

TINDERBOX

SPIRITUAL BEINGS BEING HUMAN

NEW YEAR - 1 JANUARY 2017

ISSUE No. 93



Soma: Spiritual nectar

Gifts of the Gods

HALLUCINOGENIC and psychotropic plants, considered gifts of the Gods, have been woven into human custom for millennium. The ritualised use of intoxicants - such as fly agaric mushroom, for example - to enhance altered states of consciousness was not a recreational process.

The revered plants that helped achieve a radical shift in the perceptual field were harvested on pilgrimages by the ordained Shaman or Holy person and used with intricate protocols and expertise to transport the human mind to realms of ethereal wonder.

Usually employed for specific purposes of contacting the spirit world, the mind-altering plants would contain compounds capable of inducing visual, auditory, tactile and gustatory hallucination.

The shamanic journeys brought about by disciplined yogic-type practices were performed for the sake of obtaining knowledge or power or to effect changes in the material realm by altering conditions in the subtle realms.

SPECIAL FEATURE

SACRED SOMA

Every herb and poison ultimately has a primal essence or identity pattern and this, whether delivered in a gentle or toxic envelope, possesses curative power.

- Mathew Wood

An intuitive understanding of complex plant knowledge meant that they were successfully used as the sanctified agents of energetic healing for the tribe as a whole.

This is a far cry from their indiscriminate use today for idle curiosity and hedonistic adventure, in their various illicit drug incarnations.

The only reason we abuse or become addicted to any substance is because we have lost the connection to the Divine.

Sacred Soma

Using sacred plants has always been at the heart of Yogic spiritual practice.

From the earliest times, yogic masters artfully used the wild plants that grew in particular areas where natural energies were strong - such as in the mountains, particularly by streams and lakes.

Yogic mystics, Taoist sages and also western alchemists were master herbalists, who made from their carefully chosen collection of plants, an extraordinary life enhancing elixir called Soma.

According to the Vedas, the sap of plants contains powerful life essences that react with the plasma (rasa) of the body, creating a superior form of plasma to nurture and rejuvenate other tissues.

In Tibetan medicine the ideal garden is not seen as existing on Earth

I come into the earth and with life-giving love, I support all things on earth and I become the scent and taste of the sacred plant Soma, which is the wandering moon.

- Bhagavad Gita 15:13

but within the four directions between four medicine mountains among crystal clear water.

Medicinal herbs gathered from this potentiated environment were like 'super herbs'; a result of growing within the powerful confluence of the forces of Nature.

The potent Soma drink was described as 'green-tinted' and 'bright-shining' in the Rig-Veda and this 'life-giving essence' was to be imbibed by the heart to enhance spiritual practice and bestow renewal and immortality.

Some scholars believe soma was a single plant, while others say it was a group or type of plant (texts like the

Yogic tonic supports the

FROM PAGE 1

Susruta Samhita mention twenty four soma plants and eighteen soma-like plants).

Certain references describe soma as an entheogenic substance made from mushrooms or a vine. Soma herbs were crushed between two stones or pounded in a mortar to extract the juice, which was then filtered through sheep's wool and subsequently mixed with honey, milk or butter.

*Plants are all chemists,
tirelessly assembling the
molecules of the world.*

- Gary Snyder

Body nectar

Countless sacred texts, such as the Soma Mandala, sing profuse praise for the ability of soma to energise both the physical and energetic body and expand consciousness.

Yogic scholars even talk of the most venerated herbal Soma acquiring its additional potency from an inner liquid elixir called 'ojas', produced by the body itself at the pinnacle of devoted yoga and meditation.

The life essence of the body, ojas is produced at the secret soma chakra called Amrita or 'Bindu chakra' that means 'the Nectar of the Crescent Moon' and is located near the pineal gland and Ajna Chakra (third eye).

So, like a plant, the human being can exude an essence too, at the zenith of spiritual growth!

The combination of wild plant soma with human life essence created a potent euphoriant: "An exhilarating effect that promotes healing and transformative processes on all levels."

The rejuvenating properties of soma have become mythic, yet modern science has discerned that many of the herbs and plants used in soma preparations affect our telomeres, the caps at the end of each strand DNA that get shorter each time a cell copies itself, causing them to age.

Studies show that chemical compounds found in soma-like plants (astaxanthin, polyphenols, CoQ10, Vitamin K, to name but a few) actually help rejuvenate and lengthen our telomeres, suggesting some of these ancient soma preparations could well have enhanced longevity.

Herbs for Yoga

We cannot be certain of the exact composition of the original Soma recipe, whether it was just one herb such as ephedra, a single narcotic, or any synergistic blend of wild herbs that would have provided powerful support in the practice of yoga.

It doesn't matter, for we can be sure that particularly Prana-rich plants consciously chosen and blended would have been and still can be powerful allies.

The original yogis, through their direct experience of Nature, instinctively and intuitively understood which tonic plants would enhance their spiritual practice.

They noted that the herbs proved to be even more efficacious if they were prepared along with ritual, mantra and meditation, creating a vehicle for the astral energy of the plant.

Not only did specific regenerative herbs treat and prevent disease but also they were invaluable for awakening the higher faculties.

Herbs proved to be very supportive of the vegetarian lifestyle, providing extra protein, nutrients and strengthening properties for the muscles and nerves. If we chose only one plant and really got to know it, we would have a powerful ally.

*The essence of all beings is earth.
The essence of the Earth is water.
The essence of water is plants.
The essence of plants
is the human being.*

- Chandogya Upanishad

Controversial herb

The genus ephedra, as a possible candidate for the famous Soma, is a very interesting plant, being one of the oldest, most primitive plants with forty species existing worldwide.

It becomes quite obvious why this herb was considered an asset to early yogis; it is a strong nerve stimulant and as a remarkable broncho-dilator it supports the respiratory system like no other, improving breathing dramatically.

It was believed that this remarkable herb allowed the body and consciousness to absorb more light, connecting the physical body in space through the chakras.

Ephedra's thermogenic properties cause an increase in metabolism, as evidenced by an increase in body heat, which is why it is widely used by athletes as a performance-enhancing drug.

It contains the active alkaloids ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, which mimic adrenaline and are isolated to be employed by pharmaceutical companies and also used as a precursor in the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine.

The herb is banned for common use, however the whole plant as Nature intended is safe and efficacious, it only becomes unsafe with hazardous side-effects when it is reduced down to isolated constituents which should never stand alone without the support of the rest of the plant.

Take your pick

Plants help catalyse processes that are otherwise not easy to achieve for the disciplined spiritual practitioner when great demands are made on the body and mind.

No doubt many of the Soma herbs of the first Yogis were Ayurvedic herbs found in the Himalayas, but their closely related plant cousins still exist worldwide for assisting any aspiring adept to enhance inner development.

Herbs that stimulate energy in the body by increasing circulation and flexibility are invaluable for improving

musculoskeletal function and coordination.

Anti-arthritic herbs such as ginseng, ginkgo, frankincense, myrrh, turmeric, angelica, rosemary and hawthorn are utilised to improve yoga performance.

Tonic immune-boosting herbs are classic soma candidates; increasing vitality and endurance such as ginseng, echinacea, dioscorea, saw palmetto, liquorice, rosehips, ashwagandha, astragalus, schisandra and golden seal. White willow bark, feverfew, Chinese goldthread, meadowsweet and ginger could be used for subduing pain, an impediment for any spiritual training.

Purifying the body is a foundational

*For those who have come to grow,
the whole world is a garden.*

- B Muhaiyaddeen

yogic practice so cooling, cleansing herbs such as aloe vera, barberry, gotu kola, brahmi, dandelion, nettles, comfrey, milk thistle and plantain are mandatory adjuncts to any yoga blend.

Most importantly are the essential nervine herbs to improve the function of the mind, senses and perception.

Herbs that calm the central nervous system and facilitate the process of insight and meditation are pertinent choices for the serious aspirant.

Such herbs as basil, St John's Wort, chamomile, pasque flower, passion-flower, skullcap, valerian, kava kava and hops would do the job.

Any Soma blend worth its salt would include pulmonary or respiratory enhancing herbs, such as ephedra, elecampane, hyssop, rehmannia, horehound, andrographis and marshmallow, because improving respiration and the quality of breathing is foundational to all yogic or spiritual practice.

*Do everything with
a mind that has let go.*

- John Chan

Planting and harvesting by the moon

*Plant a seed of friendship;
reap a bouquet of happiness.*

- Lois L Kaufman

IN ORDER TO maximise on the efficacy and potency of our Soma herbs, we should consider the moon phases for harvesting.

The Earth is in a large gravitational field, influenced by both the sun and moon. The tides are highest at the time of the new and the full moon, when sun and moon are lined up with the Earth.

Just as the moon pulls the tides in the oceans, it also pulls upon the subtle bodies of water, causing moisture to rise in the earth, which encourages growth. The highest amount of moisture is in the soil at this time and seeds will absorb the most water at the time of the full moon.

It was noticed that different plants grow better when they are planted during different phases of the moon.

Each of these phases imparts an influence on the

way vegetation grows on the planet through the rising and falling of the moisture in the ground and in the plants.

Planting is not the only important time; harvest time also has to be recorded. If you harvest at the correct time your herbs will last much longer, according to how the plant stores the water in the fruit/crop at different times of the Luna cycle.

Harvest and collection practices and the influences of the moon phase affect the chemical composition and efficacy of plant-based medicines.

New Moon: The lunar gravity pulls water up, and causes the seeds to swell and burst. This factor, coupled with the increasing moonlight creates balanced

*A garden is a grand teacher. It teaches patience
and careful watchfulness; it teaches industry and
thrift; above all it teaches entire trust.*

- Gertrude Jekyll

root and leaf growth. This is the best time for planting above ground annual plants that produce their seeds outside the fruit.

Second Quarter: In the second quarter the gravitational pull is less, but the moonlight is strong, creating strong leaf growth. It is generally a good time for planting, especially two days before the full moon. The types of crops that prefer the second quarter are annuals that produce above ground, but their seeds form inside the fruit.

Full Moon: After the full moon, as the moon wanes, the energy is drawing down. The gravitation pull is high, creating more moisture in the soil, but the moonlight is decreasing, putting energy into the roots. This is a favourable time for planting root herbs and it is also good for perennials, biennials, bulbs and transplanting because of the active root growth.

Fourth Quarter: In the fourth quarter there is decreased gravitational pull and moonlight, and it is considered a resting period. This is also the best time to cultivate, harvest, transplant and prune.

complete human being

Miraculous magical mythical mandrake



THE MANDRAKE, whose root strikingly resembles the human form, was the most important magical plant of antiquity and was thought to be a powerful ally that could perform miracles for its master.

The ancients were well aware of the fact that this powerful narcotic plant could be dangerous if used in-judiciously and it was often used as an anaesthetic for surgical procedures.

In the Middle Ages, mandrake also featured as an important 'Witches Herb' and constituted one of the key ingredients of the fabled 'Flying Ointment'. Considering its chemical composition, containing tropane alkaloids that induce hallucinations, this name was not far off the mark.

As myth portrays, the mandrake did not take too kindly to being dug out from its earthly home, and was said to scream piercingly as it was pulled from the ground, a scream so terrible that it was believed to instantly kill anybody within earshot.

It was thus recommended to plug up one's ears tightly and take a dog to carry out the frightening task.

Once the root was reasonably free, one was to tie a string to the dog's tail and attach the other end to the root to cautiously extract it from the earth.

If one considers the dangerously hallucinogenic properties of the mandrake root and its potentially fatal toxicity if ingested; perhaps these mythical precautions were justified.

To provoke public awe and cautious respect for the plant would indeed protect those unskilled in administering its potency.

*The mandrake is the tree of life
and the burning love ignited by its pleasure
is the origins of the human race.*

- Hugo Rahner

One man's poison...

The difference between a poison, a medicine and a narcotic is only one of dosage.

Digitalis, for example, in proper dosage is an efficacious prescribed cardiac medicine; yet in higher dosage it is a deadly poison.

The psychoactive (especially hallucinogenic) properties of some plants can be considered as a particular category of deterrent innovation that has influenced humans profoundly, shaping beliefs about the world.

Many chemical defences produced by plants taste unpleasant to us (for example, intense bitterness) the unpleasantness is the deterrent, while our retention of this sense of unpleasantness helps to protect us from consuming too much.

Humans and animals have evolved to use plant defence chemicals to their advantage, often for the same purposes as the plants themselves.

Plants, for example, produce antimicrobial compounds for their own needs, which can be used by humans to destroy our bacterial and fungal infections.

Secondary plant metabolites may serve multiple purposes within the plant itself for instance: alkaloids act as a deterrent to herbivores but are also involved in absorption of nitrogen from the soil; flavonoids help to prevent infection in plants but also protect them from UV radiation and play a role in regulating growth.

*Good nature, like a bee, collects honey
from every herb. Ill nature, like a spider,
sucks poison from the sweetest flower.*

- Anonymous

Make your own Soma

*The poetry of the earth
is never dead.*

- John Keats

TO MAKE your own personalised Soma, empowered by your own unique needs and interest, is especially meaningful.

We can choose our Soma ingredients from the garden, which of course is the preferred option, however, the few wild places that may still harbour special plant treasures are great if we mindfully and sustainably harvest what we need.

It is an interesting phenomenon that the plants that we most need are often those that grow best for us. Take note of the plants that are the most prolific and healthy or perhaps they are herbs that you habitually see and find on your meanderings through Natural places. If in your urban existence, the local whole food store is the only available provider of quality-dried herbs, then let these be your options.

Remember that herbs work mainly at the energetic level - beyond the physical body - and their effects are more subtle than food and at a heavier level than mental and sensory influences.

They enhance the pranic processes of growth and elimination, linking body and mind together stimulating its flow throughout the myriad nadi network.

This process is catalysed by our focussed awareness with conscious breath and mindfulness. Practice meditation with breath work prior to choosing your herbs to put your mind in its innate calm and wise state.

Praise each herb for its contribution, as you mix the Soma formula. Have your own special pot for the tea ritual.

When you are ready to imbibe the liquid, drink it mindfully with deep gratitude, sustaining the image of it as light filled liquid with life-giving Prana that floods your cells to rejuvenate your very essence.

Remind yourself that you want a

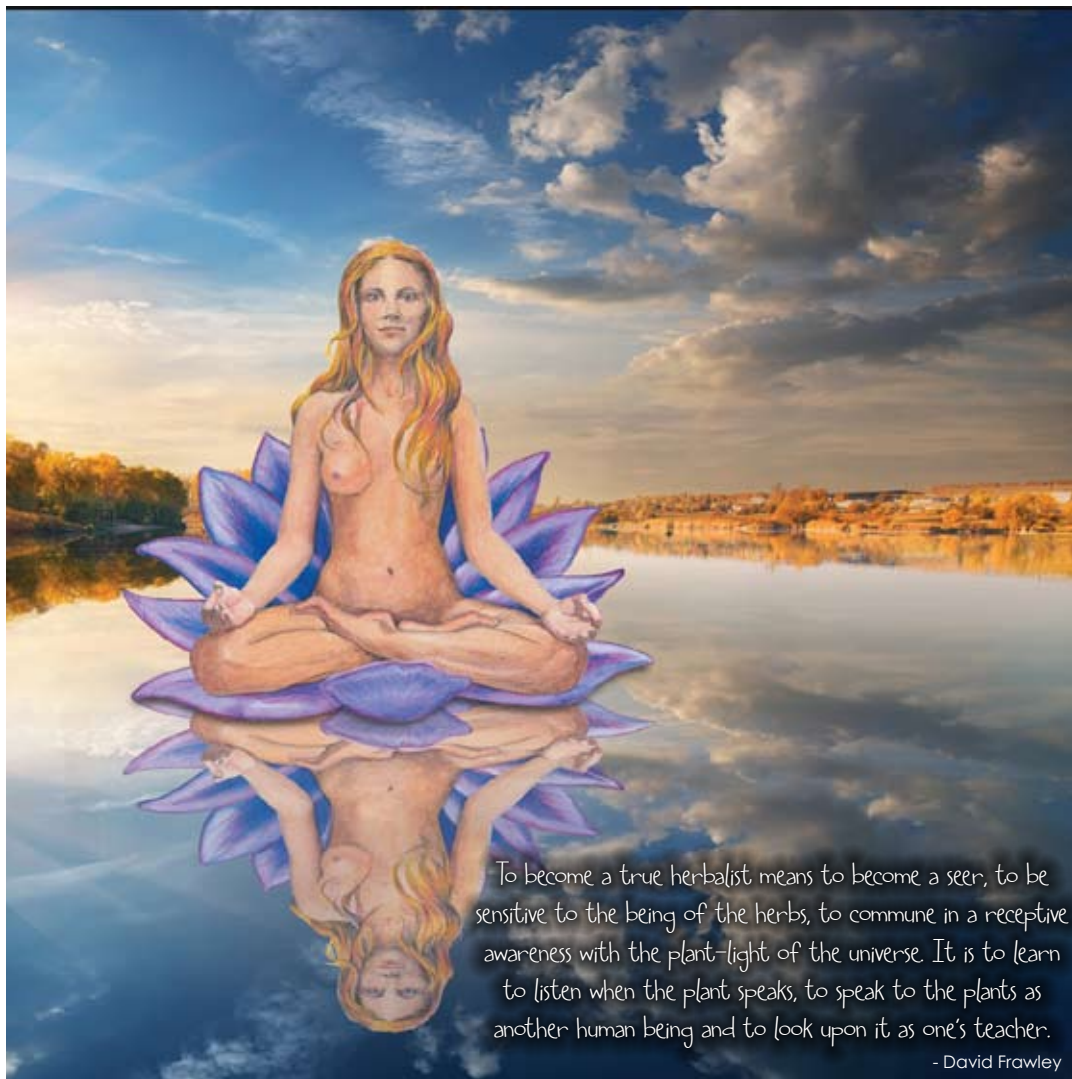
*Drink your tea slowly and
reverently, as if it is the axis
on which the earth revolves -
slowly, evenly, without rushing
toward the future.
Live the actual moment.
Only this moment is life.*

- Thich Nhat Hanh

blend of herbs that will optimise your spiritual practice in whatever form that may be.

Here are few ideas about the most useful categories that you might choose from for your selection with just a few of the many examples available.

Alteratives and adaptogens work on adjusting the general homeostasis of the body. They act on the blood current, cleansing and toning, and are of-



To become a true herbalist means to become a seer, to be sensitive to the being of the herbs, to commune in a receptive awareness with the plant-light of the universe. It is to learn to listen when the plant speaks, to speak to the plants as another human being and to look upon it as one's teacher.

- David Frawley

ten immune stimulants. Some of them contain phyto-hormones to enable the endocrine system to work better in producing their own secretions.

They are usually quite alkalising which is desired for yoga practice and general health.

Burdock root, ginseng, maca root, red clover, prickly ash, echinacea, astragalus, withania, shisandra, bearberry, green tea, horsetail, lady's mantle, raspberry leaf, nettle, golden seal, sarsaparilla, dong quai, elderberry.

Anodynes are herbs that calm pain and inflammation, which is big hindrance to active and inactive yogic practice.

White willow bark, turmeric, pasque flower, arnica, frankincense, juniper, celery seed, cat's claw, meadowsweet, rosehips

Nervines are herbs that restore the proper action of the nervous system, repairing exhausted nerve tissue and rejuvenating the complex neuronal transmitter and their response.

Catnip, chamomile, vervain, oats, lady's slipper, yarrow, motherwort, skullcap, valerian root, gotu kola, damiana, St John's wort.

Sedatives exert a natural calming and soothing effect on the nervous sys-

tem, ensuring proper response of the central nervous system and parasympathetic response, crucial for stabilising moods and tension.

Ashwagandha, passion-flower, lemon balm, liquorice root, hops, lime flowers, cramp bark, kava kava, corydalis.

Stimulants temporarily quicken and increase body functions especially circulation. Stimulants are good to add to other herbs to increase their effects.

Ginger, prickly ash, yarrow, cayenne, bayberry, rosemary, ginkgo biloba, cinnamon.

Cardiotonics balance out the actions of the heart in a holistic safe manner strengthening and improving the tone of this vital organ.

Astragalus, coleus, hawthorn ginseng, motherwort, wood betony, cinnamon, garlic, olive leaf.

Carminatives are a good choice to help settle down an active gut, with their warmth and pungency. These herbs are high in agniprana and help us digest and assimilate our food and other herbs while expelling gas. They often act as palliatives, to make blends taste better.

Caraway, ginger, peppermint, spearmint, fennel, dill, cloves, ginger, hysop.

Expectorants are great to clear the respiratory passages and expel excess mucous to enhance breathing, fundamental to spiritual practice.

Horehound, elecampane, peppermint, pleurisy root, thyme, angelica root, mullein.

Demulcents calm down the inflamed surfaces of the respiratory mucosa with their mucilaginous soothing activity.

Comfrey root, mullein, marshmallow, chickweed, liquorice, fenugreek, slippery elm.

*I love being asked to identify plants,
and I don't know which gives me
more pleasure: to know what they
are or not to know what they are*

- Elizabeth Lawrence

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