

Three Lessons I Learned from Indigenous Elders that Changed my Life by Altaire Cambata

Perhaps I took Albert Camus a bit too seriously when he recommended, *"Always go too far, because that's where you'll find the truth."* I'm not sure his literal recommendation was to travel to some of the most far-flung and remote destinations on the planet, but, nevertheless, it has been precisely in these places that I managed to stumble upon the Truth, or at least, compelling versions of it. My intention is to take you with me to the ends of the Earth, however briefly, to explore three life lessons that changed the direction of my life, forever.

Between 2011 and 2016 you would have found me spending extended periods of time in Indonesia, conducting fieldwork and research for various environmental and cultural projects. By way of divine intervention I ended up on a tiny limestone island occupying a mere 200 square kilometers in the Badung Strait, called *Nusa Penida*. It was in this remote pocket of traditional Balinese Hindu culture that I came to appreciate a philosophy that would become the framework for my life's work, and one that may resonate with you as well. You see, at the time I was studying climate change vulnerability on small island states, and more specifically, the effects of weather fluctuations on seaweed cultivation, the main cash crop of the region. I will never forget a conversation I had with an elderly man, deep wrinkles framing his smile, back permanently hunched due to his hours spent in the cold tides harvesting his crop, describing his point of view on climate change. He had no awareness of parts per million of carbon in the atmosphere, or what ice cores in Antarctica were telling us about the increase of greenhouse gases generated during the Industrial Revolution, but he looked at me quite emphatically and stated, *"Cuaca adallah rusak."* *The weather is broken.* I asked him how he felt about these changes, and on that day he taught me the philosophy of *"Tri Hita Karana"* — the Three Harmonies. These are the three harmonies that humanity must maintain in order to experience a harmonious life: harmony between people and people, harmony between people and nature, and harmony between people and spirit. When we are out of harmony in one area, all areas become imbalanced. Oh how the politics of our planet would shift were this philosophy adopted by our decision-makers!

From 2017-2018 I was fortunate enough to take several trips to Hawai'i. Here I became familiar with the wise and ancient insights of traditional Kahuna mysticism, and in particular, the teachings of Hawai'ian Kahuna elder Hale Makua, who described our true nature as a *Bowl of Light*: *"Sometimes we lie. Sometimes we steal. And sometimes we injure others (and ourselves) with our thoughts, our actions, or our words...it is as though we put a stone in our bowl, and some of the light goes out. Slowly through time, our bowl fills up with stones, and our light dims until it is nearly finished."* How do you think Kahuna Hale Makua recommended we empty stones from our Bowl of Light? He laughed and said, *"We simply dump it out! We start over then, but from that time forward, things are different. We begin to live our lives with awareness."* This teaching serves as a reminder to check in with the quality of my thoughts, words and actions, examining my bowl and its stones, recommitting daily to the light which is our natural state.

The Corfan indigenous people of southern Colombia, seem to have a genetic predisposition to hemihyperplasia of the legs, a condition where one leg is larger than the other, resulting in a slightly altered gait. The shaman who facilitates the spiritual ceremonies I attend in this part of the world shared an expression used frequently by his community, *"People will start breaking their legs to become Corfan!"* This inevitably leads to riotous laughter which is exactly the point: the Corfan laugh, and laugh, and laugh, and laugh, and laugh. They constantly make self-deprecating jokes, tease each other, and revel in the cosmic riddle that is our life. Their infectious happiness is undeniable. They also happen to be guardians and stewards to some of the most sophisticated approaches to healing I have come across, and they each recognize that laughter is one of the most powerful medicines we have at our disposal. They can regularly be heard saying, *"I'm screwed - but I'm happy!"* They recognize that above all else, a life lived in happiness, regardless of circumstances, is a life of wellbeing and miracles.

And so, in this quick trip around the world, and the many different worlds that inhabit it, I hope I have offered you a few lessons worth considering. It is these philosophies that I weave into my healing arts practice at Mytree Yoga. My indigenous teachers, these messengers of the truth to whom I owe so much, have taught me that experiencing our light in every dimension of our

wellbeing — physical, mental, emotional and spiritual — is the greatest gift we can give ourselves, each other, and the planet. And this is why I do what I do.

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