheel and it is a plant that can be for purification of an area such as a home or sweat lodge. It is often considered a guardian to the people to keep away evil.

These teachings require an elder with special knowledge of the customs of the nation to discuss and teach to the youth of their community their heritage.

Lesson #6: Heavenly Body



The alignment of the medicine wheel on the ground is placed in relation to the heavenly bodies and how they move through our lives. The sun rises in the east and the rising yellow sun is represented as the beginning on the medicine wheel. The rising sun signals a new day and this area is also seen as morning in some of the teachings. This area represents new beginnings and a renewal of the rhythms of life.

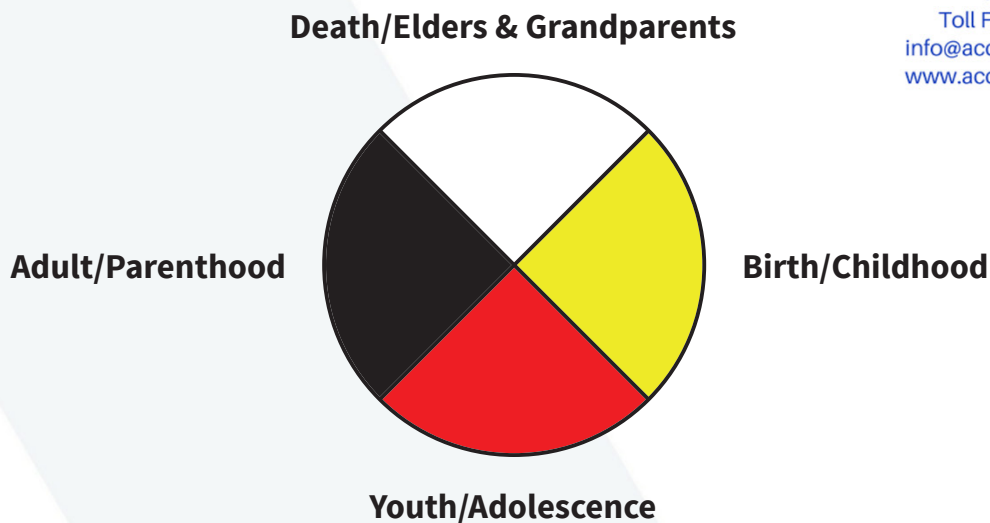
The earth is represented by the south or directly below the stars or heavens. The earth is the sacred home of the people and giver of the essentials of life. It is a living system in which people are integrally bound and a part of from birth through death and spirit.

The moon is represented by the west or the blackness of night. The moon helps to guide times of planting and a way of recording time and events.

The stars mirror what is below and are representative of those that have gone before, of ways of understanding traveling at night using the constellations.

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Lesson #7: Life Stage



The yellow eastern area represents the beginning of life, birth and early childhood. It is a time of innocence and purity. The east is where the people come from and the east also represents their physical bodies as birth brings life into the world.

The southern area represents youth and adolescence with this being a time of growth and the beginnings of knowledge. It is a time of learning and represents the mental aspects of self.

The west is the time of the adult and the time of parenthood when responsibilities and nurturing are the main occupations. The west is representative of the emotional self and meeting the fulfilment of life as we find our meaning and place in life.

Elders, grandparents and death are represented in the northern white area of the medicine wheel. The white also symbolizes the white hair of the elder and the years of learning. This is the place of wisdom and of teaching the younger people and imparting the knowledge gained from a lifetime of living in the physical world. It is a time of reflection, rest and increased understanding of the aspects of the spiritual world.

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About the Author: Kelly Beaulieu

Kelly Beaulieu is an Ojibwa women from the Sandy Bay First Nation which is situated on the shores of Lake Manitoba. Kelly was raised on a farm and has a passion for agriculture, agribusiness and food processing technology innovation. Kelly is also a writer, public speaker and journalist. Kelly is a passionate entrepreneur who was recently honored by the University of Manitoba with a Certificate of Merit for her contributions to agriculture in Canada.

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