



Sweating the Small Stuff

Q: I heard about the recent sweat lodge deaths at the seminar by guru James Arthur Ray. When I get spa treatments, the technicians tell me I can sweat out my body's toxins with a steam bath or heat wrap. Is that the idea behind a sweat lodge?

—P. Melquist

A: On February 3, New Age motivational speaker James Arthur Ray was charged with three counts of manslaughter for his actions during an October 8 sweat lodge ceremony he held near Sedona, Arizona. Three people died, eighteen were hospitalized, and more fell sick. After an hour inside the small, steam-filled tent, some participants collapsed and others began vomiting. Ray encouraged them to stay and endure the discomfort as a form of cleansing that would make them stronger. The cause of the deaths has not been determined, but it is well known that exposure to the conditions present in the sweat lodge can lead to heat stroke, dehydration, smoke inhalation, or suffocation. (For more on this, see Martin Gardner's "James Arthur Ray: New Age Guru and Sweat Lodge Culprit," *SI*, March/April 2010.)



Sweat lodges in various forms have been around for millennia. The purification many people seek from them is partly physical and partly spiritual. The sweat lodges most New Agers are familiar with (and which Ray used) are loosely modeled on those used by Native American tribes. The high heat, steam, and New Agey social fervor could have led some partici-

pants to have a spiritual awakening (if not hallucinations), but there's no evidence that they do anything else.

The idea that the body can sweat out toxins is widely believed. Hot springs and pricey spas around the world offer sweat wraps and sweat lodges, promising to detoxify and purify the body. Steam rooms can be warm and relaxing, but there is no scientific proof that people can "sweat out" toxins or impurities from the body.

Sweating is the body's method of regulating its temperature. Because humans are warm-blooded, our bodies need to control excess heat (generated either internally, as in a fever, or externally, as on a hot summer day). When the body gets too hot, it releases water via sweat glands, which in turn cools the skin and body through evaporation.

Organs such as the liver help the body collect and get rid of toxins, but sweat glands do not. Sweat, which is mostly water with some dissolved minerals and urea, is nontoxic; therefore, the idea of "sweating out the toxins" is simply wrong. Sweating will make you cooler but won't cleanse or purify your body. Human physiology simply does not work that way. A steam bath or sweat wrap can be relaxing, but it is no more "cleansing" than a hot bath—which is far safer than a sweat lodge. □