

Why the Spirit Plant Medicine Path is Important

We cannot afford the luxury of wasting their potential . . . for they constitute precisely the kind of remedy that we need as we approach a new collective Red Sea crossing.¹

Claudio Naranjo, M.D.

In his keynote address at the Fourth Annual Amazonian Shamanism Conference in Iquitos, Peru in July 2008, Dr. Dennis McKenna told participants that he and others had received the message from the plant spirits that we monkeys only *think* we're running the show. He continued to say that it's the photosynthesizing plants that sustain life on this planet, and that, strange as the idea may seem, certain plants are potentially also our teachers and unmediated guides to our own healing and naturally existing wisdom. After a lifetime of studying and exploring visionary/healing/awakening plants, Dr. McKenna has arrived at the conviction that he and others of like mind now "work for the plants." The plants are calling us, he said. They are using us to spread their teachings around the world. They are telling us we have only a very short time left to wake up to our deep relatedness to the whole and manifest that realization in the world.

The use of psychoactive plants, fungi, and molecules is without doubt the single most controversial topic and set of techniques related to healing and awakening work. It's a very poorly understood issue. Deep and long-standing prejudices make frank discussion of these substances difficult in the public arena. A lot of people with little knowledge or appropriate experience—even many of those committed to spiritual practice—have their minds firmly made up and won't even consider the possibility that what they call "drugs" can produce genuine spiritual experience.

But there is a rising chorus of committed explorers who have done much research over many years—through the literature and through personal exploration—and have become convinced that medicines such as ayahuasca, peyote, iboga, psilocybin mushrooms, and others have proven a great benefit to humans for millennia and hold exciting promise for the years ahead. In fact, it may be correct to state that the use of plants in spiritual practice and healing work is by far the most undervalued and underutilized set of modalities available to us. Some would go so far as to suggest that the planet is in such peril now that the teachings of the sacred plants may be essential for enough of us to get the message and act upon the information.

Oh soma-drinker, drink of the soma-wine; the intoxication of thy rapture gives indeed the Light.²

The Rig Veda

What remains of the anthropological, historical, and archaeological record clearly shows that visionary, healing, spirit-invoking plants have been widely used since time immemorial. The evidence is extensive: from the archeological findings of Neolithic shamans buried with their pipes and plant residues; to the spirit-flight iconography of ancient cave paintings; the use of soma in the Rig Veda of ancient India; mushroom stones of Kerala from over two thousand years ago; the visionary sacrament at the heart of the annual ceremony at Eleusis in pre-Christian era Greece; Byzantine era religious

frescoes in Northern Africa, and a great deal more. The spiritual, medicinal, therapeutic, and divinatory use of these plants has continued right up to the living traces of practices still employed by indigenous groups tucked into the jungles, forests, plains, and mountains, as well as with the determined personal and scholarly explorations of the “new people.”

A sizeable congregation of intelligent, responsible, caring individuals is now convinced that this field of exploration can no longer be brushed aside and that we need a radical rethink on the subject. It's not too difficult to see a strong correlation between the repression and suppression of wisdom-plant use and other versions of suppression that have in the past and still today affect all of us in one way or another. For too long now the religious and secular enforcers of dominant worldviews have been denigrating and eradicating the knowledge and practices associated with plant spirituality wherever they've been able to assert their influence. And it's this same mindset that has attacked, suppressed, and ignored indigenous wisdom, women's wisdom, and Earth wisdom altogether.

This is not coincidence but rather the consequence of a longstanding disconnect arising from what Buddhist teachings would describe as the illusion of the existence of a separate ego. It's widely understood by those we might call the Earth People as well as many moderns of sensitivity that this spiritual disconnect is a root cause of many of the crises we now face on the planet.

But fortunately times and minds are changing fast, avenues of research and practice are opening up, and there's very good reason to believe that sacred medicine plants will play much greater roles in individual and collective consciousness transformation in the years ahead. If so, the central questions are: What do we need to learn from these allies, and how can we effectively and safely incorporate their use into the awakening journey at this crucial time?

I'm helping organize an upcoming conference in Vancouver, the purpose of which is to address those very questions. When I consulted a Native elder friend from the peyote road and asked her help in clarifying our intentions for the conference, she told me that the plants themselves are not the core issue. What is essential is for humanity to, in her words, “reconnect” to our relatedness to the whole. The plants are one direct and potent means of connecting to, embracing, and acting on that realization.

These substances are sometimes called ego solvers. In the best of conditions—more on that in a moment—they can help us see through and release our limiting stories and the unhealed parts of ourselves. They can reconnect us to our naturally open and peaceful hearts, to each other, to the Earth, and to mysterious forces that animate life altogether. The understanding of the plant wisdom elders and visionaries is that in making this journey of reconnection, we create the foundation for the work necessary to envision and realize sane and sustainable communities and societies.

Speaking of “the best of conditions,” I believe all experienced, ethical plant-path workers would agree on several concerns. These are:

First: This work is most definitely not about sensation, entertainment, or escapism. It's about individual and collective healing and awakening and because the plants ask us to look honestly at ourselves and open to the truth, they do not offer a shortcut to enlightenment or an artificial paradise.

Second: These ‘tools’ are by no means for everyone. You need to be ready for them—ready to remain present in the encounter, ready to surrender, ready to change, ready to open to insights that might turn your habitual patterns and fixed ideas upside down.

Third: What has been called the “setting” for the work is extremely important. Indigenous traditions from around the world have understood this. You have to create a safe ritual container, approach the plants with courage, respect, and humility, and do your best to avoid “head traffic.” In general, guides, healers, and ceremony leaders need to have undergone long and sometimes arduous training apprenticeships and be on intimate speaking terms with the spirit allies of their chosen medicine.

Fourth: caveat emptor—let the buyer beware. Especially with medicines like ayahuasca, whose use is rapidly expanding around the globe, there is the distinct danger of encountering charlatans and self-styled but improperly trained ceremony leaders and ‘shamans’ who can create more harm than benefit.

Finally: The use of sacred plants is not a replacement for an ongoing meditative spiritual practice that grounds powerful experiences and insights. Neither does that use grant permission to bypass or ‘transcend’ compassionate, creative engagement with the world. Mind-blowing encounters in the end mean little or nothing unless they inform and guide our behavior in all aspects of daily life.

There is a vision loose on the planet that transcends opinion and belief and is growing in strength and clarity. If this whole 2012 meme has any reality or relevance at all, it’s surely not about the destruction of the human enterprise but about the lifting of the veil. Plants of the kind discussed in this essay are coming out of the shadows and offering their guidance as direct conduits to the deepest, most enlightening truths and when used wisely in the right hands may be of immense benefit in the reconnection journey.

We have now reached the point where the masks are beginning to fall away and we are discovering that there is an angel within the monkey, struggling to get free. This is what the historical crisis is all about. I am very optimistic. I see it as a necessary chaos that will lead to a new and more attractive order.³

Terence McKenna

Notes:

1. Claudio Naranjo, 1993 Psychedelic Summit, San Francisco, CA.
2. The Vedas are among the world’s oldest spiritual texts and make frequent reference to soma in association with awakening.
3. Terence McKenna, *The Archaic Revival*, 160

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