

# Medicine for the Soul

Plant Spirit Medicine of the Amazon  
Howard G. Charing

'Whether the plant is to heal the body or the spirit or whether it is part of an apprenticeship, what makes it work is your good intention towards the plant. They are beings, which have their own forms or they can be like human beings with faces and bodies.

When the spirit accepts the person, and the person has the will, the spirit grants them energy. The path to knowledge opens, and the healing takes place'

Guillermo Arevalo – Shipibo Maestro



In the Amazonian tradition working with 'teacher plants' (*planta maestras*) is known as the 'Shaman's Diet'. This work can be seen as a conscious set of actions to incorporate the plant spirit into one's own spirit. From this incorporation or union, the plant spirit informs and teaches both human *maestro* and apprentice. They learn the magical chants (*icaros*) which invoke the power of the plant, how to use the plant for healing purposes, and how to strengthen the 'dieter' both psychologically and physically.

The purpose of the diet is to prepare the body and nervous system for the powerful knowledge and expansion of consciousness given by teacher plants.

## RATIONAL CHALLENGES

Coming to terms with the existence of teacher plants offers a significant challenge to the rational Western mind, and a further leap of imagination is required to incorporate the 'other' consciousness, or spirit of the plant.

Furthermore the word 'shaman' has arrived in the Amazon relatively recently. Traditional people have many different words for the plant specialisation of the maestro or *vegetalista*. Benjamin Ochavano, a 70-year old Shipibo *vegetalista*, tells how his father who was a healer was known as a *moraya* or *banco* (the Spanish version was *curandero*). A *curandero* could then further specialise in a particular plant such as *chonta* (bamboo) and would then be called a *chontero*, or one specialising in aromas would be a *perfumero*.

Another challenge to the Western, rational mind wishing to enter the magical world into which plant spirits transport us, is that it is mainly accessible through dream language or an expansion of the imagination. Thus dreams and our imaginative powers act like doorways during a plant diet and connect us with the plant spirit.

Alonso del Rio, a friend who has lived with the Shipibo people, is uniquely well-equipped to be a bridge between the indigenous wisdom and modern Westerners. He relates;

'The mind of the traditional maestro is very different from yours or mine. He has lived in the rainforest without contact with the Western world, so to have access to the same visions, the same codes is difficult. But I have found that the expansion of consciousness and the power that the plant gives you to understand many things is perfectly valid.

The magical space to which we are taken - call it the 'unconscious' or any term you want to use depending on your psychological model - is one where all the kingdoms of nature can communicate. That is, people can talk to plants, and plants with minerals, minerals to animals and animals with humans... all in the same language. It is a very real communication and one of the greatest mysteries which exists. This is something which an English person or a Peruvian born in Lima can experience just as an Amazonian person. Because you can do it without speaking in a native dialect, it doesn't go through the mind but between one spirit and another.'

This point was underlined for me while chatting with Juanita, the owner of a stall in Pasaje Paquito, Belen, near Iquitos. She was describing some of the potions, lotions, plants, tonics, barks, perfumes, roots, oils, aphrodisiacs and leaves that she sells, and remarking "When you talk to the plants you will get to know them like friends, they have their own spirits, their own personalities".

#### PLANT ATTRACTION

The famed love potion of the Amazon known as the *pusanga*<sup>1</sup> demonstrates this complex relationship between shaman and plant spirit. To the Western rational viewpoint it makes no sense whatsoever that a concoction of leaves, roots and seeds can attract a lover, or bring good luck.

However, I was privileged to be invited to participate in preparing pusangas, which are normally prepared away from their clients. This experience showed me that far from interfering with the freedom of other individuals or putting a 'number' on them, the pusanga was altering something within ourselves, which was brought out by the ingredients, the magic of the plants. Whatever this was, it felt wholesome and good.

Asking shaman Javier Arevalo what the pusanga actually does - is it inside or outside of us - his response was: "When you pour it onto your skin it begins to penetrate your spirit, and the spirit is what gives you the force to pull the people. The spirit is what pulls".

Calling this 'sympathetic magic' does not do the process justice. To illustrate this, the water traditionally used for the pusanga (which is specifically made for each client) has been collected from a deep trek in the rainforest - sometimes forty or fifty miles - where there are no people, and where clay pools collect. Thousands of the most beautiful coloured parrots and macaws gather to drink from these pools, for the mineral content.

Now the great leap of imagination required is to bring into yourself the knowledge, the feeling, the sense that the water in the pusanga has drawn in or 'attracted' thousands of the most brightly-coloured creatures on the planet. If you can make this leap, it can generate a shift in consciousness in you.

To sample this for yourself, just find a quiet moment and space, close your eyes, and with the power of your imagination draw in the verdant, abundant forest, filled with life, colour and sound. Sense the rich vibrancy of the rainforest as a single breathing rhythmic totality of life force. When you have this image, expand it to include, the humid warmth, the smell of



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earth, the scent of plants, hear the sound of insects and bird song, allow all your senses to experience this. Then with a conscious decision draw this sensory experience into your being. Whenever you are ready, open your eyes, and check how you are feeling.

#### MORE THAN DIET

The shamans say that plants connect us with nature because they take their nourishment directly from the Earth, as well as the Sun's rays, the air, and water. They allow us to know and recognize ourselves. A shaman must know this and must love his people to heal them.

Maestros do not invent diets, they are given them by the plant spirits themselves; but there is more to it than simply abstaining from certain foods and activities. It involves a state of purification, retreat, commitment, and respect for their connection with everything around them - above all the rainforest.

The power of the plants can work in many ways - the colours of the flowers, the perfume, their shape, form and associations. Maestro Artiduro Aro Cardenas explains "A smell has the power to attract. I can also make smells to attract business, people who buy. You just rub it on your face and it brings in the people to your business, if you are selling, people come to buy. I also make perfumes for love, and others for flourishing. These are the forces of nature, what I do is give it direction with my breath so it has effect. I use my experience of the plants which I have dieted. I have a relation with the plants and with the patient - I can't make these things on a commercial scale.

"When I diet I take in the strength of the plant and it stays with me. Later I find the illness or suffering of the person, or what it is they want, and the plant guides me and tells me if it is the right one for that person, and I cure them."

#### TREATING RELATIONSHIPS

In common with many maestros, Artiduro works with the plants not only to heal illnesses but to resolve domestic and family problems;

"I get people coming for help to give up drug addiction and people with family problems. Supposing the man has gone off and left his family, the Mama is here with me and the Papa is far away. I pull him back so he returns to his home so that the family can consolidate again. In a short time he will be thinking of his children and his wife, and he comes back. I don't need to have the actual plants in front of me, I call the plant spirits which work for that - *renaco*, *huayanche*, *lamarosa*, *sangapilla* perfumes - and I call his spirit back to the family home. I blow smoke to reunite them."

Another (and very enjoyable) way to experience the qualities, consciousness, or spirit of the plant is when they are used to attract benign forces in *los baños florales*, or flower baths. Here the individual is bathed in flowers which have been soaking in water for many hours. The maestro prepares the water by blowing *mapacho* (jungle tobacco) smoke and at the same time placing his intention into the flower-soaked water. Again these flowers and plants have sometimes been gathered from deep and inaccessible locations in the rainforest and selected for their specific qualities which the maestro feels are needed to help that person.

#### PERMANENT EFFECTS

Dieting plant medicine is totally different than pharmaceutical medication which only affects one whilst it is being taken; these kinds of plant medicines seem to have a permanent effect in some way, metaphorical or otherwise, altering one's consciousness, or DNA.

One of the great revelations we can experience working with the plant spirit is that we are not separate from the natural world. In Western culture we perceive ourselves to be separate beings, our minds firmly embedded within our physical being - typically our head. The plants show us that this way of being is an illusion and that we are all connected - all of us, and everything else is a discrete element in the great universal field of consciousness, or Spirit.

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable support from Peter Cloudsley in conducting the interviews with the Maestros.

Howard G. Charing is a partner in Eagle's Wing Centre for Contemporary Shamanism. His initiation into the world of Shamanism was sudden, which was caused by a serious accident (a lift crash) which resulted in severe injuries and a near-death experience. After many months of physical pain and disability, he had a transformational experience which started him on the path to healing.

If you would like to discover more about this work, Howard conducts 'Plant Spirit Medicine' journeys to the Amazon Rainforest. He also offers a 'Plant Spirit Medicine' workshop programme in conjunction with Ross Heaven, who has worked with the medsen fey 'Leaf Doctors' of Haiti.

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#### NOTES

1: For more information on Pusanga see Sacred Hoop Magazine Issue 36

PHOTOS:

## SOME AMAZONIAN PLANT POWERS

CHIRIC SANANGO BRUMFELSIA GRANDIFLORA is good for colds and arthritis and has the effect of heating up the body, so much so that the maestros advise a cold shower after each dose! This plant can be used in baths for good luck, and bring success to fishing, hunting etc. This plant also makes it possible for people to open up their heart to feel love for humans and animals ('warms up' a cold heart) and bestows the ability to identify with other people as though they were your brothers and sisters. It grows mainly in the Upper Amazon and only a few 'restingas' (high ground which never floods) in the Lower Amazon. The gift of Chiric Sanango is self esteem, and develops a deep connection with your inner self.

GUAYUSA PIPER CALLOSUM is good for excessive acidity and other digestive problems in the stomach and bile. Also it is both energizing and relaxing at the same time and develops mental strength. Guayusa also has the effect of giving lucid dreams (being aware during the dream that you are dreaming). The plant is also known as the 'watchman's plant', as even when sleeping you seem to have an awareness of the outer physical surroundings.

My experience with this plant was quite incredible. I found that the boundary between sleeping and being awake to be more fluid than I had anticipated. Even now, sometime after taking it, my dreams are more colourful, richer, and lucid than before. When taking this plant, I sometimes wake up not knowing if I have actually 'woken up' or I am dreaming that I've woken up.

AJO SACHA PSEUDOCALYMMMA is a very important plant to Amazonian shamans. On a physical level it purifies the blood, and is used for people suffering from arthritis and rheumatism. It also brings mental strength, acuity of mind, and it can take you out of *saladera* (a run of bad luck, inertia, or a sense of not living to the full). The plant is used to enhance hunting skills by covering up human smell with it's own garlic-like smell.

Taking this plant I found my senses being altered and enhanced. I could zoom in and focus on sounds emanating from the rainforest, my sense of smell became sharper, and in somehow I could tune into the breathing or rhythm of the rainforest. The sound of insects and birds was no longer a random phenomenon but became a rhythmic breath, rising and falling.