

## The Ancient Pipe Ceremony

*by Toka Kawapina*

The meaning of the ancient ceremony of smoking the Ceremonial or Peace Pipe is sometimes forgotten and very often misinterpreted by those who watch it or see it graphically displayed.

The ceremony begins with the purification of the pipe. A braid of sweetgrass provides the incense for this purpose. Sweetgrass has always been considered special; even the buffalo held it in reverence and did not eat it. Tobacco was used originally for ceremonial purposes only, and the smoking of tobacco in religious rites, sealing bargains and as a sign of good faith, has come to signify the sacredness of the ritual.

The ceremony itself entails the offering of the pipe to the four directions. These represent the four elements, north, south, east and west, that the North American Indian had to contend with all his life. Many things in the ceremony are done in fours and this number has, therefore, always had special significance

in Indian life.

The pipe, after the initial prayers, is first offered to the east - the direction of the rising sun. For the new-born it represents the first day of their lives and for others, the beginning of another. We pray that with each new day our people and your people may understand each other better, and this understanding will reach out to the entire world.

Next the pipe is offered to the north - the land of the Great White Fox from whence comes the bitter north wind. That is the source of the most vicious element faced by the people of the plains.

Now the pipe is offered to the south - from where the warm winds come. These are the winds that bring the start of new life each spring to our lives. We pray now that this day will bring new warmth to all people's hearts.

We pray now to the Great Spirit, the giver of life to all things, for it is known that, though He animates all living things with a portion of

His power, only He gave us the lakes and streams, the trees and plants, the fish and the animals without which we cannot survive. For this we give thanks.

Lastly, the pipe is directed to the west - the direction of the setting sun. Perhaps for some it will be the last day of their lives. For most it is the end of a perfect day. This is the time for us to reflect on all the good things that have happened in this day and we give thanks.

We thank, too, the Good Mother Earth who sustains the life-giving qualities of the trees and plants. Without her no beautiful flowers could bloom and the creatures that move upon this land could not live. When you and I will die as it is ordained, it is our Good Mother, the earth, who will not forsake us but will, as all mothers will, even in death, envelope us lovingly in her arms.