

Medicine Plant Songs

Everything is in relationship, the most significant of those relationships being that of the Earth with all her living beings. The interconnected web of reliance between People, Plants, Animals, and the Earth is evidence that everything is alive and everything has a spirit. There is a dimension of the Human Experience, a way of existing within the world, where plants can talk to human beings and human beings can talk to plants. It is within this realm that the indigenous peoples have accessed sacred dimensions for much of our history on this planet. In this deeper wisdom of the human body in connection with the plants, we are led back to the heart of nature and able to understand the higher message, the sense of love, caring, and mutuality that we have been gifted from the Creator.

Since the beginning, plants have been partners in the evolution of our species, not only for provision of shelter, food and medicine, but in our spiritual growth and developing consciousness. Through form, beauty, scent, healing and spiritual properties, our plant friends provide a gateway to the Divine. Not only do they provide this gateway, but they also are Spirit Guides, willing and capable within this dimension to teach and heal. In learning to work as a healer and becoming acquainted with the many gifts Mother Earth provides, it is essential to listen to the plants themselves, as they will teach you all you need to know. Nature herself will tell you what the plant is used for. Plants are the great living book of nature and therefore help us to know the art of healing. Terrence McKenna reminds us that “we are not talking about passive agents of transformation; we are talking about an intelligence, a consciousness, an alive and other mind, a spirit.”

Shamans among indigenous groups throughout the Amazon believe that communication between themselves and the plants is two-way. The language of the plant is known as the icaro, their magic song. The icaro is the language by which the shaman communicates with the plant, and through the icaro, the plant will reply. The term icaro is a combination of the Quechua verb *ikaray*, to blow smoke for healing, and the Shipibo term *ikarra*, shaman song. Icaros are used to summon the spirits of ancestor shamans, create sacred space, control the visions of another who

has drunk ayahuasca, work love magic, control the weather, ward of snakes, visit distant planets, and to call the spirits for healing, protection or attack. Amongst many other things, the icaros are used to cleanse and realign the energetic centers of the heart, mind and body. As one mestizo shaman has been quoted, "You cannot enter the world of spirits while remaining silent". Songs and chanting are a key element of indigenous peoples healing rituals, and determining a shaman's powers can be based upon their acquisition of songs. There are thousands of icaros, and shamans assert their prestige depending on how many they have in their repertoire. An experienced shaman will have more than one hundred, as varied as the needs of the shaman. When an icaro arrives, one may know its use immediately, or its use may become clear as it continues to be sung.

Icaros are understood experientially by following the sounds and energetic vibrations that they create. They are a movement, a flow of energy; a direct channel is opened to the spirit world by using the voice as a gateway and allowing this energy to flow through. Icaros are much more than a song. When participating in an ayahuasca ceremony by ingesting visionary plants, icaros become three-dimensional and one is able see the forms, shapes and patterns they create. These are often transformed into works of healing art and textiles whose patterns can be traced with the finger to unlock their healing potential.

One of the ways a shaman uses an icaro is to perform a healing, known as a 'venteada'. The shaman creates an energetic field of medicine using the icaro and a leaf rattle known as a 'shacapa'. This energetic field envelops the patient and enables the shaman to know which icaro to sing when. The icaro is then blown into the patient's body using smoke, where it will carry on its work of teaching and balancing the energies. The medicine is blown into the crown chakra, the chest, back, hands and feet. The medicine, *la medicina*, is referred to as the healing energies of the trees. The shaman ingests the plants to fill their body with the tree medicine and then passes this on to their patients, through singing the icaro and by blowing it into their body.

There are many ways to meet the plant spirits. They may come to us in our dreams, speaking in the symbols and whispers of our dreamtime, or they may grab

us in their thorns, waking us to their presence. Others lure us with their ephemeral scent or the mutter of the wind in their leaves. Whatever way they catch our attention, it is up to us to look closely, to feel fully and listen attentively. We cannot expect any teacher to instruct us over the chatter of our own voices and minds, and the plants rarely shout. The best times to be able to hear and fully feel the spirits of many plants seems to be at dawn and dusk, the traditional times of the emergence of the faery folk, ancestral spirits and wild animals. During these between times, our senses are more aware and the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual fade and blur.

Lie on the cool ground; listen with your whole body and with expectant spirits. When we become still, we are able to hear the rhythm of breath, the beat of life, the hum of song, the intricate pulses of the plant world, the drinking and eating, the breathing and opening into sun and air, withering and rotting back to earth. We must be fully attentive to feel the energy of the plant pressing against us, and entering into us.

It is only recently that we humans have forgotten and destroyed much of our knowledge of the ways in which our ancestors used the plants to heal. This has happened primarily through cultural annihilation and assimilation. We must begin again, by salvaging the remains of our great, great grandmothers' knowledge, by learning from each other and asking the plants for help. At the same time, we must also remember that the plants are just what they are: plants, and not humans. And that while they are often happy to help us when we ask, it is not our interests that they are most concerned with, but the wider web of plant, animal, fungi, bacteria, with the beloved body of Gaia who is the mother and Creator of us all. Knowing this, we enter into relationship with the plants respectfully, prayerfully, humbly, remembering we are but one part of the living, feeling whole.

“Only through the Earth may we be as one with all who have been and all who are yet to be, sharers and partakers of the mystery of living, reaching the full of human peace and the full of human joy.” - Henry Beston