

The Creator's Original Instructions to Nanabozho: The Four Directions and the Anishinaabe Sacred Medicines

It is said that the Creator gathered together the four sacred elements and breathed life into them to give form to Original Man before setting him upon Turtle Island. The last of all beings to be created, First Man was given the Nanabozho. The Creator called out the name to the four directions so that the others would know who was coming. Nanabozho, part man, part *manido* – a powerful spirit-being—is the personification of life forces, the Anishinaabe culture hero, and our great teacher of how to be human.

Humans are the newest arrivals on earth, the youngsters, just learning to find our way. Nanabozho was set down into a fully peopled world of plants and animals, winds, and water.

The creator gave Nanabozho some tasks in his role as Original Man, his Original Instructions were to walk through the world that Skywoman had danced into life. His instructions were to walk in such a way “that each step is a greeting to Mother Earth.” Although his were the First Man’s footprints upon the earth, there were many paths to follow, made by all those whose home this already was.

Nanabozho’s journey first took him toward the rising sun, to the place where the day begins. As he walked, he worried how he would eat, especially as he was already hungry. How would he find his way? He considered the Original Instructions and understood that all the

knowledge he needed in order to live was present in the land. His role was not to control or change the world as a human, but to learn from the world how to be human.

Wabunong—the **East**—is the direction of knowledge. We send gratitude to the East for the chance to learn every day, to start anew. In the East, Nanabozho received the lesson that Mother Earth is our wisest teach. He came to *sema*, the sacred **tobacco**, and how to use it to carry his thoughts to the Creator.

As he continued exploring the land, Nanabozho was given a new responsibility: to learn the names of all the beings. Names are the way we humans build relationships, not only with each other but with the living world. Nanabozho watched all the beings carefully to see how they lived and he spoke with them to learn what gifts they carried in order to learn their true names. Right away he began to feel more at home and was not lonely anymore when he could call others by name and they called out to him when he passed, “*Bozho!*”—still our greeting to one another today.

After his eastern journey, Nanabozho’s footsteps took him next to the **South**, *zhawanong*, the land of birth and growth. From the South comes the green that covers the world in spring, carried on the warm winds. There, **cedar**, *Kizhig*, the sacred plant of the South, shared her

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teachings with him. Her branches are medicine that purify and protect life within her embrace. He carried *kizhig* with him to remind him to protect life on earth.

Nanabozho also had the task to learn how to live from his elder brothers and sisters. When he needed food, he noticed what the animals were eating and copied them. Heron taught him to gather wild rice. Beaver showed him how to make an ax; Grandmother spider's and her web taught him how to make a fish net. He followed the winter lessons of squirrels to create maple sugar. Nanabozho was counseled by many plants too, who shared gifts, and learned to treat them always with the greatest respect. After all, plants were here first on the earth and have had a long time to figure things out. Together, all the beings, both plants and animals, taught Nanabozho what he needed to know.

In his journey to the **North**, Nanabozho found the medicine teachers. They gave him *Wiingaashk* – **sweetgrass** – to teach him the ways of compassion, kindness, and healing, even for those who had made bad mistakes, for who has not. The circle of healing includes all of Creation. Sweetgrass, in a long braid, offers protection to a traveler, and Nanabozho put some in his bag.

When Nanabozho came to the **West**, he found many things that frightened him. The earth shook beneath his feet. He saw

great fires consume the land. **Sage**, *mshkodewashk*, the sacred plant of the west was there to help him, to wash away fear. The Firekeeper came to Nanabozho and said, "This is the same fire that warms your lodge. All powers have two sides, the power to create and the power to destroy. We must recognize them both, but invest our gifts on the side of creation."

Nanabozho learned that he had a twin brother who was as committed to making imbalance as Nanabozho was dedicated to balance. That twin had learned about destruction and rocked creation like a boat on a choppy sea to keep people out of balance. He found that power could be used to unleash destruction. Nanabozho vowed to walk with humility in order to try to balance his twin's arrogance. That too is the task of those who would walk in his footsteps.