

Plant Spirit Medicine: Introduction to the 14th Edition

When I began writing this book in 1991 I had been practicing and teaching plant spirit medicine for a number of years, and I had just begun an apprenticeship with a Huichol shaman in Mexico. I felt both his medicine and mine were valuable because both promoted balance, even though most people I knew didn't find balance very interesting at the time.

Back then it seemed the American Way Of Life would go on forever. There was some lip service but few were *really* concerned about "sustainability," and almost no one saw sustainability as having anything to do with spiritual healing. I was pretty much alone in my work, stubbornly exploring new territory that turned out to be very old. Restoring ancient ways of balance looked interesting to me in 1991. Today it looks necessary, it looks urgent, and I no longer feel alone.

The loneliness is gone largely because this small book brought many extraordinary people to be my students. Some of them became plant spirit medicine healers; some engaged with Huichol shamanism, some explored and discovered other paths. Many are working today to make life satisfying and sustainable once again. Their good-hearted work is producing important changes: When I first wrote Chapter of this book, for example, I pointed out that our young people did not have effective rituals of initiation into adulthood. I mentioned some of the many resulting illnesses and sufferings, but could offer no remedy. Today, thanks to the Sacred Fire Community, authentic initiation is once more available.

At the same time, much has been lost. Violence upon human beings and the natural world has escalated while the keepers of wisdom have become an endangered species. Amazonian plant spirit healer Eda Zavala tells that only a few years ago indigenous leaders and medicine people in Peru were slaughtered by heavily armed police while attempting to save the forest homeland from petroleum development. Sadly, this is far from an isolated case; the genocide of heart-centered people goes on throughout the undeveloped world while the developed world becomes more aggressive as it falters and fails.

Where loss, of habitat and outright murder are less intense, age and illness are claiming the wise elders. Most of the teachers in this book are gone. The great Huichol shaman, don Jose Rios (Matsuwa), died in at about 110

years of age.

Don Jose Benitez Sanchez, the Huichol artist and shaman who introduced me to Matsuwa passed away in 2008. Don Guadalupe Gonzalez Rios, with whom I apprenticed, died in . The preeminent English acupuncturist, Professor JR Worsley, my guide to the Five Elements, died the same year. The warm and funny Ute medicine woman, Grandma Bertha Grove, left this world in 2009.

Don Lucio Campos, the Nahua weather shaman and healer passed away at his home in Nepopualco, Morelos, Mexico in at years of age. An outline of his life might give some feeling for what the world loses with the death of such an elder and what hope and guidance he leaves behind:

As the wisdom keepers die, the cloak of elderhood is being passed on to my generation -- a generation born and raised in a society entranced with money, power and youth, but uninterested in wisdom. Today our way of life is collapsing under the weight of its own greed; the need for wise elders has never been greater, yet has there ever been a generation less prepared to provide wisdom?

Somehow, miraculously, the cloak is put on and wisdom reappears: A don Lucio sees fertile ground in the soul of a David Wiley. The soil is cultivated, and at the old man's death an American yuppie has grown into a wise elder himself. In a few years the younger man midwifes a flourishing of the tradition such as the older man had not seen in his long lifetime.

One function of an elder is to demonstrate the wisdom of our wisest elder: the natural world itself. I say "demonstrate" because talk is not enough. I can say, "The natural world sustains itself with balanced relationships, and it can also restore balance, healing and sustainability in human life." This may sound appealing, but as an idea it is soon drowned out in the din of other ideas clamoring for attention. Even if you agree with it, nothing will have changed from thinking about it. An experience, on the other hand, can be denied and even forgotten, but it can not be un-experienced. Experience changes you forever.

When your heart is touched by the medicine of a plant spirit, you *feel* the love and wisdom of the natural world. Ideas do not deliver the same touch, therefore this is not a theoretical treatise nor a how-to manual. Mostly this is a book of stories, because stories aim for the heart, where experience lives.

Plant spirit medicine works partially because it has a broad perspective. It does not look only through the eyes of physics and chemistry; it sees human beings as expressions of divine natural forces. It plumbs the human mind and emotions. It gives paramount importance to spirit -- the mysterious core of our lives.

My apprenticeship, initiation, and work as a *marakame*, or shaman in the Huichol tradition, steeped me in a perspective larger yet than the one I had in 1991. This has enriched my approach and deepened my appreciation for the medicine of the plant spirits. While Huichol shamanism is not the subject of this new edition, the Huichol perspective comes out here and there, and I trust the writing has been improved by it.

By way of tipping my hat in respect, I will mention that the Huichols are an indigenous people whose once-extensive homelands have been reduced to some rugged areas in the Western Sierra Madre in the states of Jalisco, Nayarit and Durango, Mexico. Like all indigenous peoples in the Western Hemisphere they have been and are being hard pressed by the dominant culture. Unlike most indigenous groups, though, they have never been conquered, they have not converted to foreign religions, they have not lost their language, their communities are functional and their ancestral spiritual traditions are still robust. This is not to say that life in a Huichol village is idyllic. The people face many problems, they have few possessions, scanty modern education, little money, and no reliable friends in high places to protect them from the predators who circle around their natural resources. Even though their lives are hard, they know who they are, where they are and what is important. Their world is not a world of inert "things;" it is a living world of divine feeling and expression. They live in a mood of restrained joy mostly unknown to Western people.

Like Huichol medicine, plant spirit medicine is low-tech; it produces healing purely through good relationship with the natural world. In this way it is not simply a relic of the past; it is also a medicine for the present and the future. Whether you consider high technology a blessing or a curse, we are now

confronting this reality: the world cannot support the extraction of resources, production of heat, and contamination of air, water and soil necessary to build the machines and keep them running. Hi tech medicine is already too expensive for most of humanity. Like everything unsustainable it is destined to become more extravagant and rare until there is a collapse of the unbalanced system that props it up.

No doubt collapse will produce hardship and even tragedy, but it will also bring us back to what traditional healers and indigenous elders have always demonstrated: plants, animals, rocks, waters, fire, wind and the entire natural world know us and love us as grandchildren. We don't have to steal from them because they have what we require and they are glad to give it to us. We are only asked to follow a simple rule: take only what you need and then give back something that satisfies the one you've taken from.

Chapter : Medicine and View

I was sitting around a fire one night talking with a number of people, when a man I had never met shared this story: One day he had been sitting in an armchair in his back yard, studying an ancient scripture. Suddenly he remembered an urgent errand, so he set the fragile book on the chair and drove to town to attend his business.

Once in town, black clouds blew in without warning. He knew rain would soon follow, and he feared for the fate of the scripture. At that moment he recalled my book and the story of how I came to relate to rain as a living presence. The storm now upon him, he prayed to the rain, explaining the preciousness of his book and asking that it be spared from destruction.

He arrived home to find the cloudburst had soaked everything in the yard... except the armchair and the scripture, which were dry.

This man was well-steeped in the Western dualistic view of the world. The story in my book, though, resonated in him, and he was open to the resonance. It was as if he said to himself, "What Eliot discovered feels right somehow. Maybe the world is not mechanical and distant. Maybe it hears me and responds. Never mind if it seems silly or embarrassing; I'm going to speak to the rain. I will explain my concern and make my request and see what happens." What happened was this: the unity view proved itself

correct.

Had he approached the situation from the dualistic view, that would also have proved itself correct, for the premise of dualism is eternal conflict between self (the man and his book) and other (the rain), in which the other is always the problem to be destroyed or overpowered. Dualism has yet to discover how to overpower or destroy rain on short notice, so the dualistic view would have only this to offer: “See, I told you so; the world is your enemy.”

Here is another example of the effect of view: When I had my first interview with the spirit of a plant, fifteen or so other people were also talking to plants about healing and knowledge. What came out of my interview was the rediscovery of an ancient medicine and the development of a way to re-introduce it to the Western world. What came out of their interviews, so far as I know, was simply an interesting conversation. I had an advantage the others did not have: I was speaking from a traditional non-dualistic view of healing. It was not a theoretical view; I had lived and worked in it successfully for ten years. Naturally, the plant world spoke back to me in my own language, accepting and expanding my view.

What was it in the man with the scripture that resonated with the non-dual view I wrote about? What was it in me that resonated with the Chinese five-element view? If there had been nothing in us to resonate, neither of us would have really heard it. He would not have prayed; I would not have done the work I did. His manuscript would have been ruined .. and he would still see the world as his adversary. My conversation with a plant spirit would have borne poor fruit, and I would similarly be at odds with the world. I say what resonated in us was a natural, innate non-dualistic view.

Since both traditional wisdom and modern science agree that the world shows up according to how we view it, it is worthwhile considering what “view” is.

First, some words about what view is not. It is not a set of opinions to agree or disagree with. It is not a belief system. It cannot be acquired by studying or reading books. View is not something we can think our way into. We have it in our bones. We live in it. Usually it is as transparent as water is to fish.

Yes, the world shows up according to how we view it, but this does not mean we can get the world to produce what we want by changing our thoughts. Trying to get the world to produce what we want -- the very notion is itself a product of the dualistic view that sees the world as an other to be controlled or exploited. View is not the same as our thoughts; it is more like the seedbed of our thinking.

Education today claims to be about passing an information.. but in fact it is more about getting the young to take on the dualistic view. By force of law children are put into situations that reward competition and individual achievement. Demonstrations of cooperation and empathy are discouraged or even punished. Over and over, the young are drilled in these experiences. In time "me against the world" seeps into their bones until it becomes "truth." This is how the world works for most people today, because most people see it that way: "Life is about getting what you want, and you don't have to consider the cost to your enemy." Almost nobody realizes that this seeming "truth" is nothing more than the product of their view. In fact few people realize they have a view at all.

The Western view produces results that are useful in some ways. When I am driving a car, for example, the modern Western view of time and space serves me well. When I am doing healing work, though, the traditional Chinese view and the traditional Huichol view produce results unobtainable in more conventional ways. Plant Spirit Medicine healers and Huichol shamans routinely do things that are flat-out impossible by Western standards, but this does not bother us. The results speak for themselves. They are simply expressions of how the world works from our points of view.

I know a conventional physician whose daughter was born with several serious health conditions. I offered to set up an appointment for the child with my teacher, the Huichol shaman Don Guadalupe. The treatment would be totally non-invasive, I explained. She would just be lightly brushed with feathers. The man's mother offered to pay for the treatment. The doctor was at first reluctant, but finally agreed to have his child seen. The day before the appointment he rang me to say he was cancelling "because my wife and I don't believe in this sort of thing." The child died some time later.

Of course there is no way of knowing what would have happened had the child been treated. My point is that invalidating other views denies us

access to possible benefits. The Western view is not the only one; there are many. Each view is valid and offers unique capabilities. To insist on one's own view as the only truth, reveals deep insecurity on the part of the speaker. In extreme cases that insecurity can cause the holders of the "truth" to exterminate the holders of other views. Many indigenous peoples have died this way, and the extermination efforts go on to this day.

So back to the question: what *is* view?

We need certain equipment -- arms, legs, mouth and so on -- to get along in the world~ We don't create this equipment ourselves; we don't acquire it in school; we inherit it from our ancestors.. We must also be spiritually equipped; we need a view for seeing and relating and acting in the world. Like our body, our view is also inherited from our ancestors. It is as much a part of us as our temperament or the color of our hair. It is part of our soul.

Just as there are many different peoples brought forth from different lands, there are many ancestral views, each with its unique possibilities and limitations. What they have in common is this: they are all non-dualistic. In the case of the man with the scripture, his ancestral soul view resonated with my story about the rain god. My soul view resonated with the Chinese five elements, and later recognized itself in the Huichol view.

What of the modern dualistic view? It has brought forth a society that is unsustainable. It cannot be an ancestral view, for if the ancestors' lives had not been sustained, we would not be here. Yes, no doubt people have always had some tendency to dualism, but it was a problem to deal with rather than a view to live out of. Those societies which invest in it too heavily collapse because dualism does not support life.

The modern view alienates us from our innate connectedness. It is a conditioned view, not a natural one. This is good news, because the nature of a person will always be their nature, but whatever is conditioned can be de-conditioned.

Those who become students of Plant Spirit Medicine find the accumulation of information is important, but secondary. The main work is to break down assumptions about how the world works, while at the same time nourishing and reinforcing the reawakened ancestral soul view.

Deep down no one really wants the alienated view this society insists on. The soul wants to express itself with its own limbs and its own voice. It wants to see with its own eyes, to hear with its own ears. It wants to invoke the magically connected world to which it belongs. Only in this way do we come to know ourselves and be in good relationship with the beings, both human and non-human, around us. To be alienated produces much illness, much suffering, and a longing for what plant spirits can provide: the feeling of being at home in the world.

Fred was a friendly, good-natured farmer who had taken on the modern view with zest. I was surprised he consulted me, but I reminded myself that illness can open us in unexpected ways. In any case he certainly needed help beyond what conventional medicine had provided. His breathing was so labored that the smallest effort had become a mountainous challenge.

I treated Fred three times; after each session he happily reported more tasks he was once again able to perform. In order to hold onto his gains and continue to progress, I explained, he would need to do a bit of homework.

"The homework might seem odd," I said, "but why not try it and see whether it works? If it doesn't, you've lost nothing but a bit of time. If it does you've gained a lot."

Now I had to speak to Fred from an unconventional view, but since he was born and raised in Ireland, he had a rather unconventional wife, and my treatment had brought good results so far, I figured there was a good chance I could get through to him.

"I don't know if you've thought about this," I said, "but some people say the land itself and the creatures that live on it have feelings and would like to have some say about what happens to their home. Do you think that could possibly be true?"

"I dunno," Fred answered, "I suppose there could be something to it."

"Well, to me it makes a lot of sense," I said. "You know, I've asked myself why you haven't found help with your health before now, and I think it has something to do with that."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," I answered, "I think it has to do with the pond!"

"The pond?"

"Yes. When the stream was bulldozed to create the dam, it seems the stream got sore about not being asked how it felt about the matter. It would like a little apology and some peace offerings. Kind of like bringing your wife flowers after you've had a tiff. Do you think you might be willing to do that?"

"What would I have to do, exactly?" Fred asked.

I outlined some seasonal visits and the appropriate gifts to be left at the stream.

"I couldn't walk all the way down there. Not in the state I'm in," Fred objected.

"Your son could drive you down there on the tractor," I replied. "Like I said, why not give it a try? You've got nothing to lose and everything to gain."

"You think that could help my breathing?"

"If I didn't think so I wouldn't be saying this."

"Alright, I'll give it a go!"

But Fred did not give it a go. Nine months later he had not visited the stream, his symptoms had returned, and he had forgotten or denied he had received any help at all. Even a skeptical experiment in ancestral view was too big a leap for him to consider.

Donald was a much younger man who was crippled not by shortness of breath but by mysterious pain and stiffness in his legs, hips and low back. He had been strong and athletic before the onset of his condition. Like Fred, he had not been helped with conventional care. Also like Fred, he had got himself in trouble with the waters.

Donald had made a modest investment in a hot springs resort. This seemed

innocuous enough at first, but I noticed that the young man's health problems began shortly afterward. Looking at the situation through ancestral view, I saw there was indeed a relationship. The spring is a sacred site that is unhappy about its commercial development as a resort. It has blessings to offer and it does not want them dishonored or ignored. Like Fred's illness, like all illness, the young man's pain was a call to awareness, an invitation to relationship and resolution.

Another sacred spring of my acquaintance offered to broker an arrangement for Donald. He was to undertake a traditional pilgrimage to the second spring and leave prayers and sacred offerings there. If all went well, the first spring would accept this and Donald would be on good terms all around. The pilgrimage, though, required rigorous preparation, long and dangerous travel, and considerable expense.

I felt the expense might be a deal-breaker, because Donald is a man of small means. I made the offer anyway, and after thinking it over for several weeks, he accepted. The preparation was done, the expenses paid, the offerings placed, the travel completed. Within a few days his pain was gone.

PSM - Sacred Plant Teachers

Colin Campbell, the *sangoma* and traditional doctor from Botswana, tells the story of a villager in his country who fell seriously ill and called in a local traditional doctor for help. The healer examined the patient and then set off to consult with the mountains, waters, animals and plants of the area. In a few days he returned to announce his diagnosis: someone had cut down a tree without asking permission of the spirit of the tree itself. The disrespectful act of one person had created imbalance which showed up as someone else's illness. The villagers understood very well that there would be consequences for everyone unless good relationship to the trees could be restored. A ritual was prescribed to remediate the offense; the whole village participated, and the patient and his community returned to health.

This is not a story about an evil spirit out to smite people. Plant spirits are part of a web woven of love and respect, giving and receiving. We humans

are part of it too. When we tear the web a messenger shows up who says, "For the sake of all creation, repair the web. Get back to what supports you, what supports others, what supports everything: love and respect, giving and receiving."

The messenger comes to town carrying a suitcase full of something designed to make sure we take the message to heart. The suitcase is labeled "misfortune".

This story should be remembered in any interaction with plants. If you are interested in engaging one of the sacred plant teachers, such as peyote, ayahuasca, or special mushrooms, you should remember the story as if your life depends on it. The power of these plants is beyond imagination; you don't want to see *their* messenger arriving with his suitcase.

Some will say, "I have good intentions and I am respectful. There won't be any problems for me." This is naïve. Yes, sometimes naïve engagements work out okay, but sometimes they don't. If we wish to be blessed with knowledge, wisdom or healing, what must we give in return? How must we demonstrate our respect? It is not for us to say. The spirit of the plant will make the call.

To understand respectful engagement with these great teachers, we have to go back to the time when the gods were singing a great story -- the story of the world. Their singing brought the world and all its creatures into being, including, eventually, us humans.

The Darwinians made their best guess about how this came about, but according to the indigenous wisdomkeepers, they didn't get it quite right. The different human peoples did not evolve out of a common ancestor; they were each born out of the womb of their own homeland. We appeared in different parts of the world at the same time. Each group was as much a part of their environment as the other animals and plants of the region.

The Arctic willow and the banana have much in common: they both have roots and leaves, they both do photosynthesis, and so on. At the same time each is part of a different environment and needs different conditions to live and thrive. The Inuit and the indigenous Amazonian are as similar and as different as the Arctic willow and the banana.

Each of the animals was sung into the world with the equipment it needs: wings, gills, fur, pointy or hooked beak, claws, fast running legs, a keen sense of smell or hearing, and so on. The special equipment given to us was the human mind with its unique ability to create the sensation of separateness: "This is me and everything else is not me." The mind goes on from this primal separation to make many more separations and distinctions: "This is a rock. That is a plant. That is a stick."

Our mind, driven by a fearful concern for survival, comes up with creative interventions: "I am hungry and the deer runs faster than I do. If I break the rock to make a sharp point and fasten it to the stick with plant fibers, I can throw it at the deer and have a meal."

All this is fine, but a problem arises when we dwell too much in the mind. The mind creates the illusion of a separate self and then justifies any action it thinks will protect that self. Like the man who cut down the tree for his own selfish purposes, we tear the web of relatedness. This brings many misfortunes: illness, isolation, never-ending fear, personal and environmental catastrophe.

Human intelligence is amnesiac. It forgets that we are part of the web of being, and this forgetfulness is the source of illness and suffering. For this reason when we were given this problematic gift we were also given the ways to keep it in balance as a small though important part of our lives. All the original peoples were given teachings and practices to remind us that we are part of the web. Remembering produces healing, wisdom, a flourishing environment and a sustainable way of life.

Some peoples were given sacred plant teachers as memory aids -- doorways to sacred realms of knowledge, wisdom and healing. Some of these plants, like peyote, are ingested; others, like the wind tree, are not, but not one of them was brought forth everywhere. This is because, as we have seen, peoples are different. The Inuit and the Amazonian, the Aborigine and the Celt, the Zulu and the Mongol each have different needs. Their souls are made of the ancestral stuff of different lands. The ways of remembering are different for each. None of the sacred plant teachers are for everybody.

In the old days it was perfectly clear who could benefit from a sacred plant teacher. For example, if you were a member of a group that had been through countless cycles of living and dying where the ayahuasca vine

grows, then you and ayahuasca were made for each other. If you were from someplace else, ayahuasca was not for you.

These days it is more difficult to know whether something is for you. The collapse of adequate funerary rites has caused many souls to wander after death and drift into foreign ancestral realms, so the reservoirs of ancestral energy have become quite mixed. Since the human soul is constructed from ancestral energy, we ourselves have become soul mutts. To say it another way, your genealogy and place of birth are no longer reliable guides to what your soul is made of. Maybe you were born in Chicago into Eastern European Jewish families, as I was. Despite that, maybe your soul is mostly made of Huichol ancestral stuff, as mine is. If so, maybe you could benefit from peyote, as I have. But do you really know the construct of your own soul? In these times few people do.

Are you considering whether the plant sees you as one of its people --the people it was brought into the world to help? Or is it all about what you want? If it's all about you then the plant teacher will see you as disrespectful. It may ignore you, it may play a little trick on you or it may send its messenger with a bulging suitcase. These days you need the help of a trustworthy guide who can look into your soul to see whether you and the sacred plant teacher are soulmates.

Actually a human guide has always been needed; the sacred plants insist on it. They were brought into the world to benefit us. They open into vastness we cannot navigate on our own. On our own we easily get lost, and a lost person is of no benefit to himself or others, except as an example of what not to do.

A good guide has himself had a guide. He or she has walked the path and is still walking it. He knows the direction, the twists and turns. He knows who belongs to the medicine and who does not. He has seen many receive blessings, and some who have suffered misfortune. The successful ones like himself stayed true to the traditions given by the plant and passed down through generation after generation of ancestors. The unsuccessful ones wanted to have it *their* way.

In the Huichol tradition this is what it takes to become a guide for peyote: First, there is at least five years of grueling apprenticeship under the supervision of a tricky, hardball-playing shaman. Then there is a dangerous

initiation ritual. If the candidate makes it through initiation successfully, he has himself become a shaman and must take on a life of service to his community. Still he is not ready to guide others. He must now work as a shaman for another five years. If he is seen to be an effective healer and devoted to the welfare of his people, he may ask for a second initiation, which is even more dangerous than the first. After running that gauntlet he presents himself for a third initiation as a guide to peyote. In that final initiation the ancestors, the gods, and peyote itself at last declare him ready to help others who would ask this sacred plant teacher for help.

Of course the arrangements are different for different plants and different peoples, but preparing to become a guide is always a big responsibility. The one who disregards tradition, who looks for shortcuts, who declares himself a guide -- that person is a dangerous fool. These days all kinds of people offer themselves; some are authentic, some are deluded, some are after money, sex, or power. Make sure your guide is properly initiated and has your interest at heart.

The moment arrives to invoke the medicine of the sacred plant teacher. What kind of situation is the sacred plant teacher invited into? Is it focused, respectful and safe, as the plant desires? Or is it scattered, contaminated by egotism -- an invitation to misfortune? A trustworthy human guide follows the instructions given to the ancestors about how to build a proper ritual container, and he listens carefully for guidance on moment-to-moment adjustments.

The rituals of engagement are not invented by an individual; they are not even invented by a culture. They were given to the peoples along with the plant; actually, they are part of the sacred presence of the plant.

When the people of the peyote -- the Huichols -- want to ask their sacred plant teacher for special gifts, they take great care with the ritual setting. First the human guide sets a date for a pilgrimage to the birthplace of their traditions. There is a preparatory month of abstinence from sex, salt, and bathing. A deer is hunted and killed with the proper prayers and respect; a bull is also purchased and properly sacrificed. Special offerings are constructed and prayed over with love and devotion; later these will be left at the sacred site. The journey is long -- until a few years ago it took a month of walking. These days trucks and buses can be hired, but the cost is so great that the journey may be postponed for lack of funds. Along the way there is

much protocol to attend to, culminating at the entrance to the holy land with a specific purification rite that leaves the fasting pilgrims innocent as young children. There are moments to move and moments to stay still, moments to speak and moments to keep silent. A fire is built, consecrated, and lovingly tended. An altar is constructed, festooned with offerings and anointed with the blood of the deer and the bull. The sacred medicine is prayed to, searched for, found, prayed to again and again, blessed by the attending shaman, and finally eaten. The prayers, the offerings, the altar, everything is done with scrupulous and loving attention to the prescriptions given to the ancestors at the beginnings of time. The pilgrims vigil through the night. At dawn they sing the traditional prayers of gratitude and start the long journey back to their village.

Traditional indigenous peoples understand such practices; they know the practical value of rituals and they take great care with them. Modern Western people often feel these things are quaint and obsolete. But have we benefited from our “highly evolved” approach? How many Westerners do you know who produce blessings for others from their involvement with sacred plant teachers? I know many traditional people – grounded, practical and effective community leaders, farmers, healers, artists -- who make wonderful contributions to life as a way of sharing the gifts they receive from their sacred plants.

Due to their enormous popularity, two sacred plant teachers deserve special mention here: marijuana and tobacco. Let's consider marijuana first. Its homeland is Central Asia. In the Western world it is rare to find a person with substantial soul relatedness to that land and plant. It is even more rare to find someone initiated into its indigenous protocols, and rarer still to find a properly initiated guide willing to teach others. Marijuana tricks people into believing they are benefiting from it. Outside of its sacred context, the sacred teacher becomes a trickster carrying an intriguing, prettily decorated suitcase.

Many more people have relatedness to tobacco, but very few recognize and respect its sacredness. These days it is feared and condemned as a poison, and the numbers of smoking-related deaths and illnesses would seem to support that view. But tobacco like all sacred plants becomes destructive when treated with disrespect. The statistics do not prove the malevolence of this plant; they only demonstrate that it is massively abused.

Tobacco was brought forth in the Americas, and I have never been anywhere on these continents where it does not have an important place in indigenous spiritual practices. It helps people hear with the ears of the heart, so it is a special adjunct to prayer -- the source of many blessings. Ironically, the plant which produces healing and protection in the indigenous world produces danger and illness in the modern one.

In most cultures tobacco does not require elaborate conditions for its proper use, but it does demand unfailing gratitude and respect. A minimal ritual setting is good for keeping the user focused and honest about his intentions.

Lest you think these teachers have no relevance in today's "real" world, consider this: A few years ago I was talking to a Huichol acquaintance. He was a prosperous man by Huichol standards, and he was serving a term of unpaid community service as the Traditional Governor of his area. He spoke excellent educated Mexican Spanish, like others of his generation who had attended a nearby Catholic mission school as children. To make conversation I asked him if he had also attended there.

"No," he said. "I never went to school. I don't know how to read or write."

Surprised, I asked him, "So how did you learn to speak Spanish so well?"

"I learned the same way my Grandfather did. He was a great shaman who lived to be 110 years old. He learned Spanish at about 80."

"Well, how did your grandfather learn?"

"Peyote taught him."