

THE SPIRIT OF HEMLOCK

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Preface

All traditional cultures have a history of using plants as medicine. There are varying legends about how ancient people came to know that a specific plant was useful for a specific condition. These stories generally involve either a mythical being who brought the information or an event where a plant or even an entire jungle spoke to someone. Sometimes, an individual who developed a particular effective combination of herbs would say that the formula came to them in a dream. These are such commonly described “routes of transmission” in many cultures that one must wonder what is occurring. Do plants really talk to us, and if so, how? One hypothesis for these traditions in pre-literate societies is that there is a neural mechanism in the brain that takes visual and unconsciously perceived patterns and converts them into information. This is possibly the same area of the brain involved with language and the pattern-recognition of reading. Therefore, by learning to read, we trade one skill for another.

I am also constantly amazed by descriptions plants that spoke to humans and gave complex information which hundreds of years later is found to have a significant biochemical basis discoverable only by analysis with instrumentation. This is especially true in Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine, where properties of herbs are altered by sophisticated treatment with chemicals or physical processes, such as frying in vinegar. (This converts certain molecules to an acetate form and makes them more water soluble.) How did they know?

The true experience described in the following article is possibly an example of this type of information formation. Although nothing was derived concerning actual usage of plant material, interesting existential aspects were involved. In doing the field work, I was much more interested in the chemical components of the plant. If there was something suggestive or self-hypnotic involved in the process, I would assume that the “information” given would have more likely concerned that.

Was this the same type of experience as someone in the 5th century BCE China having a dream about how to process *Pinellia rhizome* so that it was not poisonous? Clearly not. Was this a circumstance where my subconscious processing of existential issues chose a life-event as a way to manifest an interesting concept? Maybe. Is the process one where plants don’t talk, but the consciousness works something out on a deep level and then presents it as a story superimposed on events of daily life in a waking dream? This might be – the brain loves to tell stories. The bottom line, however, is that I just don’t know. Decide for yourself.

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Hemlock is the most famous poison in literary history, being the main ingredient (with opium) of the infusion taken by Socrates in 392 BCE as a punishment for his opinionated verbal ramblings. In fact, the narrative about the death of Socrates provided me with the first hints that hemlock would be a topic suitable for comprehensive research. The clues are thus: Socrates drinks the poison, and after a few moments someone suggests that he lie down. Common knowledge of the time evidently was that the poison first weakens the legs, and then produces an advancing paralysis. This paralysis moves up the body, eventually causing death by respiratory failure. During this entire process, the victim is aware of what is occurring. This explained Socrates' ability to continue conversation even after his drink.

This description is at odds, however, with other information sources. A description from the Renaissance tells of hemlock causing death accompanied by great pain and incredible abdominal and diaphragmatic spasms. (I do not believe that the opium added to the Socratic cocktail would prevent such convulsions.) A botanical text from the 1930's describes hemlock as being exceptionally poisonous. Yet, when I consulted a recent representative medical text on poisoning, hemlock is said to be of little danger, and suggests that most individuals who accidentally eat the plant survive without supportive medical care.

Wait a minute! What is going on here? A modern medical text says that hemlock is not worrisome. Another text (modern for its time sixty years ago) says that hemlock is a dangerous poison. Anecdotes from four hundred years ago describe violent convulsions, but 2,400 years ago drinking hemlock tea is reported to be a humane method of capital punishment. Was there a genetic mutation at some point?

The logical (and correct) answer is that the plant occurs as several species, and that the toxin is different among the species. My research disclosed that hemlock occurs in at least six different species. In some plants, the active toxins are present at dangerous levels only certain times during growth; others are violently poisonous at all times. There are two major toxins in the hemlock varieties. One of the active toxins produces the progressive symptoms described in Socrates; the other major toxin produces the signs of poisoning described as being accompanied by violent convulsions. Clearly, even at the time of Socrates, there was sophisticated botanical knowledge.

Two similar plants, two chemically different toxins, and still there are mysteries. By mysteries I mean the scientific questions that we can now answer with instrumentation. I also mean the almost mystical questions about the functioning of Nature that cannot be answered: Why are there poisonous plants? Why several varieties with different poisons? What purpose do these varieties serve?

My work to answer these questions led me into field research. Although I love books and my computer, being “boots on the ground” in a forest seems more like research. After reading much reference and written material on the topic, I set out to collect various specimens of hemlock so that I could conduct toxicological analyses of the plant. I use the word collect, rather than the word harvest. “To collect” implies to me that the intrinsic value of the plant continues even though it is removed from the ground. Harvest sounds like a process involved in raising a crop for money. I believe that just as there must be some reason for my presence here on this planet, there must also be a reason for the presence of several varieties of this poisonous plant. By keeping the mental semantics clear, I honor both the belief and the reason.

So, I ventured forth into the woods and forests and vacant lots in search of plants with leaf ridges running to the points of the leaves, and others with ridges and veins running to the notch between the points, and stems with purple stains and stems without purple stains. These plants became my friends. I pursued them in the same manner that I pursued the books containing their known history.

Now, however, a digression that will provide background leading to the major subject of this narrative: Many years ago, for several years, I studied and participated in various forms of the martial arts. Something within my personality required that I bang away with a wooden sword and throw knives and lose two pounds of sweat three evenings a week hurling people through the air and getting myself bounced on the ground, all in pursuit of the knowledge contained in obscure Asian philosophies. I learned many skills from these experiences; more importantly, I incorporated subjective conditions into my personality. The most significant of these conditions concerned accepting the portion of my Self that is capable of violence.

Many years ago I killed a young man after his behavior convinced me that my only proper course of action was to shoot him. Subsequently, I felt very bad: not that I killed him, but that I did not feel bad for having killed him. I felt guilty for not feeling guilty. After several years of martial arts experiences, I saw that my feelings about this incident were inappropriate and rooted in other people's religious guilt. I decided that it was better that I was alive and not dead, and that my personality contained an aspect not generally present in others: this was the aspect of extreme compassion coupled with the capability for extreme violence. If I was going to feel guilt about my capability for violence, then I also should feel guilt about my capacity for compassion. I didn't for the first, and I wasn't going to for the second. Having this knowledge, however, did nothing to increase my understanding of why I was that way or the purpose it might serve in my life.

At this point, let me state that everything heretofore said was merely a preamble to what is described next. You may accept what follows exactly as written, or you may choose to think of this as

my description of a dream, or perhaps this is scientific fiction, but it is all true. In any case, back to the hemlock story.

In early June, I located a fine specimen of *Conium maculatum* beside a trail in central San Mateo County. This species was introduced into the United States from England about two hundred years ago. The robust plant stood about six feet tall in the midst of several odd varieties of trailside brush. At the base of the plant were some small hemlock specimens ranging from a few inches to a foot in height. The main plant was in bloom: yellowish trails of pollen streamed with each sharp gust of wind. Black with red spots and red with black spots ladybugs crawled over large clusters of tiny flowers. Spiders busied themselves weaving webs among the rigid small new leaves and the brown-ing limp older leaves.

In preparation for my botanical and toxicological research, I photographed the plant in various ways: normal lens with skylight filter; close-up lens with extension tubes; ring flash with crossed polarizing filters. I carefully documented every aspect like this was a crime scene.

Then, it was time for the latex gloves and the pocketknife. As I approached the plant to take my samples, I noted that I had a headache. More a noise than a headache, more in my temples than the muscles in my neck, more like a hangover than from tension. I had not touched the plant yet; maybe I inhaled some pollen and was having an allergic reaction.

I looked closely at the plant: it seemed more real and more intensely green than a moment ago. I cut off stems and leaves and flowers, placing them in small bags. I shook pollen into a glass jar. I also wanted to take a complete plant so that I could compare the concentrations of the toxin in the stems and leaves and flowers and roots. A small plant at the base of the large one seemed more robust and attractive than the others. I began scraping the dry dirt away with my knife blade. The more I scraped and dug, the deeper the root went. I sought the horizontal root nodules and the main portion attaching to the stem and the tap-root-like structure winding between small rocks in the underground desert. The soil was very hard and very dry, therefore the root went very deep. I dug and exposed as much root as my patience allowed. Then I forced myself to dig some more out of personal discipline. Then I convinced myself that I would break the knife blade if I dug further. I removed all that I could of the plant, leaving behind some of the deepest root. A feeling of incompleteness remained buried in the ground. I wondered if this feeling was related to my headache.

My latex gloves were now striped with brown dirt adhering to yellowish juice from the plant. Some of the earliest sap was already turning orange from exposure to air and sunlight. I wrapped the samples collected, removed my gloves, packed my cameras, and placed everything in my bag. I walked the mile back to my truck carrying the feeling that something odd had occurred.

That night my dreams were of woodland streams, and trees blowing, and plants brushing against my face like tormenting wing-breaths of teasing birds. I awoke with the feeling I have when a

new poem is living in my Mind and must be written. I walked the eighteen-foot commute from the bedroom to my home office. I sat at my desk and explored my thoughts. The pungent stale smell of the hemlock still in the collecting bag filled the room. The odor became a presence in the room like a personality, and then began talking to me.

The following reads like my writing because it is, but it is also the voice that was in my consciousness. I started writing when it began talking – talking like words sound in my head when I read – and stopped when it was finished. I listened to its voice and wrote the following as if dictated:

"I am the Spirit of Hemlock. I am to the realm of plants as martial artists are in the realm of humans. A true martial artist is a personality type: a specific vibration within consciousness. We mean Death, but not in the sense of cruel and unreasoning attack. We are death in the sense of cleansing all realms of consciousness of those parts that are inappropriate or misaligned. I have the power to reach across levels of the vibrations of consciousness and touch something in the animal realm that is out of balance. When there is a specific kind of imbalance, it comes to me: then I strike, but not with malice. I strike with the Power to effectuate an outcome. There is no sensation of harm being done.

I have reached out, through the common vibrations of consciousness, to share myself with you. The spirit of a plant is that vibrational aspect of consciousness that perfects the purpose and manifestation of the plant's physical aspect. This vibrational aspect can be assumed by other creations of the conscious realm to varying degrees. In a sense, there is a Spirit of the Martial Artist that manifests in both Plants and Man. The human manifestation is obviously quite different than mine, but the purpose is the same since the source vibration is the same.

How does the Universe use us? Since consciousness is the link between vibration, one aspect of the manifestation speaking to another can make a more complete manifestation possible. We each learn from the other, and artistically increase our manifestation whether we know it or not.

The small plant that you took existed for your use. It did not decide to sacrifice itself for you. Such an idea is a purely human cause and effect way of structuring a reality. The plant, at that particular moment, was resonating with the purpose and desires in your thoughts. That resonance made it one with an aspect of Consciousness that you were trying to manifest. Your intention created a pattern that brought that particular plant into a domain of purpose. When you did not take the entire root, the plant spirit was not injured, for how can there be an injury to Purity?

Rather, a hole or lacuna was left in the domain of the intention-purpose transaction; incompleteness occurred. This is the incompleteness that you felt. It is good, however, to show reverence for the plant. To do so is to show reverence for the vibrational level of consciousness that the plant represents.

Contacting the Spirit of Hemlock, or the spirit of anything, means finding direct contact with the vibrational level of Consciousness. The Catholic Saints are a representation in the same way. The Saints are easier for some people because they can find a saint representing a specific human desire. The symbolism is easier to handle. This contact with a vibrational level allows a focused method for implanting patterns upon energy. The energy then manifests according to its meaning within the limitations imposed by thought and belief.

The Martial Spirit is a vibration of waiting. The true nature of martial arts is passive: it may seem otherwise because outcomes often require dynamic and active physical methods to achieve results. These physical acts, however spectacular, are merely tools. Some situation of imbalance existed first, and then congruence between the reality of the martial artist and the unbalanced situation had to exist. Only then are the skills of the martial artist properly applied. All time previous was merely waiting to provide correction, or a movement towards the fuller manifestation of the spirit of something else, or a healing.

The difference between a correction and a healing is that a correction takes away something standing in the way of manifestation, and healing moves something back into the vibration or path. Protection is the redirection, correction, or healing of something that would affect something else.

The martial artist protects by acting on something before something else occurs. *The martial art involved is the perfection of the waiting.*"

So, it had come to this in my middle age: plants were talking to me. The message seemed to have been encoded through the content of my dreams the preceding night. Whether the source of the experience was internal or external did not matter because everything the plant-spirit vision said made sense. I understood more about my Self. I now wait peacefully.