THE WAY OF THE SHAMAN with MICHAEL HARNER, Ph.D. The Intuition Network, A Thinking Allowed Television Underwriter, presents the following transcript from the series Thinking Allowed, Conversations On the Leading Edge of Knowledge and Discovery, with Dr. Jeffrey Mishlove.

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JEFFREY MISHLOVE, Ph.D.: Hello and welcome. Our topic today is shamanism, and my guest is Professor Michael Harner, the author of several books, including *The Jivaro, Hallucinogens and Shamanism,* and *The Way of the Shaman*. Dr. Harner is a former professor of anthropology, for many years, at the New School for Social Research, and is currently acting as the director of the Center for Shamanic Studies, which he founded, and is actively involved in teaching Westerners how to live and practice as shamanic healers throughout the world. Welcome, Michael.

MICHAEL HARNER, Ph.D.: Thank you, Jeffrey.

MISHLOVE: It's a pleasure to have you here. You're really unique in the field of anthropology, I suppose, in the sense that you started out as an objective student of shamanism, and eventually came out of the closet, or transformed yourself into a practitioner.

HARNER: Well, this sometimes happens to anthropologists, that they go native to some degree, and I think it's a respected and revered tradition in the field. But perhaps this is unique -- that more than going native in a sense, I've decided some of the things the natives have are very pertinent to our daily life today, and badly needed. And so part of the work I'm doing is attempting to bring back shamanism to modern society.

MISHLOVE: I'm sure there are some of our viewers who probably don't know what the word shamanism really means.

HARNER: Well, it's quite natural. In fact, that's one of the reasons we use that word, because it doesn't have previous connotations for many people. The word itself comes from Siberia, from the Tungus tribe. It's shaman there, and the Europeans who first saw much of shamanism, saw it in Russia, in Siberia, and described it. The shaman is a kind of medicine person, but there are some very specific characteristics that one should note. The shaman goes into an altered state of consciousness when doing his or her work -- either men or women may be shamans -- and this is often brought on by monotonous drumming. The shaman is a person who makes journeys -- you might call them out-of-body journeys, to use current terminology, or journeys of the imagination, if you will, though many of us think there's more to it than that -- to an upper world, to a lower world, here in the middle world. These journeys are done for very practical purposes, such as to gain knowledge; shamans are often called persons of knowledge. And they work to help solve problems in the community -- healing and other problems of daily life.

MISHLOVE: People might think of them under such terms as a witch doctor or sorcerer.

HARNER: Yes, there are many terms like that. The problem with those terms is that they have ancient histories in Europe, and mean many different things, often of a pejorative nature. So it's best to wipe the slate clean, use the word shaman, and look closely at what does the person really do. Because not all, let's say, witch doctors, not all medicine people,

are really shamans. Many of them are priests, tribal priests that do very beautiful and valuable work for their peoples, but don't necessarily fit into the category of shaman.

MISHLOVE: You began a lot of your research in South America, in the Amazon region, working with the Jivaro, who used to practice the art of headhunting.

HARNER: Yes, of course this is widespread in many parts of the world, and not unknown in Europe, as a matter of fact. But in that part of the world, shamanism, when I first went down there, was still quite strong. It is still strong in many areas there. Just as a matter of course, as an anthropologist, I had to study this part of the local culture, and I found it fascinating, but for some time I remained just an outside observer. And then, on another expedition, a later expedition to the Conibo Indians in eastern Peru, the Indians said, well, if I really wanted to learn about what they were talking about, that I had to do it, get into it, and they gave me a certain drug that they use. In that part of the world, unlike most parts of the world where they do shamanism, they use psychedelic drugs, and I discovered just in a few hours that there was a whole amazing world that we in anthropology really hadn't realized existed.

MISHLOVE: That was back in the early sixties, I guess.

HARNER: Yes, that was 1961, and at that time I knew nothing about psychedelic drugs and so on; in fact, very, very few people had even heard of them at that time.

MISHLOVE: That was the ayahuasca plant, I believe.

HARNER: Right. Ayahuasca, yes. The vine of the dead, it's sometimes called. Or taking it, it's sometimes called the little death, because it gave you entrance into what we now call a near-death experience, but it also was an opportunity to increase your own knowledge of what Castaneda called non-ordinary reality, and in that way improve your own life and permit you to help other people in certain ways that wouldn't be possible if you were just stuck in an ordinary state of consciousness.

MISHLOVE: It struck me in your description of this in The Way of the Shaman, that after you had this drug-induced experience, you met with one of the elder shamans, a blind man, and described your experiences to him, which were quite detailed, visionary types of experiences. And he seemed to understand exactly where you had been, and what you had experienced.

HARNER: Yes, that was a critical point for me, because here I'd had these experiences which were so incredible, and then I went to the shaman, and he dealt with them quite matter-of-factly. There were certain creatures who said certain things about how they were really running the planet, and he just smiled and said, "Oh, they're always saying that," and so on. And I realized, from that and many other things, that he was quite familiar with the terrain that I'd been to.

MISHLOVE: You also remarked in your book that the same terrain was covered at least in part in some of the sections of the Book of Revelations in the Bible.

HARNER: Yes. Through the years I've followed this, of course, more and more intensely, and it's clear to me, although there are obviously cultural differences in mythologies and cultural differences in experiences in journeying in shamanic cultures, that there are

remarkable uniformities in this hidden reality -- uniformities that are beyond culture, beyond individual experience. And you'll find great similarities between experiences of great Christian mystics and experiences of shamans, experiences of the near-death situation, and so on. This is fascinating to me, because I was trained as a cultural anthropologist, and I was told that culture did everything. And now it looks like maybe culture isn't the last word about everything.

MISHLOVE: And shamanism itself is particularly interesting because there are native peoples all over the world who have shamans and shamanic practices, and anthropologists such as Mircea Eliade, who has written about shamanism, seem to be struck by the similarities.

HARNER: Yes, it's just standard anthropological knowledge that you have the same system for using the mind in a place like Tierra del Fuego, at the tip of South America, or in Lapland in northern Europe, because these things are known in Europe too, or over in North America or in Siberia or Southern Africa. So that we're dealing with a remarkable consistency of knowledge of how to use the mind and the heart and the spirit for healing and other purposes.

MISHLOVE: And these are cultures that have been separated from each other for tens of thousands of years.

HARNER: Yes, the Australian aboriginals have the same system, basically, and they were separated thirty or forty thousand years from other peoples. So we can't ascribe this thing to anything except that it works, because these people were very inventive when it came to peculiar kinship systems, they were inventive when it came to making special adaptations of difficult environments. But this one thing stays very consistent -- how to use the mind, how to use the heart, for healing and helping.

MISHLOVE: And yet, with this pervasive art and skill being practiced around the planet, doesn't it strike you sometimes as ironic that our modern culture has had such a negative attitude, by and large? In fact, I think up until rather recently anthropologists assumed that shamans were schizophrenics.

HARNER: Yes, there was this tendency to feel that shamans were psychotic individuals -- in other words, crazy -- but they had the good fortune to live in crazy cultures, i.e., cultures other than our own, which of course is very sane. There also was the point of view that they were fakers -- that when they claimed to go into a trance, which is the word they often used in the literature, that they couldn't possibly be going into the trance and having these experiences they claimed to do. I've run into ethnologists from Germany, from Russia, who in fact in the course of field work stuck pins or burning embers under the skin of shamans while they were in a trance, to see if they were really faking or not. There was this kind of skepticism.

MISHLOVE: Good scientific methods.

HARNER: Good scientific methods.

MISHLOVE: I know Mircea Eliade wrote that even if they were crazy, it was uncanny how they could dance all night long, and maintain this incredible level of energy. There is something charismatic --

HARNER: Well, you're drawing on power beyond yourself, and shamanism looks like a lot of hard work -- you know, dancing all night. My goodness, what terrible hours to be working. But as a matter of fact, the person who's doing this work is drawing upon an experience of power far beyond himself or herself, and there's a thing called shamanic ecstasy, where you're having ineffable experiences, difficult to describe, which make living very, very worthwhile. They're experiences connected with helping others too, and working in harmony. This power comes from harmony -- some people might say God, some people might say love. But this power has tremendous strength, and so when you draw upon it, particularly for good purposes, then this energy is there.

MISHLOVE: Shamans have sometimes been referred to as wounded healers, or those who have healed themselves. I think Eliade points out that in the training of shamans, sometimes illnesses are induced, or they happen naturally, and the shamans have to learn how to heal themselves as part of the process.

HARNER: Yes, often in Siberia and some places in South America, some of the shamans became shamans through a very simple process. That is, a person would become very, very ill. Sometimes it was an illness of a very physical nature as we'd ordinarily call it, like smallpox. Everyone expected the person to die. Then suddenly the person experienced a miraculous recovery. Now when that happens in a shamanic culture, they say, "Ah! A miracle has occurred. The person has received power to fight that illness and succeed." Now, since other people also would suffer from similar illnesses, sometimes the same illness, it was only natural then for them to seek out this person, and say, "Look, you have the power to fight this illness. Could you please try to help me?" So that was one way for a shaman to be born. But there are many other ways. I was in one tribe, the Suara of eastern Ecuador, the Jivaro, where all the shamans had bought their power from other shamans, and there's quite a trade in spiritual power in exchange for things like hunting dogs and blowguns and so on. Other cultures, you may inherit it in your family. Other times, you may learn it from a tree; in fact, my first main teacher was a tree. What's important is not how you become a shaman, just like it's not really that important where you went to school -- it's how good you are when you do your work.

MISHLOVE: And now in your book The Way of the Shaman you actually have a set of exercises and practices so that Western people, without even meeting with a shaman face to face, can induce this ability in themselves.

HARNER: Yes, well, the best thing of course, if possible, is to work firsthand with somebody. But the book was written to help people for whom this was not possible. What I found was that we're not introducing something exotic, we're just going home. Europeans had shamans up to a few thousand years ago; in fact, the last northern Europeans, the Laplanders, had shamans up to the 1930s. So we are talking not about something exotic, but some ancient capacity that is right there; it only needs to be waked up by certain proven techniques. So it's quite practical, and sometimes almost embarrassing, how easy it is to do this work, because you ordinarily think you should be wearing a hair shirt and be in a cell for thirty years suffering, to do it. But it's really in fact not that difficult for most people.

MISHLOVE: I think it's very important that a tradition which has developed over tens of thousands of years not be exterminated by our modern civilization. And you seem to be taking great steps in the direction of preserving the essence of the tradition.

HARNER: Well, in anthropology we've had a long tradition of trying to save a record of disappearing cultures. And in more recent years especially there's been an attempt to save the culture as it exists, not just to make a record of it. I think now this is another step -- to recognize that many of these people in these tribal cultures are potentially great teachers for us, and particularly in something as universal as the use of the mind, so that we see them as custodians of ancient knowledge. So we can do two things: we can learn from them, but we also can reaffirm to them, because they're in a state of great crisis in many of these societies, that they have something of value. Missionaries and many other people have spent much effort, much money, to persuade these people they're nothing but savages, that they have nothing of value, that they should change and get with it and be like ourselves. So it's very important for a few of us to go to them and sit at their feet and say, "We are studying at your feet. We need to know what you know." And it's quite honest; they know a great deal -- things that were stamped out long ago in most of Europe, for example.

MISHLOVE: I suppose the very fact that the native cultures didn't possess our technology led them to delve deeper and deeper into the realm of the mind and the powers of the mind.

HARNER: Well, I could think that too, but the fact is that today, when we have the highest level of technology, when we have the highest development of the medical healing arts and so forth, this is just the time now that people are turning to shamanism, or the rediscovery of some of the principles in shamanism, to develop what they call holistic health, to develop many shamanic techniques that already were present for thousands of years, such as visualization. So I think the high level of technology has been proven not to be adequate. And the reason that shamanism went out of fashion, in a way, was for political, not technological reasons. The shaman is a subversive person inherently. The shaman is a person who believes that each person can directly contact this hidden universe, the spiritual universe, and receive information. Every shaman is his or her own prophet. Now, when the first kindgoms arose, and the empires arose, it was necessary for the priests to be consolidators of the political power, and shamans then were persecuted, and not just by Christianity but by many other state religions. They had to go, and they went underground, and they finally disappeared in most of these cultures. Now, when we have essentially the age of science, it's ironic but science makes it easier to do shamanism. For example, shamans anciently claimed that we were related to the animals and the plants. Only with Charles Darwin have we again had permission to reassert this understanding, this belief. And there are many other things I could point to that science gives us permission to again inherit.

MISHLOVE: In the journeys of the shaman to these other realities, there is a sense in which the shaman is able to draw on the inner essence of the plants and the animals. The realm of the subconscious mind in a sense represents this.

HARNER: Yes, when a state of consciousness is achieved that permits one to move out of the daily concerns of household problems -- the daily news, if you will, in our society, and so on -- and move to a more fundamental level, then one is able then to heal or at least have the experience of healing, to solve problems of a serious nature, to work with a whole other dimension of resources that one doesn't ordinarily have.

MISHLOVE: And now in your work you use simple techniques such as drumming to help people, in maybe a space of ten minutes, to begin to enter into these realms.

HARNER: Absolutely. It's an amazing thing. We are ready to go, basically, and the drum is an incredibly underestimated instrument. We go to wars to the beat of a drum; we have our highest moments of social dancing to the beat of a drum. The shamans have been using the drum in a monotonous, steady way for thousands and thousands of years. And yet I've only located four papers in the scientific world on the impact of drumming on the human nervous system. They are so close to us, so natural, we underestimate their power. But when you use them in the proper, ancient way, and use them with a certain discipline, things happen that are truly profound.

MISHLOVE: In this work you actually train people to enter into a realm -- you call it non-ordinary reality, but it's certainly a realm that would certainly seem to be a fantasy from our logical, awake state.

HARNER: Yes. Well, I sometimes consider fantasy something that I've been told by somebody else that I never saw. Much of the news, for example, I often consider in the fantasy realm, or claims about politicians. What I don't consider to be fantasy is what I've seen for myself. A lot of people make the mistake of assuming that if other people haven't voted on it, it isn't real. But in the spiritual reality, the information you get is very specific and tailor-made for you. It's perfect for you, and you don't have to wait for other people to vote on it and say, "Ah yes, I saw that too." If you experienced it firsthand, the shaman says it's real. If you heard it firsthand, the shaman says it's real. If you smelled it firsthand, it's real. And no one can take that away from you. So for us, non-ordinary reality means that in a non-ordinary state of consciousness you are encountering things firsthand, and that's your reality. Now sure, we can use the word fantasy, we can use the word imagination. It doesn't much matter, because once you do enough of this work, you then arrive at your own conclusions about what it really means. It's not a belief system, it's a method.

MISHLOVE: You also seem to experience that people who practice shamanism are still quite capable of functioning in the real world of ordinary reality. They keep their feet on the ground, so to speak.

HARNER: Right. Years ago with the Jivaro, there was a man who wandered the forest day and night, talking with the spirits. Now everybody in that culture had had experience with the spirits. They had taken psychedelic drugs, they had gone on vision quests, and so on. They all knew the spirits were there. I said, "Is that man a shaman?" And they said, "No, he's crazy." The reason was he couldn't turn it off. The shaman is a person who knows when to enter that other reality with discipline, a sacred ground, and what to do there -- a mission to perform such as a journey of healing, and then when to return. All shamans are part-timers. If you were full-time, you couldn't do shamanism. I mean, how could anyone be full-time in the world of spirits unless they were dead?

MISHLOVE: You focus quite a bit on the role of the shaman as a healer, and one of the exciting things to me that you've described is how the shaman will really get in there and struggle with the patient to fight against the disease, even to fight the evil spirits that may be contributing to this disease, and that that somehow motivates the patient, perhaps to get in touch with their own inner healer.

HARNER: Yes, from a psychological point of view I think you're absolutely right, and that's a dynamic dimension of it. But there's another aspect too. The shaman, from the shamanic point of view, is offering himself or herself up as a sacrifice, on behalf of the person. In other

words, another human being cares enough that he or she is interceding on behalf of that human being. The person who is ill is no longer alone. And not only the shaman but the family, the whole village, maybe the tribe, is gathered there together, working intensively together with their wills, asking for help for this person. So there is already this harmony in the group, this will, and it seems that great results then ensue. The person is not left alone, as we often do it here in the West with the so-called self-healing process. Now, I think one should make an effort to help themselves, but why not have other people work with you in this process?

MISHLOVE: The self-healing tradition in our culture is one in which often people sometimes feel guilty -- you know, if they can't heal themselves, maybe they are really responsible. Some people say that can cause an illness to get worse.

HARNER: Well, it's complicated. Some people do need to know that they should be working actively to help themselves. Too often they've just been viewed as passive objects, and they have to get engaged. But we also should keep in mind that we'll all fail sooner or later. We all die, and we should not really go to our deaths blaming ourselves as another failure. The shamanic view is that we are not alone, and that we can call upon vast resources to help, and those resources include other humans who have training and ability to move in realms that we normally don't move in. In fact the shaman doesn't just treat people who are ill; the shaman also looks after them after they die. A shaman is a psychopomp, and one of the jobs of the shaman is to move people at the time of death into realms where they'll be content -- a conductor of souls.

MISHLOVE: That's fascinating. I'd like to talk a little bit about the world of spirits, since this is one of the universals that comes through in every culture -- this understanding that shamans converse with, interact with, spirits.

HARNER: You know, for a while I was wondering if the word spirit was out of date. I know Jung wrestled with this -- Carl Jung, the famous Swiss psychologist. He suggested a word that was similar, not identical, called archetype. But it doesn't quite do the job, and I come back to spirit again and again. What the bottom line seems to be, as I study cross-culturally, is that spirit is something you see when your eyes are closed. Now, that's not all there is to it, because as people who have done visualization work in healing know, these images have tremendous power. So if you see something with your eyes closed or in complete darkness, don't dismiss it as unimportant. It could be so important that it could help save your life.

MISHLOVE: The shaman actually believes -- and I guess many others besides shamans -- that these spirits live in a kingdom of their own, like the animal kingdom; that there's the kingdom of spirits, that they are entities.

HARNER: Well, if you talk to entities and they give you advice, and you interact with them, just as you're doing with me here, you come to believe they exist, just as I believe you exist. And so naturally, if they give you wisdom, they give you help, you regard them in a serious way. That's what happens with shamans. Many people in our present society take up shamanism because they're skeptical. They don't really have a belief system, but they'd like to see what's there. Then as they work they come not to a belief system, but a system of knowledge based upon firsthand experience. And so it has been anciently -- that people in shamanic practice come to the conclusion there are such things that they call spirits, though you could put up another name for them, I suppose.

MISHLOVE: And would it be fair to say that there are good spirits and bad spirits? The shaman learns -- you mentioned earlier the nether worlds and the higher worlds.

HARNER: Well, it's not that simple actually. For example, illness often presents itself in some communication way to the shaman as some sort of horrible insect or something. But the insect is not evil. Take termites, for example. Do you consider termites evil? Probably not; but you probably wouldn't want them in the foundation of your house either. And so the shaman is busy, in a sense, moving entities around without making value judgments about them being good or evil or whatever, because they in fact aren't. They are part of that universe, and the shaman is simply trying to move them where they should be.

MISHLOVE: In other words, the shaman might view the realm of spirits of all shapes and forms as being like part of nature.

HARNER: It is, it is. What else is it? I mean, there's that universe. And a shaman finds the universe in fact is much nicer than is often advertised. There have been various caveats prohibiting us in recent centuries from exploring that on our own; and as a matter of fact, when you go there, what do you find? You find cosmic unity, you find a sense of love, you find what's called shamanic ecstasy, where tears of joy exist. It's the same world of the Christian mystics of the medieval times. It's the same world of the great Eastern saints.

MISHLOVE: Dr. Michael Harner, we're out of time. But that's a marvelous note to end on, and you've surely portrayed the way an individual can balance both an objective and a subjective approach to an extremely important and also somewhat difficult subject. Thank you very much for being with me.

HARNER: Thank you, Jeffrey. I enjoyed talking with you.

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