SACRED PLANTS

A GIFT FROM THE GODS

John Perkins
The Power of Perceptions

“The world is as you dream it,” an Amazonian shaman told me.

Perceptions control our reality more than most of us realize. What we accept as true or false dictates our choices, our feelings, and our relationships. When we are able to put aside assumptions and presuppositions about the world around us and our place in it, we can be free to truly live rich, deep, and meaningful lives and to create a future for our children that is peaceful, just, and spiritually fulfilling.

The way in which we view plants is one of the most fundamental perceptions about the world around us. Plants can be food, medicine (or poison), and facilitators of sacred experiences. Indigenous peoples all over the world hold plants as sacred; they celebrate rituals that involve the natural world around them, particularly plants. These plants enhance and contribute to the power of shapeshifting.
An Intimate Relationship

Central and South American people eat what they find, cultivate, or kill—which gives them a deeply personal and intimate relationship with nature, food, and resources. In my time deep in the Amazon rainforests with the Shuar, Achuar, and other nations, I learned much about the meaning and uses of their sacred plants. They believe that plants are essential to the educational process—not a classroom education, but lessons about life and time and reality. Plants help us to release our personal and cultural inhibitions (I call these our “onion layers”) and to be truly open to the lessons the universe is teaching us.

There are four types of plants that are held sacred by most indigenous peoples, and they are all our teachers if we will listen. First, there are the plants that teach us about beauty and aesthetics, the decorative plants that can bring so much joy to our lives. Then, there are the nutritional plants that we eat and feed to our families, and the healing, medicinal plants with their properties for making and keeping us healthy and in tune with the right order of the universe. Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, there are the spiritual plants like Ayahuasca, Datura, and San Pedro that teach us about the deep connection to everything else.
Everything is Energy
We are in the midst of a great revolution: the Consciousness Revolution. People around the world are waking up to the damage that we have done over the years and to the ways that we can build a better future now. Plants are important contributors in this consciousness revolution. They are uniquely well-suited to helping us learn to shapeshift our perceptions—dream new dreams for our individual and communal lives. Their energy and power are often underestimated, especially by those of us from the “developed” nations of the world.

The shamans believe that everything is energy: our bodies, our minds, our spirits, our emotions, as well as the world around us. Beliefs and perceptions are also energy; that’s why they can be so powerful in affecting the physical world and our physical well-being.

All things have an energy body, sometimes seen as an aura. Shapeshifting occurs when one energy field slips into another and combines with it. Plants are part of shapeshifting, both because they have their own energy, and because they are part of our energy. Our perception of plants plays a powerful part in our ability to transfer and move energy as we embark in shapeshifting our world.

Each culture teaches social norms revolving around food and plant life. What my forefathers in New England regarded as poison (such as a plant used in sacred rituals by Native Americans in the United States, Datura), indigenous people in Latin America regard as a sacred medicine reserved for the most powerful rituals. What my mother taught me was a healthy diet would leave the Shuar people with puzzled looks and upset stomachs, and vice versa. For both of our cultures, but more consciously for them, preparing a meal can be a burden or a sacred rite of passage. The more we take this task for granted, the weaker our power to shapeshift becomes.
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My Near-Death Shift

One of my first encounters with the power of perception and the magic of dreamshifting was in 1968, as a Peace Corps volunteer living in the Amazon rainforest. Having consumed the food regularly eaten by the villagers where I was living, including squirming white grubs fresh from a rotten log, and chicha, a beer brewed from the manioc plant after it has been chewed and spit out by the Shuar women and allowed to ferment, I became terribly sick. I lost a great deal of weight in a short amount of time. I was a grueling several days walk from the nearest medical doctor and was resigned to dying. Then I was told that there was a Shuar shaman nearby who could cure me.

That night the shaman gave me a foul-tasting tea. At the time, few people outside the rainforests had ever heard of Ayahuasca. I had no idea what I was drinking. Within half an hour I began vomiting violently and then seeing colorful geometric patterns. The shaman ushered me to a wooden bench where I lay down. He hovered over me, shaking a bundle of leaves around my prostrate body, chanting, and assuring me that I was on the road to recovery. The colorful designs turned into scenes of me eating those strange Shuar foods. I saw that every time I did so I heard a voice in the background saying, “It’ll kill you.”

Those scenes morphed into other visions of Shuar men and women—robust, healthy, strong—eating and drinking the same things. I heard another voice explaining that the fermentation process made chicha safe to drink, unlike the river water that was full of organic matter. In that moment I got the message loud and clear: it wasn’t the food that was killing me; it was my mind-set.
The next morning I felt great. I ate the grubs and drank the chicha. Within days I had regained my weight. It was then that the shaman informed me that my payment to him would be to become his apprentice. In the process, I learned that the power of shamanism resides in its ability to change dreams, perceptions, and mind-sets. It also lead to a life-time of working with and learning from shamans on every continent except Antarctica. That experience confirmed for me that we are what we think we are. It also forever transformed my life. Since this experience, some of my most important teachers and mentors have been the plants, and they have guided my process of finding my mission on this planet.

Although the range of plants used by indigenous people is almost limitless, below I describe two that are very different and yet very important to people in the Amazon.

**Chicha**

I’ve already mentioned “chicha,” a kind of beer made by the women in some Amazonian tribes, consumed daily by everyone in the community because it is safer than drinking river water and contains many essential nutrients. Chicha is made from various fruits, tubers, and herbs that have been fermented by the women of the community chewing and spitting out the plants, allowing them to ferment and become drinkable. This process is a sacred part of their culture. According to indigenous tradition, this beverage can only be prepared by women, and it plays central roles in welcoming ceremonies and the harmony of the household in the Shuar and Achuar villages. Even something as common and everyday as this nourishing beverage is regarded as sacred by these people who have such a deep relationship to the natural world around them and such an intimate understanding of their interdependent existence.
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Datura
The beautiful flowering plant known as the “Angel’s Trumpet” is also a poisonous and powerful plant that is often used in sacred rituals, especially by the Native Americans in the north hemisphere but also in such places as India. It can be made into a tea and consumed, and during the ceremony the participant experiences connection with the universe in a higher state of existence, similar to Ayahuasca. It is often used in coming of age and healing rituals, allowing those who partake of it to access deeper understanding and awareness of themselves and the world.

Ayahuasca
The shamans teach that the sacred plants have been given to mankind by the gods, and that they possess the wisdom of the universe. Ayahuasca is especially important for sacred rituals. This normal brew is a combination of a vine and one or more “partner plants” (the male and female coming together) that allows those who partake of it to commune directly with the spirit of Pachamama (Mother Earth, Mother Universe), as well as ultimately allowing us to fully be one with the universal dream. It is considered to be a ladder into a higher level where a person experiences unity with all else.

The vine is often translated as “the vine of the soul,” “vine of enlightenment,” or “the vine of death.” It is used in many rituals and ceremonies as a healing agent and a tool to help the people who take it to change their dreams and shapeshift their world, in fact to die and be reborn. From The World is as You Dream It: “Ayahuasca forces us to change our perceptions, to leave our bodily consciousness, to see the world differently.” (Pg. 109.)

The scientific name of the vine is Banisteriopsis caapi, a member of the Malpighiaceae family, and it contains a group of alkaloids known as betacarbolines, of which harmine, a compound with psychoactive effects, is the primary component. Usually it is prepared by boiling with other plants and is taken as a beverage during a sacred ceremony in which the participant is guided and supported through the experience by a shaman or leader.
Purgative Ritual
The ritual centered on taking ayahuasca can be life changing and powerful and is different for each participant. It is a way to make an offering from the plant world and to be part of the whole universe. Like the ancient Christian rituals of baptism and communion, it sanctifies our unity with the forests, jungles, and other natural environments that make up our home on this tiny planet.

The effects of taking ayahuasca can seem strange to “Westerners,” due to the purgative nature of the plant (an important part of the ritual is expelling what is inside of us and letting go physically through vomiting and diarrhea, which represents what is happening spiritually and emotionally). Knowledge comes pouring in as part of this cathartic experience, and it is often in the moments following the violence of vomiting that insight and change occur.

A Unique Journey
Plants have amazing spirits and intelligence, and they offer individual lessons for each one of us that are as unique as we are. The journey to other worlds is not an escape from our present reality, but access to a richer, deeper reality that brings greater understanding for each person. This journey can be done through dreamshifting without any plants or other supplements such as ayahuasca. It is one of the things I teach in workshops where people learn to take shamanic journeys through a sort of meditation. However, this plant, like others, can serve as a vehicle for traveling into the sacred. The plants, whether ingested or simply observed, admired and felt, are part of our communication with the physical and spiritual worlds and an immediate and intimate representation of the balance between humans and nature.

Dreamshifting is a powerful method for the journey to our sacred space, a way to find our paths, connect with our ancestors, and to heal all types of disease. Each of us walks a unique road, one that is connected across time to everything in the universe and that is designed by our experiences, backgrounds, and perceptions.
Plants such as the ayahuasca have been used by tribes whose roots go back millennia. The earth, the mother Pachamama, has so much to offer us in wisdom and experience. All the plants can teach us if we will only tune in—about beauty, nutrition, medicines, and the sacred; we only need to learn how to hear them. The indigenous people are incredibly in touch with the plants, listening and learning from them all the time. Plants are a staple of their lives. In order to change our dreams and shift our realities, we can listen to the lessons of the plant kingdom, just as the ancestors of every one of us did long ago.
About the Author

John Perkins' work with shamanism began in 1968 when he was an apprentice to a shaman deep in the Amazon. Since then, he has studied and lived with shamans on six continents. His books have sold over 1 million copies, spent more than 70 weeks on the New York Times bestseller lists, and are published in more than 30 languages. As Chief Economist at a major consulting firm, his experiences advising the World Bank, United Nations, IMF, U.S. government, Fortune 500 corporations, and heads of state convinced him to devote the rest of his life to facilitating changes in consciousness and in social, political and economic systems. He was founder and CEO of a highly successful alternative energy company and is a founder and board member of Dream Change and The Pachamama Alliance, non-profits dedicated to creating a sustainable, just, peaceful and thriving world.

John has lectured at universities around the globe, and is the author of Shapeshifting, Confessions of an Economic Hit Man, The World Is As You Dream It, Psychonavigation, Spirit of the Shuar, Hoodwinked, The Secret History of the American Empire, and The Stress-Free Habit. He has been featured on ABC, NBC, CNN, NPR, A&E, the History Channel, Time, The New York Times, The Washington Post, Cosmopolitan, Elle, Der Spiegel, and many other publications, as well as in numerous documentaries including The End of Poverty, Zeitgeist Addendum, and Apology of an Economic Hit Man. He was awarded the Lennon-Ono Grant for Peace 2012, and Rainforest Action Network Challenging Business As Usual Award, 2006.

To learn more about John Perkins, visit johnperkins.org
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The Pachamama Alliance is a non-profit organization based in San Francisco. Its mission is to empower indigenous people of the Amazon rainforest to preserve their lands and culture and, using insights gained from that work, to educate and inspire individuals everywhere to bring forth a thriving, just and sustainable world. To learn more, visit pachamama.org

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