

berkana learning exchange

# healing journey in mexico

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# beginnings...

In Udaipur, India, I have been learning about traditional healing practices with local healers and sharing my knowledge of herbal plants with families and community members. We discover our own capabilities of healing our bodies and minds through working together.

I got an opportunity to go to Mexico and to spend 6 weeks with different traditional healers, organic farmers, artists and artisans. I wanted to expand my knowledge of self healing by learning with Mexican healers, discovering what they know. I wanted to know many different types of healing practices.

I wanted to realize different types of native medicinal plants found in Mexico and how self-healers use them. I was interested to hear their stories, practices and methods.

I also wanted to share my experiences living as a healer in Udaipur, building community gardens with other healers, growing an herbal nursery and making our own medicines. By sharing with local healers in my area, we have discovered



different ways we can use local natural resources to make the necessities we use in our daily life, such as cow dung soap, herbal hair and massage oils, and toothpaste.

## exploratory questions

I have some questions I would like to raise in the conversation of self healing.

o How we can live free from hospitals, doctors and the western medical system?

o How can we take our health into our own hands to live organically and holistically?

o How do we understand our relationship to nature in the context of healing?

o How can we redefine our understanding of nutrition/ diet/ lifestyle to better live in harmony with the Earth?

o How has indigenous knowledge been shared in different communities? How has this knowledge been maintained? How has it been passed on, without formal studies, degrees or diplomas?

o How do we better share this knowledge with communities, while dealing with the challenge of the mentality that western medicine is the only/best option?

*In the pages that follow, I have shared my experiences, insights and more questions...*

# Mundo Mujer (Women's World)

I had a big image of this place in my mind, when I heard about it. I thought of a big NGO, institute or a big campaign. I used to participate in women's campaigns and rallies in Rajasthan. I always found a big crowd of women in those campaigns and never found any real work. Some NGOs invite women from different villages and make a big crowd in front of a government office to fight for their rights.

When I went to visit this place with a group of 12 people, I was surprised to know there were only 2 women (!) but many things were happening in this space. In this small place, I could find almost everything I need in my daily life. Everything was done by Rocio and Lidia.

I decided to come back for a week. So I asked them, if they could give me the opportunity to stay and work with them. I shared what kind of skills and ideas I can also offer them.

The next time, I spent a week in Mundo Mujer (based in San Agustin Etla). It was my first chance to come out of Oaxaca city on my own. Some of my friends were worried about my decision to go



alone without knowing Spanish and using a little money. Rocio and Lidia came to pick me up from Unitierra (my host organisation).

I spent most of my time with the vegetable garden, herbal garden and exploring new people around this village. I have a little experience of vegetable gardening, but I am not able to do much with it as I have more interest in herbal plants now. So, it was nice to learn about permaculture (a natural kind of farming or gardening) and to share my little knowledge about herbal plants.

How to keep bugs or insects away from the plants? It has been a serious question to me, since I have been trying not to kill any living being. Most of the modern solutions are based on chemicals, I found some natural solutions too, but the natural pesticides also kills insects, if you spray on them.

**“Killing insects is not allowed in permaculture. You have to find the way in which none of the living being gets affected by your action.** For example – you

should grow marigold flowers and lemon grass around the garden. They will attract all the bugs, so they will not harm any other plant.” Lidia told me this

when she was showing me the garden.

I also found some natural pesticides made of chili, garlic, onion, and lime mixed with boiled water and then sprayed on plants.

I have been looking for a solution of how to make bad soil into fertile soil. There they dig a ditch 2 feet deep and fill it with a layered mixture of rich, fertile soil, bad soil, and natural compost. They continue to layer the ditch until it is full, and then use any left over material for a new ditch in another location. They also put dry grass on top of the soil as mulch to keep the soil below moist. They also experimented with different ways of delivering water to their plants. Some plants need more water than others, and all plants need water at the roots. So, they have cut the tops of plastic bottles, and placed them upside down so that the mouth of the bottle is a little under the soil and near the root. Then, the remainder of the bottle serves as a funnel, so when they water, the water goes straight to the roots, and isn't wasted on the ground near it or the leaves.

They also have a method for quick composting. They make a ditch, make fresh organic material in the bottom, then layer soil on top of that, and then put dirt, and then dry organic material on top. They keep layering this until the ditch is full.



All of these four layers serve a function – to speed up and to balance the process.

Another thing that inspired me was that these two ladies built

their own house with mud and waste material such as bottles and metal boxes. They didn't require any outside help or any outside resources. They also made a dry composting toilet, and are sharing this idea with other families who are interested.

What impressed me the most was that this "work" was not being done through an organization or through any government support. Rather, it was through the efforts of just two women, who experimented with different ideas in their own house and in their own lives, and then shared it with the community and families around them. Even the materials they used in building their house, they bartered from nearby families. In exchange, they help others. For example, a local family (Nuestro Papel) makes paper adobe, and these women helped that family make their own house out of that material. The family then gave some pieces of scrap paper to these women who used it in jewelry making.



# Curandero vs. Doctor

"I am not a *curandero* (traditional healer), I am a meta-physiologist." Epimaco doesn't want himself to be called *curandero*, as modern societies don't value them anymore. He said, "People don't have faith in *curanderos* and they say that *curanderos* can be dangerous for you." It is the same in India, where traditional healers are labeled *neem-hakeem*, as in "*neem-hakeem khatare mein jaan*" (traditional healers can harm you). I remember how I was taught in my school that all the traditional therapies are superstition, so all the villagers need to get PROPER EDUCATION so they can go to doctor and can buy western medicines.

Around 18 years ago, Epimaco got hurt by some robbers and he had 4 bullets in his body. By mistake, he was put in jail, because the police thought that he was one of the robbers. Some meta-physical therapists found him in the jail and helped him. He got very interested in this therapy, as it had magical effects on his body. He found relief in just 3 months. Since then he has been learning and practicing this therapy which is originally from Venezuela. People believe that this therapy was started by Jesus. Epimaco

generally massages some points of body and put his energy and faith into the healing practice. He has experimented with some herbal plants too. His village (San Sebastian - 5 hours by bus from Oaxaca City) is full of many



different types of herbal plants, so he learned about them from older people.

In the beginning, he didn't tell me about the plants. He thought, "Why should I tell you about

Mexican plants? What will you do if you know about them?" Later he started talking about some vegetable plants which can be used as medicines. They don't even call them medicine; it is just part of their food. He knows how to cure diabetes and asthma patients. These are the disease that western medicines have no treatment for! He uses some native herbal plants such as *cola de caballo* and *manzanita* for diabetes; garlic and honey for asthma. I was surprised to know that fibers from corn plants (which comes on the top of corn seeds and is considered a waste material) are very good for cleansing our urinary system or kidneys. Onions, carrots and garlic can be used as a good medicine for women's problems (like irregular monthly periods) and mustard leaves are good for stomach pain and parasites. He also helps women to give natural births.

Doctors don't even know how our body works. For example, they give you hot medicines when you have fever, but when you have a fever your body is very hot too, so if you take a hot medicine in fever, it is very dangerous! It is true that in doctors' understanding, all diseases are your enemy, so you should attack on them or kill them. Epimaco told me how he uses hot and cold plants to balance our natural healing process. He said very simply, why do we need to make cuts on our body parts? God has given us all the power of healing naturally. And everything we need, we can find in this jungle.



# Limpia: Cleansing Spirit

Why do we need Limpia (cleansing) for our spirit? Why is the spiritual part important in traditional healing?

Doña Hemila (a 74 year-old *curandera*) gave me 'Limpia' and purified my spirit. She asked me if I have any problems with my body, mind or spirit. I had no problem, but I just wanted to experience how it feels. She prayed in the beginning, and then cleaned me with the smoke of *Copal* and some other herbs.

I know most of herbs she used; I have seen them in Rajasthan. I was surprised to know that they use *Albahaca* (basil) plant for many things, especially for cleansing. It is a sacred plant in Mexico and in India as well. In my village, I have seen many families worship to this plant and most of the temples have a space for this plant. When I was a little kid, we used to go to the temples every evening at worship time. In the end, the priest would give us one leaf of basil to keep in our mouths (but not to chew). My mother and the priest used to tell us that basil is a preventive medicine for fever, headache, cold, cough and many more problems. I don't remember if I had any big problems with my health in those years.



I was taught in school that our past generations used to worship plants, water, fire, the sky, the air and the earth. They lived in the jungle like animals. They worshipped dead stones, because they were superstitious. My schoolbooks said that we are now developing, but there are some tribal communities which are undeveloped and their first generation needs to learn how to live!

**How come the same plant was used in similar ways in 2 different opposite sides of the world? How do we have some common principles of living, if there were no ways of communicating? It is becoming clear to me that we need to learn more from our traditions.**

I always felt worse whenever I went to doctors. And I felt so good, when I received this Limpia treatment. There is no scientific (?) logic to prove why I felt good.

# Vegan Food in Mexico: Impossible?

I made the decision to eat dairy products in my food while I was in Mexico. For the first 2 weeks, I didn't eat any dairy products as I decided to be vegan on Walkouts Challenge Day (April 6, 2006). Then I realized that if I don't eat *queso* (cheese) and other dairy products, I am not going to experience Mexican foods. But I was very conscious about what I was eating everyday and how healthy it was for me.

I was staying at doña Cristina's house. She had some images about Indian people . . . like what they eat etc. because a friend of ours has lived at her house for 9 months. She could understand why I don't eat non-vegetarian food, but it was hard for her to understand why milk and other dairy products are not good for our health. I would say she can still cook delicious food without milk products. Sometimes we tried to discuss how she has some health problems, and I can surely say that one of the reasons is eating too much cheese.

Cesar and Ebon had a restaurant near my house. I was told by doña Cristina that sometimes I should eat in that restaurant to have a special taste. When I ate in this

restaurant, we had a long discussion. Cesar said, "What do you eat if you don't eat meat, eggs, fish, milk, butter, cheese, oil, sugar, tea, coffee!?" I found it very hard to be vegan in Mexico, but I think its quite possible to cook healthy food without all these things. But we need to rethink what does being healthy mean? **We need to rethink what nature has given us as food. Most of the plastics come from packed food and "care-taking materials." I think if we just start eating healthy vegetarian food, half of the plastic disease could be cured.**

I remember when I was debating with Manish about milk. He said that people are treating animals very badly, because the demand for dairy products is increasing everyday. I could hardly agree that it is an exploitation of animals. I didn't see people using so many dairy products in India. I grew up in a village, and I used to drink milk, buttermilk and *ghee* (purified butter) at my home but we never treat the



animals badly. They are part of our family. But since I have seen people eating so much *queso* all the time in Oaxaca, I feel stronger with my decision to be vegan. I can't imagine how we get a huge amount of *queso*, if the number of animals is decreasing! How happy are we if we need to do experiments on animals in order to get more and more milk!



I found many different types of fruits, vegetables and nutritious herbs in Oaxaca. I am interested to know more about the food Mexican people used to eat before the Spanish came. I have been to some villages, where I didn't see much *queso*. A friend told me how many herbal plants were used in the food in indigenous communities instead of dairy products.

I tried to learn about some Mexican food which can be cooked without oil, sugar and milk products. I hope I will be able to experiment with some local recipes in Udaipur. I am not saying that I will not be eating anything made of dairy products, but **I am very much aware of the food I eat; not only for my own health, but also to support natural living. I feel it's my responsibility to not to be a part of exploiting nature.**





# Nuestro Papel (Our Role/Our Paper)

“Handmade paper is so expensive! We can buy much cheaper paper from factories.” I used to think about the cost we pay in currency, but never realized the cost we pay in exploitation of nature. How many of us know how many trees are cut down every day just to make paper? How much water is consumed and polluted in the process of factory-made paper?

Alberto and Ana have set up a small space where they make handmade papers out of different fibers, like banana-leaves and barks. Most of the materials they collect from their village - they grow their own trees and use waste parts of the leaves and bark. Alberto told me the whole history of paper making and import-export. He

showed us different samples of the papers used in different countries, like rice paper, leather paper, bark paper...

*Nuestro Papel* has two different meanings: - our paper and our role (as in our role in society). It is neither an institute nor a factory. They are trying to define



their role in society by making paper and paper products.

Since paper production is industrialized, the beauty of the paper making process is lost and the relationship with the raw materials is totally changed. I was shocked to know that 1 ton of paper production pollutes 15 tons of water! 40% of Mexican people don't read and write, but a large amount of papers are

produced for the people who are “educated” and who haven't grown a single tree in their life! The 40% of people (who don't use paper for reading and writing) are the people who take care of the natural resources.

I was aware of using paper for writing and printing - I thought the biggest part of the paper is used for printing. I already



stopped using plastic bags. But I got to know that only 17% paper is used for printing and rest of the paper is used for packaging, wrapping and for tissue papers! Saying "no" to plastic bags is a good step, but then what to use? I found some stores that sell things in paper bags or things wrapped in shiny paper. I have



some friends who buy things, which are packed in paper bags or paper boxes... but only to use and throw! I also used to do the same. **I never questioned the whole idea of packaging. Why everything is served in packets?** It doesn't matter, if it is packed in plastic or paper or something else. I am not trying to criticize those people or the culture of consuming packaging. But I am trying to rethink my own lifestyle and want to discuss why we are trapped in a readymade culture?

on the street after using it once.

I don't know if I will continue making handmade paper. But my relationship with paper is completely changed now. **It is not**



**necessary to make everything you use in your life, but we should experience at least once the process of making things, which are part of our daily-life.** By making your own things, you can also challenge those 6% of the people who have controlled over 60% of the natural resources.

*Please contact Alberto or Ana to learn more*

*<papeloaxaca@hotmail.com>*



# How to save traditional healing knowledge?

"No! They will not tell you anything about their knowledge of healing. Traditional healers are very secretive people." Somebody told me this when I was searching for traditional healers in Oaxaca.

Why they should tell me about their knowledge? Thousands of people have visited Doña Sofia and told her, "Wow! You are doing great!" But then what? What would you like to do in your own life? She asked me why I came to Mexico and about what I want to know? She also checked with me to see if I have a real interest in healing. So she asked me if I could tell her about some plants. We both shared different uses of the same plants and talked about different ways of healing. It was good to share about urine therapy, as we both know about it. I am glad that I also could share about *Panchgavya Chikitsa* (healing with the five products of the cow: urine, dung, milk, curd and ghee).

What does 'healthy' mean? Looking physically fit? Learning about food is very important if you are going to learn about your health. Doña Sofia told me a story about when northern Mexican people came to southern Mexico (1910 - 20), they took everything with them when they left. There was no food left for local

people, except *Nopal* (schooled people call it cactus!) and corn. Cactus means useless plant (as I was taught)! She said people could save themselves by eating just *nopal* and corn. How nutritious this food is! We also have a similar story in Rajasthan: when Maharana Pratap (king of Mewar in the 16th century) was searching for food in the jungle during a freedom struggle, Bheels (an indigenous community) gave him *hamo* to eat. It's a healthy grain, but now it is called a kind of grass, as in a food for animals. He was able to survive on just *hamo*.

We found many interesting plants and we talked about their different uses. I got to know Hibiscus which is a good plant for diabetes; Mexican people drink the juice of its flowers mixed with water and sugar. If you have diabetes, then just leave out the sugar. Marigold flowers are used for steam baths - you can cure many different diseases by adding this plant to a steam bath. A tea can be made from mint, orange peels and lemon peels. You can use this tea for nervousness and for diarrhea.

## *Reflections from Katrien Dupont*

*About your question 'How can we prevent traditions from being commercialized? Maybe we should ask ourselves: Why are people interested in buying? How can we show people they don't need to buy it? etc. Why don't we/others like it to be commercialized? Even knowing when if it is commercialized, it will not be the same. Do all people 'need' the traditional value that is attached to this healing system? Can people 'self-rule' in this? Can they decide (on commercial grounds even) that for them they like to 'just benefit' from it because they like the feeling?*

*I will share with you that I went to Sauna for the first time some weeks back, since I had won an entrance ticket. Before, I never thought of buying a ticket and going there. To me, it was quite some experience: I felt great afterwards and entirely healed... but in a way I felt guilty due to the waste of water and energy used for this.*

# Possibilities of living without money

During my stay in Mexico, I tried to exchange things, skills and ideas instead of spending money. I knew that it will be challenging to do this with people whose language I didn't know.



One day, a friend told me that I should meet Sandrine, who is a sculptor (she works with ceramic). I was interested in working with clay and had some experiences in Udaipur. But she asked me to pay 150 pesos. She explained that this is a kind of full-time job for her, and she charges everyone who comes to work in the workshop. I asked her, if we can exchange something instead of money. We decided to cook some Indian food and then to work with ceramic.

She invited Maribel (one of her friends) to learn this cooking of different food. Annie was interested to learn sculpting, so she also decided to come. The four of us cooked broccoli without oil, chapatis and basmati rice. Later we worked with clay for 3-4 hours. Sandrine shared some basic techniques she learned from different indigenous artisans. We can use these



techniques to work with any kind of clay and can make anything with our imaginations. For example, she showed us a simple techniques for taking air out of the clay. I remember half of our sculptures got broken when we fired them

during the workshop we had in Molela (near Udaipur) because we couldn't take the air bubbles out of the clay, so when we fired at a certain temperature, the air broke them. We made some bowls with simple techniques.

While cooking food, we shared our personal stories of learning different things. Maribel told me about her brother who is also learning with traditional healers. Her brother never went to any institution for learning about healings and he has been practicing for last 3 years. She is going to put him in touch with Swapathgami Network. She is going to take me to meet a healer in Oaxaca City, where we will experience *Temazcal* (a kind of therapy).

A new friend suggested that I should meet one more artist, Gabriela Leon. For me, it was not so important to meet artists, as my basic focus is on healing. But I made this choice on Sunday (generally most people don't work on Sunday). Gabriela studied painting in university,

but she never painted for real. She makes sculptures with ceramics and handmade papers. We had a discussion about some different things, like what does it mean to be an artist? How can we live our life artistically instead of just painting on a paper or sculpting? We came up with the idea of doing something together. We (the 3 of us, Alberto from Papel Oaxaca was also there) made some jewelry with different materials and talked about using waste materials. Gabi makes jewelry with the waste pieces of handmade paper that she gets from Alberto who makes handmade papers and some paper products (like diaries, photo frames). But I could hardly tell if people are aware of using plastic, rubber and other toxic materials. Gabi liked the bag I had with me. It was made of waste tire tube. And she wants to organise a workshop on making things out of rubber tire-tubes. We will do it together if I don't find anything else to do next Sunday.

I want to share one more experience I had in Mitla. I had no idea that what I was going to do there, because I went there just for 2 hours in the afternoon with no one else. I met a family in a shop, where they sale *khadi* (handmade cloths). They weave them in their house and sell them in this market. We started talking about different things that they do and what I do in India. One of the women asked me



for a natural treatment, when I told them that I am learning about natural healings. I am glad that I could tell her about some herbs that she can easily find and heal herself. She gave me one T-shirt as a gift. Another woman gave me a frock for my daughter and the other one gave me a kind of shawl for my wife! I wanted to pay for them, but they didn't accept it. Then I made some jewelry and gave it to them. I didn't even pay for seeing ruins in Mitla. It is a tourist place, but I was able to deal with the guard, who allowed me to enter without ticket!



I can strongly say that it is quite possible to re-create a culture of exchange, a culture of gifts, a culture of relationships anywhere, everywhere. The question is how to make it possible? I am on my way to explore these possibilities. Please let me know, if you have any suggestions, ideas and experiences to share with me.



# Tonantzin Tlalli (Mother Earth)

I promised Iliana (when we all were in the Berkana conference) I would come back to Tonantzin Tlalli for a few days. I was so inspired by this place and some people like Don Tino and Iliana.

This time I had enough time to work with my hands and to learn with Don Tino. The first day, I enjoyed working with Pedro and Rufino. We made doors for the bathrooms by using wood pieces and some other materials. *Bueno Carpintero* (good carpenter)! Rufino would always use this sentence, whenever I made any mistake. I don't know if he was making fun of me, but I really enjoyed working with them. **I don't think any of us were professional carpenters in the whole group, but we all could use all the tools and could make the structure we needed.**



I also offered them some of my little knowledge about herbal plants. So we made a herbal hair oil with Aloe Vera, Fenugreek and coconut oil. This is a very simple medicine, can be used for hair loss, sunburn, and some skin diseases. We couldn't finish the whole process because I had to leave this morning but the rest of the process they can do themselves.

Some of them couldn't believe it when I asked them to make a herbal soap with cow-dung. I brought some clay from India, just to compare and to ask them for similar clays that we can find in Mexico. Poncho, Annie and I went for a walk to search for good clay and we came back with 3 different types. The next morning Annie and I worked in a farm with Don Tino – we ploughed with ox. We collected some cow-dung for the soaps from his house.

We experimented with some local herbs to make the soap. Iliana suggested to use lemongrass, and Poncho asked, if we can mix some other local herbs. The whole process of making soaps was interesting and different for me too. For the first time, I realised that we could mix white clay with the water, so we don't

have to pound it for long time. It's much easier than pounding.

Annie and I went for a walk in the jungle with Don Tino. He showed us so many plants and their use in local language. It was hard to find their botanical names or English names. But I realised that all these treasures could have been lost, if people could find their botanical names. I think this is a way to save this knowledge. If I have a deep interest about learning about all these plants but then I'd have to spend years with these people.

I was surprised to know about some plants that I never thought could be used as medicines. *Lantana*, *Babool* & *Bougainvillea* are available in large quantities in Udaipur. I used to think (as most people think) that *Lantana* and *Bougainvillea* have no use except decoration! I thought *Lantana* was a big problem as it is growing so fast and we don't know what to do with it. Don Tino told us that the mixture of *Lantana* and shy plant can be used for diarrhea and *Bougainvillea* can be used for cough. I am trying to know



what kind of *nopal* (a kind of cactus) we have in our region and if we can use it for cooking.

Last night, we had a celebration for planting new seeds. We spread all the different seeds on the ground which we were suppose to plant next morning. And then we had a bonfire. Everyone shared what seeds mean to each of us and how we celebrate planting seeds. Some of us shared some stories and traditional ways of celebrating.



# Building a Straw Bale House

Last week I got a chance to learn building straw bale houses. I met Adriana, who has built houses with straw bales. She took me to the place where they were building a new house. I don't know if it was a coincidence but I met Pablo again (I already met him during my last stay in San Agustin when I was walking on the road) and found that he was the owner of the house we were building.

In our region (Mewar and Marwar), people used to make their houses with mud and different types of natural materials. My house also was built with mud and straws, but since we (my brother and me) were "educated", we decided to build a "pakka house" (built with stones, lime and cement). This straw bale house made me to think again about my own house.

5 adults and 2 kids (3 years young) worked together for four hours. The materials we used for making straw bales are easily available in our region and we have to pay almost nothing for them! I could find all the wheat straws on my uncle's farm. A small water pond (in front of my house) could supply me all the mud and sand. I don't have to pay for donkey dung! Wheat straw is not a waste material for me, as we use it for feeding to cows and other animals, but it was good to know that we can use it for building a house.

During these four hours, we basically prepared a mixture of red clay, sand and donkey dung, and started plastering on the straw walls. Adriana told me that she learned this skill by her own interest and now she helps other people to build their houses. Pablo is a biologist by his formal study, so I was curious to know that why he decided to build his house with natural materials instead of having a big concrete house. He told me that he tried to live with nature many times, but he always

had a fear that is impossible to live organically in a complete way. The house he is building now is also made of mud and concrete both. What he wanted to explain is that it's not necessary to jump in to natural life, but we still can take small steps from where we are standing now. We all shared our knowledge about what different kinds of clay and other materials can be used and how can we identify the right materials without asking a professional engineer. It reminded me of how my mother could tell me to bring the right mud for plastering our floor and making "maandana" (a traditional art of painting on floors).

**No one asked me about my educational qualification while working on this house. And I was neither selected nor rejected for the skill they needed. Both kids were also working with us, no one gave them any marks or grades for the wonderful work they did.**

Adriana showed me her house, which she made with mud-adobes. She has made a dry compost toilet inside the house. She said, "Don't worry, it doesn't smell more than the bathroom-water! All the chemicals we rub on our body to show that we're 'clean' really smell worse than our shit!" She is going to convert this house in to a greenhouse.

I wasn't prepared to attend a birthday party when Adriana asked me. But I found it very interesting when I met many people from different countries in this party. Sheryl (I met her during my last visit) was also there with her husband, she introduced me to Pia (who is a mid-wife and works with traditional mid-wives).



# Nueve Lunas (Nine Moons)

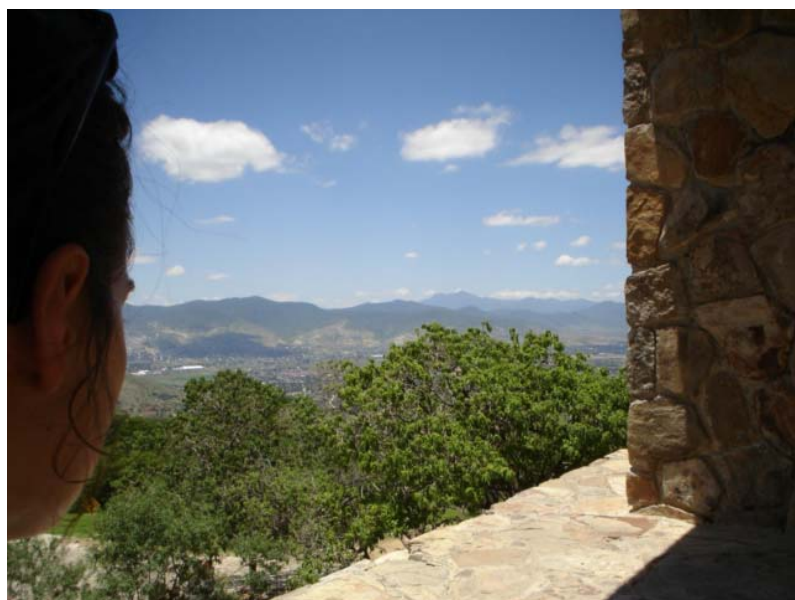
I met a *partera* (mid-wife) in an organisation called *Nueve Lunas* (Nine Moons) and we had some discussions. I've never had a chance to talk to mid-wives before I visited this organisation I used to work with a big NGO called Barefoot College based in Rajasthan, where they have a project for mid-wives. But Barefoot College has given a space to 'qualified doctors' (!) and these doctors give trainings to all mid-wives! As I was not interested in allopathic medicines, I didn't try to learn about it. There was one more reason that I would always think: why should I learn or talk about women's matters?! Only women should know about their body!

I was ashamed to answer, when Araceli (one of the young mid-wives) asked, "Where were your children born? In a hospital or at home?" She was expecting my answer to be 'at home,' because I told her that I am a healer and I have not taken any other medications in the last 2 and half years. Both of our children were born in a hospital. I also was trapped in modern medicinal system until our 2nd child born (3 and half years ago). There are some mid-wives in my village too, very old and experienced women, but no certificates! My mother also helps other women to give birth and she knows how to live and give care during the pregnancy period. But my in-laws live in a town and they have started believing that hospitals are better options

then mid-wives. So they took their daughter to a hospital after having a debate with my mother.

Araceli told me, there are not only *Parteras* (mid-wives), but also *Parteros* (male healers for births) in Mexico. And they are trying to involve *parteros* in *Luna Llena*. Luna Llena is a centre for mid-wives, where traditional and young midwives work together. Araceli herself has been learning with a traditional *partera*, Cristina for last 4 years. As she told me, it has been a completely different experience from institutional learning. I was little surprised that a young woman (who grew up in Mexico City) has made a choice to be a mid-wife instead of trying to be a doctor or something. Later, I got to know that there are many girls who are learning with *parteras*.

"It's a first step in taking charge of our health in our own hands" she said, when I shared my ideas of living a medicine-free life. And it's true that if we are willing to have a poison



free body, then we need to start from birth. It is same with the mother earth and the seeds. We have had to use so much organic fertilizer and now we have been trying for the last 5 years to make our land chemical free, because we used chemical fertilizers for 3 years. How long it takes to recover! **We have polluted everything - our food, our land, our house, our body, our heart, our mind, our spirit... Isn't it a serious matter? Do we even know how many chemicals we feed our body and throw on mother earth everyday?**

"How can we change the world? We need some experts and leaders!" many people says when I ask them to do something. I heard what doña Queta said about birthing a child: "You hungry, you eat. You thirsty, you drink. So if you have a baby inside, you have the capacity and the wisdom to give her/him birth." Giving birth to a child is a spiritual, sacred, peaceful, natural and cultural process. Why do we need experts and violent process for that? I learned about the first and most important women's right. I would like to ask all the women's rights campaigners, if they have this right on their list of women rights.

It is interesting to know that there are many similarities in Indian and Mexican healing therapies. There are many different kind of *Curanderos* (healers) in Mexico, like *Temazcaleros* (who use *temazcal* therapy, healing by heat), *hueseros* (who work with bones), *chupadors* (who suck poisonous things from the

body), *parteras/parteros* ... And they all have different kind of diagnosis methods, like – *velas* (candles), *cartas* (cards), *Limpia* (cleansing with eggs)...I wonder, if there was a connection in Indian and Mexican people hundreds or thousands of years ago. How do we have these similar healing therapies? Chanting, massaging, cleansing spirits, urine therapy, using lots of similar herbal plants, using cow-dung for cleaning body as a disinfectant?

I talked to Araceli about how new mid-wives (who come from different backgrounds and environments) learn and unlearn in their centre? Mostly traditional healers are very old and I don't see so many young people who are learning to carry these traditions and responsibilities. Of course, there are some young people who are learning to get degrees in *ayurveda*! Learning about techniques is very easy, but the techniques can be very dangerous too, if people don't learn when and why to use them. Many people and organisations work with different techniques, and they train people to use them as a profession. *Ayurvedic* doctors and *Gunis* (traditional healers who use herbal plants) use the same kind of therapies and plants but certified *ayurvedic* doctors have no vision, no purpose other than just healing physically.

I would like to ask this question to all of you. What alternative ways can we make to keep "traditions" alive? (please share some new ideas other than writing books, making websites, organising conferences and trainings)

# Temazcal :

## A ritual, spiritual and natural process of healing

I had a picture of Temazcal in my mind because I have heard about it from some friends. I thought it was similar to a herbal sauna bath. I had a sauna bath once in Thailand. So, I was not too excited. I was invited to do this ritual by a new friend, Maribel (I met her at Sandrine's place where we cooked food together). There were 9 people in Temazcal.

I had a half hour to talk with Jesus (the healer who prepared *temazcal* for us) before we entered Temazcal. I saw a different kind of herbal garden at this place. I found some native Mewari plants there. But Jesus said that they have had these plants for hundreds of years. They have *Dhatoora* (a well-known plant for making people mad! but also a medicinal plant) and *Satyanashi* (the Hindi name), which is also a native plant in India. He told me some different uses of these plants and also castor plants.

We all got *Limpia* (cleansing by *copal* smoke), before we entered a dark room prepared for *Temazcal*. Each of us got a bunch of different herbs (basil, rosemary, rue, perul and aloe vera). We sat in a circle in the dark room, prayed, and did chanting in Spanish and Sanskrit, then we put hot stones in the pit in the middle of the circle and Jesus put some water on the stones. We stayed in the room for 3 hours. It was a collective ceremony, not just to heal physically,



but also to get together in a space where we could breathe together, feel each-other as a collective and give thanks to the earth, the fire, the sky, the water, the sun. It is a universal truth that our body is made of these five elements. And it's our responsibility to live according to natural harmony.

I was full of peace, clean and very light when I came out of the room (it's hard to explain in English). I think Temazcal was a part of life for Mexican people. They used to have Temazcal once every few months or once a year. But now it is going to be the fashion! There are not so many people now who go for Temazcal with a real or deeper purpose. Like someone said, "Well, I am not a spiritual man, I came here to feel good!" It's like many people do nothing whole day, but they do Yoga in the morning and try to prove how they are aware about their health!

I am worried that Temazcal also will become available in the market to buy or will be available at tourist places, where people can go sometimes to feel good!

## Reflections from Molly Ruth Batchelder

*Your reflections are beautiful. These women you met seem so wonderful, so strong and intelligent. Yes, I agree with the idea that with epidurals and vaccinations and this drug and that drug, we are weakening our children at birth. And how you relate that to the chemicals we put in our Earth and how long they take to leave, it gives me a rounder, fuller view of the damage that we are causing our bodies with constant drugs for this head ache and that back pain. In California, we have always been known for our rich soil that has produced so much fruit and vegetables. But today, big factory farms have spent so long putting chemicals into the ground that the soil is literally dead. It is now necessary to add chemicals to the ground just to make the plants grow. Nothing would grow otherwise. And we can relate this to our bodies as well: We start at birth adding drugs to our system, and we continue to add these drugs throughout our lives. When we get older, the drugs become necessary just to keep us alive. What natural abilities we one had to fight off a sickness is dead. Scary.*

*You also pose a very important and hard question about learning traditional medicine and how we do it and the responsibility that is attached with that. Yes, indeed the ideal way would be to apprentice with an elder traditional healer, learning all the ways that are lost in books, discover the esoteric knowledge (sacred, mysterious) that is only passed on by mouth. How do we keep these traditions alive? How do we seek out our elders who are healers?*

*Especially in western countries like America where these arts are all but dead. How do we put more value into learning traditional healing than just a way to make money? We want more people to know about the alternatives to western medicine, but if we use traditional healing arts in the same structure as western medicine, most of it is lost. The spirituality is taken*



*out. I think this is what it comes down to.*

*I think by just posing the question, as you have done, gives*

## Reflections from Aerin M. Dunford

*Hi Ram-ji and others. So I have been reading and posting Ram's reflections from his time in Oaxaca and I thought that so many of the things he had to say were so interesting that I better start a discussion forum here.*

*Mostly what I am interested in is the last blog that Ram wrote. He was speaking of his experience with Temazcal, a traditional type of healing ceremony that he participated in. His question, in the end, was related to the phenomenon all over the world that we have seen with Yoga - Ram feels that "many people do nothing whole day, but they do Yoga in the morning and try to prove how they are aware about their health!" and I think he's saying that it has become something to be bought and sold in the market place.*

*Now, I agree that almost everything in our world today has become commodified and Yoga is definitely not free from the clutches of commercialism (far from it). But I guess my question is: "What is wrong with people doing things to make themselves feel good?" I realize that there is a definitively Western bias here probably, and I do like Yoga quite a lot. I have worked very hard over the past seven years to find my spiritual path, and it has been very difficult and thus far, not so fruitful. Some would probably say that I chose the "wrong" path to begin with. I guess this is where I run into some trouble though - who is to say what is good or bad for someone else?*

*I guess I'm just a little confused by the idea that we have to keep things like Temazcal and Yoga "safe." I guess I trust that the spirit in which these practices have been done for thousands and thousands of years will protect their true nature. The other thing I think is that we will find what we are looking for, no matter what. If you are looking for true, deep spirituality you will find it (no matter what that means for you). I'm not going to be the one saying, "You should do it this way or that way..."*

*I also know that I talk/write too much. Any other thoughts?*

*someone who interested in healing more of an understanding of the responsibility that comes with healing. And I know you wanted other suggestions besides using the web, but I really think that by sharing personal experiences, we can come to a better idea of what is best for us. And the internet is a way to connect us all across the globe. See how your experiences have only widened my understanding of myself and my intentions of self discovery, my place and creativity with healing? This was a powerful narrative. The truth is, if someone wants to learn the ways of healing, and has integrity and beauty behind that life decision, I believe he/she will not choose the easy path to knowledge but seek out the hidden, sacred knowledge. This path takes a lifetime to discover. But for a true healer, that is the life they have chosen, right?*

# closing reflections...

Since I met indigenous people and traditional healers in Mexico, I am able to see things from different perspectives. I already had faith in indigenous ways of living (as I grew up in a village), but I was taught that we can not survive in the world if we try to apply the traditional practices. And I was taught most of the traditions are superstitions.

I found so many similar ways (compare to India) of healing, farming and living. But today, many of them are considered as backwards, undeveloped and superstitions in both countries. For example, *Tulsi / albahaca* (basil) is a very important and sacred plant in both countries. We both worship this plant. I am curious to explore how do we have these similarities, if there was no transportations and communications before modern civilization? It made me to think about our local stories. My grandmother used to tell me some stories about how people would travel and communicate before this modern technology. I have some questions about why modern institutions are avoiding all traditions and putting bad labels on them?

After having spent 6 weeks in Mexico, I can connect my struggle with the larger world. I could build meaningful relationships with some people from Oaxaca and I will

continue to keep sharing with these new friends. I am inspired of their small-small experiments of living organically and their beautiful connections with each other.

I spent sometimes with a community of young people, who are practicing inter-dependent lives. They live in different places around Oaxaca City, but are connected with each other by sharing and exchanging their materials, products, skills and ideas. It is a little similar to what we are trying in Udaipur. We also have been working on making learning webs in the city we live in.

Most of the people I met in this community are *Swapathgamis*, so it will be a good contribution for us, if they share their stories and experiments with other *swapathgamis*. They can write for the magazine in English, or I can translate their work into Hindi.

I have learned some different techniques of healing, farming, cooking and different arts. So, I will share these new skills with my friends in Udaipur, specifically,

different therapies, use of herbal plants, new ideas for farming, composting, making handmade paper, healthy cooking with corn and amaranth, some techniques of clay sculpting...



I miss the San Agustin community most. It is a small network of creative people, where they are experimenting with different things, like building natural houses, composting, making different kinds of arts and crafts and sharing with local people. I miss my wonderful friends from 'Mundo Mujer' (women's world). They were the first people who were happy to invite me at their place and gave me a chance to work for a week. Only two women doing many things! They can do almost everything they need in their life.



I miss my family in Oaxaca. I stayed in mama Christina's house while I was in Oaxaca. She has given her whole house for rent and moved to an apartment, so I also had to leave that house. But she took me in her new rented house where I spent a week without paying anything. We both cried together, when I left... I don't know why. I don't know how



we got attached. We could hardly understand each other's spoken language, but we know each other. Now I understand there are many different types of languages, which cannot be written on

papers and cannot be taught. We could build strong relationship. I find it very different when I compare my relationships with 'educated' and 'uneducated or less educated' people. And I think this is what we need to learn from 'illiterate' and 'uneducated' people.

I miss the family I met in Mitla market, where I could share my knowledge of healing and got some different gifts. It was my first experience in a tourist market where I could barter my skills and didn't buy anything. Generally, I avoid visiting tourist places, as I believe that things are very expensive in tourist markets. **But this experience showed me that we could change anything, anywhere, if we build meaning relationships.**

Thank you for offering me the opportunity to experience a healing journey in Mexico.

Yours truly,  
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