



FACILITATOR GUIDEBOOK

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CACAO GLOSSARY	2
PREPARATION AND SERVING GUIDELINES	5
TREATS & OTHER FOODS	9
HOW TO INTRODUCE CACAO	10
IMPORTANT PRECAUTIONS/ CONTRAINDICATIONS	12
A SIMPLE CACAO RITUAL	13
ON THE SUBJECT OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION WITH CACAO	15

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NOTE FROM THE FOUNDER

Dear cacao enthusiast,

The world of cacao is very mysterious and – due to a lack of scientific evidence and testing, and a messy historical record – can be prone to misinformation, mythology, and propaganda. I’m being honest with you about that because I like to keep things “BS Free.”

I can assure you that this document contains the most accurate and relevant info I have been able to collect, based on interactions with cacao farmers and experts throughout Central

America since mid-2015. But I don't believe a complete and definitive guide to ceremonial cacao would be possible to create at this specific moment in history. As with anything, continue to do your research, trust your gut... and have fun!

As far as I've learned in my research, there is no established ritual lineage for cacao in indigenous cultures the way there is with other plant medicines like ayahuasca and peyote. Cacao is still present in Mayan ceremonies devoted to fire or water, but cacao is reportedly not the central focus.

What's clear is that cacao has been a magical, sacred, and valuable part of indigenous life in Mesoamerica for thousands of years, whether in the case of royalty trading it as currency, or a modest family keeping a few cacao trees on their land.

Remember, there is no national or international certification for leading cacao ceremonies. I recommend that you only lead cacao ceremonies when you feel grounded and confident in the role of spaceholder, after having attended plenty of other cacao ceremonies as a participant and/or worked extensively with cacao in your private spiritual practice.

Supporting the ceremonial cacao movement supports sustainable agroforestry, safe employment in developing nations, respect for indigenous peoples and cultures, and other positive causes. Thank you for your desire to be a force of good in the world.

–Nick Meador

CACAO GLOSSARY

CACAO: Can refer to both the "Theobroma cacao" tree and the edible product made from its seeds. One tree produces only about a kilogram (just over 2 pounds) of cacao per year!

POD: The tree sprouts pods shaped like little footballs that can have various external colors (a mix of green, yellow, red, and/or brown). When ripe, these cacao pods are harvested and cracked open, exposing the...

BEANS: Something of a misnomer, these are actually the seeds of the cacao pod. Each pod contains about 40 cacao beans, and each bean makes about 1g of cacao. That means it takes approximately a whole pod to make a ceremonial serving of cacao! But because the original crystal formations still exist in cacao beans, these can't be made into a ceremonial cacao drink even if using a blender.

The beans come encased in a white pulp (the real "fruit" of the cacao tree) that is tangy, sweet, and creamy. The beans and pulp are placed in an open-air wooden crate to ferment for about five days, and are turned occasionally to bring in more oxygen. The oxygen combines with the natural sugars in the pulp to fuel the fermentation process. This "cures" the cacao and influences the flavor of the cacao or chocolate consumed later. The seeds begin to germinate at this time, bringing in more nutrients.

After that, the beans are usually sun-dried and roasted. Producing cacao with sun-drying alone is a small-batch process involving time and manual labor, so it can really only be done at a very small cacao farm. The roasting is what turns the cacao bean from white or purple to the brown we all know as chocolate.

So what a lot of people assume to be totally uncooked "raw cacao" is probably roasted but kept under a temperature of about 118 degrees Fahrenheit (though there's disagreement about what temperature is the maximum to keep it "raw"). Mass-produced chocolate products have likely been heated well above that temperature and are clearly no longer raw!

HUSK: The paper-thin layer around each cacao bean, which is said to contain theobromine (the main active compound) and minerals. The husk is almost impossible to remove without roasting (the easier way) or sun-drying (the harder way).

We've been told that when the beans are roasted, most of the theobromine transfers from the cacao husk to the bean inside. That could be why TRULY RAW (only sun-dried) cacao is actually less useful for ceremonial purposes. It doesn't produce the same depth of sensation when drinking or eating it.

The broken pieces of husk from roasted cacao can be brewed like a tea that has a pleasant light flavor and the healthy minerals without the stimulation. However it's important to source cacao husk from an organic farm, since conventionally grown cacao husk might contain mercury, lead, and other harmful compounds.

Other factors could make a difference too, like where the cacao is grown and whether there's pollution in the soil. So get your husk from a reliable source.

NIBS: After the husk is removed and the bean is crushed, what's left are cacao nibs – little broken pieces of the cacao fruit. These are commonly put in smoothies, on oatmeal, or just eaten by themselves. They are still crunchy, so like beans they can't be made into a ceremonial cacao drink.

PASTE: When nibs are ground one or more times, the cacao crystals are broken to create a smoother texture as cacao paste. The length and style of the grind affects how the texture comes out. There's some alchemy in the grinding that also affects the sensation produced by the cacao – another reason that cacao paste is better for ceremonies than nibs or beans.

After grinding, the paste hardens into a solid block at room temperature (technically, below 86 degrees Fahrenheit), and must be chopped and melted in hot water (or a similar liquid) to make a ceremonial drink. Cacao paste is essentially non-perishable if kept enclosed in a cool, dark, dry place. *Be cautious to keep cacao paste out of high heat and direct sunlight unless you want it to melt!

BUTTER: Cacao butter is the natural fat in cacao seeds. The butter is often separated through mechanical processing in order to use in commercial chocolate or cosmetic products. Some think it could help transport the theobromine into the body. Not only is it important for the texture of a ceremonial cacao drink to have the cacao butter left in the paste. Cacao butter also consists of good fats like oleic acids (the same kind in olive oil, which promotes heart health). Cacao does contain the saturated fats stearic acid (which has a neutral effect on health) and palmitic acid (which may increase the risk of heart disease and high LDL cholesterol, if consumed in excess). But these three fatty acids are present in equal amounts in cacao. So moderate consumption of cacao, like a ceremonial serving a few times per week, should be totally fine!

POWDER: Frequently sold in health food stores, cacao powder is made by removing most or all of the cacao butter from the paste. Therefore it doesn't melt well and is not ideal for ceremonial use. Also, health food store types from South America may have higher caffeine content than Guatemalan ceremonial cacao, but we haven't seen science to back that up. Even if cacao powder is organic, it has still been processed to remove the cacao butter. So it's never

clear what other treatment it might undergo, like heating to extreme temperatures, cutting with other substances, etc. So stick to organic cacao paste for ceremonial use.

COCOA (hot cocoa, hot chocolate, etc.): This appears to be made by grinding down the cacao husk, which would explain why hot chocolate isn't stimulating. Cocoa might also contain some powder from ground beans that have the butter removed. Either way, even "gourmet" cocoa has probably been processed so much that it's trash by ceremonial cacao standards!
*Notice the minor difference in spelling from CACAO! (Pronounced "cah-cow")

CHOCOLATE: A product that can include a mixture of ingredients such as cacao powder, cacao butter, cocoa solids or liquors (processed versions of cacao paste), sweeteners, flavors, and other natural or artificial additives. An average chocolate bar has 90% or more of the beneficial compounds of cacao removed or destroyed! But even an organic, fair trade chocolate bar isn't usually transparent about the source and could have refined sugars or other undesirable ingredients in it.

CEREMONIAL CACAO: Different people would define this differently. At Soul Lift Cacao we consider it "ceremonial grade" if it comes from an organic family farm, it's roasted over an actual wood fire, and it's grown and produced with the intention for it to be a soul medicine to the world.

Scent, flavor, texture, and appearance matter as well. Those are influenced by cacao genetics, farm location, soil health, length of fermentation, length of roasting, and other factors.

But what matters most of all is the effect... whether it deepens meditative experiences, brings greater insights to real-life situation, and fosters more inner/outer connection and holistic unity. Obviously that part is personal and subjective. Follow your intuition there.

PREPARATION AND SERVING GUIDELINES

Helpful Equipment

- **PRIMARY NEEDS:**
 - Cutting board

- Chef's knife (please be careful as these tend to be very sharp!)
- Portable stove (plug-in induction burner is fast and precise; or a regular stove if there's one at the venue)
- Pot (at least 2-3 gallons) with lid
- Wooden spoon or ladle (for stirring)
- Some kind of cups (for people to drink out of; these can be a back-up if you ask them to bring their own mug)
- 1 cup (8 oz) scoop with measurement lines (for easy measuring into each cup)
- 1-2 plates or bowls (some non-fragile material, to rest scoop, ladle, etc, without making a mess)
- Stir sticks (for people to mix in sweetener and spices; wooden ones are available in many grocery stores)
- 1-2 towels (to set the lid or other things on)
- **ABOVE AND BEYOND:**
 - Vinyl or latex food prep gloves (for responsible food handling)
 - Ziplock bags or re-usable air-tight containers (to hold the chopped cacao if you chop it at home)
 - Hand blender (much easier/more portable than a regular blender)
 - Hot pad/oven mitt (in case you need to move a hot pot of cacao off the burner)
 - 2x4 ft folding table (to set up a cacao serving station anywhere)
 - 10-30 ft heavy duty indoor/outdoor extension cord (in case you can't cook near an outlet)
 - 1-2 commercial table cloths (to make the serving table look clean and stylish)
 - 15-25 mugs or mason jars (to avoid using disposable cups; if you have industrial composting services nearby, compostable cups work, too)
 - Abalone shell, sage and/or palo santo, and a lighter (Sacred incense "kit"; these can be found at any New Age/meditation shop or on Amazon or Etsy)
 - Electric candles (for decoration; since not everywhere allows burning)
 - Folding wagon (to wheel all this equipment between your vehicle and the venue!)
- **ALTERNATIVES:**
 - Electric kettle (some people prefer this over a stove and pot for heating the water)
 - Milk frother (a very small and portable way to make ceremonial cacao by the cup, especially when travelling)
 - Paper towels (instead of, or in addition to, the real towels)

How to Prepare the Cacao

Every step of preparing and serving cacao is an opportunity to take deep breaths and send intentions into the cacao for it to be a soul medicine to you and the others serve. So take steps to get centered and grounded, making sure you don't send energy of stress or worry into the cacao!

To turn a block of ceremonial cacao paste into drinks or treats, unwrap and place it on a large cutting board. Use a chef's knife to chop it into small pieces (no larger than an inch on any side).

Whether the cacao is a solid block, chopped, or ground, store it in a well-sealed container that keeps out air and moisture (a Ziplock bag is more temporary/portable, while a Mason Jar works well for home use). Keep it out of high heat or direct sunlight to prevent it from melting. At room temperature it's basically non-perishable.

The standard recipe for ceremonial drinks is to measure 8oz of water for every serving of cacao. Heat enough water for your desired number of drinks in a pot or kettle. PRO TIP: a portable induction burner or electric kettle can be taken anywhere with electrical outlets and heat up a large amount of water in a matter of minutes.

Some prefer to keep the water below boiling, believing this will preserve more of the enzymes or other beneficial compounds in the cacao. As for taste and "spiritual" potency, it doesn't seem to make a difference if the water boils. Either way, heat the water *at least to steaming* to ensure that the cacao will melt well.

Once the cacao is chopped, each serving is about 1/4 cup of cacao paste. If you know you'll have a full group, and **easy ratio is: 1 gallon of water to 1lb of chopped cacao paste. This makes 16 servings at 1oz of cacao per person.** The strongest advised ratio would be 1lb of chopped cacao to 80oz of water, which would make 10 servings at about 1.5oz of cacao per person. Anything stronger than that could result in adverse effects like nausea or headache.

You can simply stir the chopped cacao paste in steaming water until the cacao is fully melted (no chunks remain). Or if you have a hand blender, use that in a pot with the combination of hot water and chopped cacao. This emulsifies the cacao butter and makes the whole drink

much smoother (less gritty) than just melting chopped cacao in hot water. Turn the temperature down on the stove burner to keep the cacao warm until it's ready to serve.

***WARNING: If you boil the water and use any kind of blender, please exercise extreme caution to avoid an accident. Boiling water will burn skin if direct contact occurs!**

With a portable burner, pot, and hand blender, you can quickly make the right amount for the approximate number of people who will show up – as long as you have hot water and chopped cacao ready. Just stirring chopped cacao in hot water can leave a slightly gritty texture and cacao will settle at the bottom. Blending it means you won't need stir spoons (unless you're offering a natural sweetener and cayenne for people to add in). With or without blending, if you do heat the drink in a pot, make sure the cacao doesn't burn or boil over (both have happened)!

With the cacao drink heated in the pot, you can simply use a 1-cup measure or similar vessel to scoop and pour the drinks into cups. Do this right over the pot to avoid spillage. You can get compostable cups at your local gourmet supermarket, or on Amazon.com. Or you can buy glass mason jars or ceramic mugs for your ceremonies – but then you have to transport them and wash them. It helps to have one or two kitchen towels around for this part, so you can clean up any cacao drips or spills (paper towel works as an alternative).

However you make it, it's recommended to offer people cayenne pepper "on the side" and invite them to add a dash to their drink. While it simply tastes good, cayenne is known as a synergist that could help bring out the full energy and potency of the cacao. And you can also offer honey or another natural sweetener (we love organic coconut sugar), plus cinnamon, clove, vanilla, or any other spices you want. We recommend making all these things optional.

There's no "right" way to make a ceremonial brew. It's all personal preference. At Soul Lift Cacao we usually take the purist approach, just serving cacao blended in hot water, and offering cayenne and a natural sweetener on the side. We've also heard of people mixing in supplements like maca root or Reishi mushroom, but be advised that people react differently to herbs and mushrooms! Some people are allergic or sensitive to them, or to spices like cayenne. And some people can't have sweetener of any kind. If you do mix in herbs or sweeteners, you'll first want to reserve some on the side for people who need the cacao straight up.

A stronger brew (1.5 oz of cacao per person) is good for a deep journey that's more shamanic, or earlier in the day. A moderate brew (1 oz of cacao per person) is better for high-energy activities like ecstatic dance, or for a nighttime event.

A layman's "hot chocolate" would be more like 18g of cacao to 22g of sugar (55% cacao), mixed with 8oz of hot water or some kind of milk (dairy or non-dairy). Try this if newbies cringe at the thought of unsweetened chocolate!

You might want to make personal experiments changing the flavor and energy by adding tea, fruit juice, milk, or something else. **However, until you know how your body handles pure cacao, we don't recommend having more than 43g (¼ cup, or 1.5 oz) of pure cacao in an 8-hour period.***

Consuming much more than 43g in an 8-hour period can result in nausea, a heavy heartbeat, or other uncomfortable sensations. It's not recommended for people taking MAOI antidepressants or those who have a heart condition to consume pure cacao. The first can result in a migraine. And the concern in the second case is that cacao increases blood flow. **If you'll be hosting cacao ceremonies, please make an effort to let participants know about these precautions.**

TREATS & OTHER FOODS

You can make your own treats once you've turned the block into ground cacao by chopping it and then using a blender to grind the pieces *without water* (PRO TIP: Don't use a Vitamix since that heats up and will melt the cacao paste).

For bliss balls (or truffles), you'll need some binding ingredients. We recommend nut or seed butters, and honey. Then you can experiment with adding whole seeds, chopped nuts, dried fruit, spices, etc.

We aim for about 20g of pure cacao per bliss ball. That means about 22 balls from a one-pound block of cacao. But this is totally up to you.

To make treats with less cacao, you'll need more binders and other ingredients. The cacao starts to soften or even melt when your hands mash the ingredients together, so start on the dry side and slowly add more binders. Get creative and have fun! Remember to breathe deeply and think about your intentions for the cacao to be a soul medicine.

The ground cacao can also be mixed in smoothies, oatmeal, cakes, on top of ice cream, or anywhere else that sounds good to your soul.

HOW TO INTRODUCE CACAO

Superfood

This is an abridged list of the biochemical attributes of cacao, because people at a cacao ceremony simply don't need every single technical detail about cacao!

ANTIOXIDANTS: Cacao contains possibly the highest amount of any food. The most prominent antioxidants in cacao are called "flavonoids."

MINERALS: Cacao contains notable amounts of copper, manganese, magnesium (known to relieve muscle tension and menstrual pain), and zinc. There's also some iron (known to promote blood health and optimal oxygen transport) and selenium. We usually just mention magnesium and iron.

THEOBROMINE: The main active, stimulating compound in cacao. It's different than caffeine because it's a heart stimulant, not a nervous system stimulant. So it's less jittery and doesn't cause a crash or cravings. It increases blood flow so there's more oxygen running to the brain and other parts of the body.

Theobromine might convert to caffeine if cacao is processed at extremely high heat. So commercial chocolate could actually contain caffeine as people assume.

NEUROTRANSMITTERS: Cacao is known to contain anandamide, the bliss molecule (which probably adds to the aphrodisiac effect), and promotes the release of tryptophan and serotonin (mood regulating neurotransmitters, which both protect the body against stress).

COMBINED SUPERFOOD EFFECTS: These factors added together can result in a gentle boost in energy and focus; increased cognitive function and memory recall; but also the possibility of light nausea or headache, especially if someone doesn't drink enough water!

Plant Medicine

These are the more mysterious attributes of ceremonial cacao, which you won't find listed on a package of cacao nibs at your local grocery store.

"HEART-OPENER": People often report feeling a warm, fuzzy sensation around the heart and increased connection with emotions like empathy, compassion, forgiveness, and self-love.

MEDITATIVE AID: Cacao can deepen focus during meditative activities and spiritual practices. It can also bring insights in challenging life situations, help with big decisions, and increased clarity about your life path, etc.

"CACAO SPIRIT"/PLANT ALLY: There can be a sense of interacting with an "intelligence" in cacao. However, cacao is a *gentle* plant medicine in comparison to some others. It's not a psychedelic/hallucinogen or even really a drug. We don't use the terms "psychoactive" or "mind-altering." Even though cacao does influence our consciousness and perception, those terms have such a strong connotation with drugs that to use them would (in our view) be a misrepresentation of cacao. Cacao takes us to an edge, but does not *force us* beyond it the way that psychedelics can.

Yet it's common to have an experience of being on a journey or feeling "held" by a higher power. It's just that instead of a journey happening *to us*, we're invited to co-create our own journey. That's part of why cacao is such a great teacher for how to live. We can tap into a sense of responsibility to take more control of our experience in life!

IT'S PERSONAL: We've heard vastly different things from different people about their experiences with cacao. To us that's another aspect of it being a plant medicine – that it could be totally different for different people at different times. We suggest giving people an idea of what they might expect, but also allowing space for them to find their own truth.

Also, some people experience a reverse-tolerance with cacao, where the more they work with it, the less they need to consume to feel an effect.

COMBINED PLANT MEDICINE EFFECTS: A sense that cacao “has your back” and is nudging you to walk further on the higher path of unfolding your destiny – the reason you came into this life and what you’re here to share with the world! Woo hoo!!

However, there could be some emotional/“spiritual” discomfort from processing and resisting this new information, stemming from conditioning and imprints that said to stay small and not fully step into our power. Therefore it’s always good to suggest that people focus on integration afterward, using whatever introspective activities are part of their personal practice (journaling, yoga, nature walks, etc).

IMPORTANT PRECAUTIONS/ CONTRAINDICATIONS

*As with any health matters, please consult a licensed medical professional if you have concerns or issues.¹ As facilitator, it’s your responsibility to state the things below (mainly the first two) and account for liability issues, which could include using a signed release waiver, buying general liability insurance, etc., if you so choose.

ANTIDEPRESSANTS: Pure cacao contains tyramine, which could react with an MAOI (monoamine oxidase inhibitor) antidepressant medication and cause a migraine. Such antidepressants are less common these days, but it’s still good to be aware of. People taking them have likely already been warned by their doctor not to eat chocolate.

HEART CONDITION: Cacao increases blood flow and could cause undesirable stress on such a condition.

¹ By the way, the contents of this ebook, such as text, graphics, images and other material are intended for informational and educational purposes only. This ebook is not intended to substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.

PREGNANCY: Keith Wilson, cacao wizard of Guatemala, claims that ¼ to ½ ceremonial serving would be fine for pregnant women. But we're not aware of any existing clinical research in this area.

KIDS: We leave this up to the discretion of parents. Just like adults, different children may react differently to cacao. We've seen children drink a whole glass of ceremonial cacao and do just fine. But a small amount could give them some of the benefit as well.

TIME OF DAY: You can serve cacao to people at any time, as long as you're transparent about the possible delay or interruption of sleep. Our favorite time range to begin a ceremony is between 10am and 7pm. That way we can awake at our natural pace, and also hopefully get a full night's sleep. However, many people enjoy having a cup of cacao first thing in the morning or even at sunrise.

WATER AND FOOD: We don't generally recommend fasting before a cacao ceremony, because it increases the possibility of nausea/upset stomach without a significant deepening of the experience. But that's up to personal preference, and a lot of facilitators do still ask that people come on an empty stomach.

Make sure to recommend that people drink plenty of water and have a bite to eat after the ceremony! Water helps prevent a headache, and food helps with grounding during integration.

SELF-RESPONSIBILITY: You can only inform them, not take care of them. They may lie to you or withhold personal information. And anyway, people can buy, serve, and eat cacao anywhere in the world. Exercise caution, but remember that they're responsible for themselves. You can only walk beside people while they make their own decisions.

A SIMPLE CACAO RITUAL

A cacao ceremony can be thought of like a ritual in which cacao is paired with different kinds of introspective or meditative practices. There's no single right way to host a cacao ceremony. But it's important to convey to people in advance (through an event page, at the beginning of a

workshop, etc.) what you plan to do, so they have some idea of what to expect. This promotes calmness and openness, which allows the cacao to “do its work” more effectively.

After you’ve verbally shared the necessary info about cacao, you can either serve the cacao drinks where you’re seated in a circle, or you can have people come up to a table to get their cup. The second way is preferable if you want to give them the opportunity to mix in their own sweetener, cayenne, etc. Ask them to get the taste how they like it, but to save most of the cacao for the opening circle.

Once everyone has their cacao and is sitting in a circle:

1. Make sure practical matters (bathroom location, water, etc.) and agreements (options like confidentiality, self-responsibility, etc) have been covered.
2. It can be nice to pass an abalone shell around the circle with sage and/or palo santo (sacred smudge/incense) that people can light (if burning incense is allowed in the venue), and invite everyone to share their name and one or two sentences of an intention for the journey or what called them to the ceremony.
3. After everyone (including yourself) has spoken, invite people to hold their cacao near their heart, close their eyes, and take some slow, deep breaths.
4. Continue with a mix of guided breathing, asking them to reflect on their intention, honoring the people who grew the cacao, etc., for at least a few minutes.
5. Then say something like, “When you feel connected with your core and tuned into your intention, I invite you to take a sip of your cacao as a toast to that.” You can adjust to make it authentic to your own words.
6. Invite people to remain seated with eyes closed and continue to enjoy their cacao at their own pace. **Continuing to guide their awareness back to their breath is one of the most important things you can do at this time.** This might also come paired with reminders to give the logical mind a vacation, to come fully present in this time and space (the here and now), etc.
7. Mindfully transition to whatever activity you have planned next, ideally after having given them some foresight in the introduction (for example, if they won’t be sitting down the whole time). **NOTE:** Many people will lie down within minutes of sitting and drinking cacao, even if you’ve told them there will be dancing, breathwork, or some other activity later. Be gentle when inviting them to get back up, but trust your gut if it says to stick with the plan.
8. Have fun, take deep breaths, and draw on the support of cacao in what you do as a facilitator!

This can be adjusted if a spoken intention circle isn't necessary or desired, for instance if pairing cacao with a yoga class where people would simply go back to their mats instead of meeting in a circle. Follow your intuition here.

If you do have an opening intention circle, it's also a good idea to have a closing integration circle where people are invited to share something about their experience. Passing the shell around again can be a good way to pace that, since people tend to breathe and speak more slowly when holding the shell. We like to make speaking optional in the closing circle, in case someone prefers to sit longer with their experience before sharing.

ON THE SUBJECT OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION WITH CACAO

Soul Lift Cacao acknowledges the collective conversation that has arisen recently around claims of cultural appropriation of cacao and ceremonial practices connected to it. This is an overview of the very complex topic, to help you in your heartfelt efforts to share cacao with the world.

Some believe it's unethical for non-indigenous people to serve cacao in a spiritual context. This is what's meant when people who don't have – or who appear not to have – cacao in their cultural heritage get “called out” for cultural appropriation for hosting cacao ceremonies. The critical viewpoint is based on some hard facts, and some assumptions shaped by broader cultural narratives.

One undeniable fact is that cacao has been a sacred part of the cultures of what we now call Central and South America for at least 3,000 years. There are hard records of it being consumed in a ritualistic manner and even treated as monetary currency. Another fact is that those parts of the world have suffered various kinds of pillaging and oppression for the last 500 years, first at the hands of Spanish conquistadors, and now by developed nations and their corporate influences.

However, it seems to be an incorrect assumption to say that what we call a “cacao ceremony” is a lineage-based practice that is or has been passed down in the same manner as some other plant medicines. In fact, the term “cacao ceremony” as used in countries where cacao doesn’t grow (and even in countries where it does, like Guatemala and Peru) can be a very general concept that might include any sort of healing or self-development activities combined with cacao.

Cacao is still present in some Mayan ceremonies, but reportedly it's not the central focus. There are fire ceremonies and water ceremonies, for example. **Yet it's unclear that a facilitated spiritual journey specifically centered around cacao ever existed in indigenous cultures. It's possible that the unique phenomenon called a cacao ceremony is just being born at this time in history.**

So while it's extremely important to source cacao ethically and responsibly, it's also important to trust in the gentle but powerful ally and teacher that is the cacao plant itself, and to trust in your own intuition. Anytime you serve cacao in a workshop or ceremony, it is recommended to verbally honor the indigenous people who have kept cacao traditions alive for millennia.

And it's also important to seek training and experience in general methods of holding “sacred space,” ritual, and ceremony (which could potentially include yoga teacher training, Reiki attunements, tantra, shamanism, etc.).

In other words, be a professional! If you're going to take on the role of sharing cacao with the world (or if cacao "chooses you"), then embody the ethics and impeccability that it demands.

Remember, even an indigenous person sharing a lineage-based practice (i.e., a “shaman”) can still cause harm, as many travelers to the Amazon have unfortunately discovered. On the flip side, someone can be a legitimate shaman, generally safe facilitator, and ethical practitioner regardless of where in the world they were born. It's important to consider all the factors and see each situation as unique.

If you get called out for working with cacao, try to slow down and do some real soul searching. Don't react out of fear or anger, or issue counter-judgments (such as calling someone "close-minded"). First pause and take deep breaths. Do what you need to do to get centered and grounded.

So many healing arts facilitators arrive at this work out of a sense of service and mission, inspired by their own painful past experiences. If that's the case for you, honor it deeply and make sure to take care of your own needs to avoid burnout. Remember that underneath any argument about this, all people involved probably have a deep desire to make the world a better place.

Consider that you could cause harm by responding without tact, even if simply not acknowledging that systemic oppression and cultural stealing have and still do occur in the world. In this context that would be if a white person held a Mayan fire ceremony without training or permission from of Mayan elders; or if white people claimed to be the first ones to discover the spiritual use of ceremonial cacao.

Not acknowledging the real social problems at all can be a type of spiritual bypassing, so we want to avoid that as well. While on the one hand no one owns a plant and a plant medicine does seem to have a mind of its own, it's important to acknowledge that sacred cultural practices do become tied with plants and artifacts.

Soul Lift Cacao's whole business model is based on developing direct trade relationships with family farms and indigenous groups who grow and prepare cacao using traditional methods. That means growing organically, using sustainable/regenerative agroforestry practices, providing safe work conditions, and roasting cacao beans over an actual wood fire.

Increasingly it will mean there's some kind of profit share or charitable component built into the cacao sales. And that the indigenous people have sent intentions into the cacao for it to be a "soul medicine" to the world, giving their blessing for us to share it with respect. These two factors are both already present in the Ruk'u'x Ulew and Tz'utujil varieties of cacao that we sell.

In short, it's not damaging cultural appropriation for a safe facilitator anywhere in the world to serve ceremonial cacao that's been sourced in an ethical and responsible way.

The ceremonial cacao movement is an undeniable force of good in the world, especially when contrasted with the "Big Chocolate" industry, which uses unsustainable farming practices, creates excess pollution, doesn't pay fair trade prices, and even reportedly relies on child labor in places like Africa. Big chocolate, Mexican food chains, and other institutions are truly

appropriative in the sense that they totally remove something from its cultural origins without giving enough credit, money, and/or other types of compensation to the creators.

On the other hand, **the ceremonial cacao movement is actually improving the lives of indigenous people and protecting their ancient traditions of growing and preparing cacao. Our direct trade method is even a step beyond “fair trade,”** because we’re transparent about sources and build direct relationships with the groups making the artisanal cacao.

Thank you for your efforts to support a better way. And remember, plant medicines do “choose us,” in a way. Shamanism can appear on its own, separate from any specific training or approval by a human authority. So we recommend finding a balance between confidently trusting your intuition, and practicing with great respect and humility.

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact Soul Lift Cacao founder Nick Meador at soulliftcacao@gmail.com!