

# ***The Teachings of Don Juan by Carlos Castaneda***

***The solitary trials and achievements of a novice “brujo” to perceive various realities  
of an impersonal and unloving cosmos***

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## **INTRODUCTION**

*The Teachings of Don Juan* is the first book of a series of writings produced by the anthropologist Carlos Castaneda, describing the training he went through in plant-assisted shifts of consciousness, as well as perception of subtle realms. The book represents the attempt of Castaneda to account, in a systematic way, for the teachings received from the Mexican *brujo*, Don Juan Matus, with the aim to set the grounds for further research into the approaches to gaining first-hand knowledge about the transphysical worlds.

According to Dr. Eric M. Weiss, the creator of the concept of “transphysical worlds,”<sup>1</sup> there are strong grounds in favour of a new metaphysics, which encompasses both physical and transphysical worlds. The latter are as objective as the physical world, but they operate according to laws that are different from the ones that govern the physical world. This is also the main message conveyed by Castaneda’s book—*i.e.*, that he perceived, during his experiences supervised by Don Juan, other realities/worlds that are as objective and ontologically real as the physical world, and that, at the same time, as Don Juan repeatedly mentioned to his student, *it does not add anything to our knowledge just to interpret the experiences and perceptions about the transphysical worlds in the same way as we interpret physical reality*, given that the subtle realms function according to different laws and principles.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Long Trajectory. The Metaphysics of Reincarnation and Life and Death*, Dr. Eric M. Weiss, iUniverse, Inc. Bloomington, 2012.

Before moving on, I need to explain the subtitle I gave to this essay—*The solitary trials and achievements of a novice “brujo” to perceive various realities of an impersonal and unloving cosmos*. Thus, Castaneda is undertaking what seems to be a mentoring programme, as a single student of Don Juan, into a type of knowledge that is described in words elusively, nevertheless that is strongly represented by the events that take place. The novice is tested, challenged, and pushed constantly, including by experiences that lie at the edge of life and death. The achievements are marked by Don Juan, similarly the failures, the latter being a boost to continue striving.

Throughout plant ingestion and its effects, the student manages to perceive differently than the usual day-to-day perception (e.g., sounds, colours, sizes, shapes, sense of dematerialisation, etc.), consequently, becoming aware of another reality, or what might even be numerous “realities.” I finish my sub-title with the wording “an impersonal and unloving cosmos” because, remembering most of Carlos Castaneda’s books, I always got the same feeling of a cold universe, which the novice is trying to figure out and to navigate through, without perceiving the love or care, or sense of meaning and purpose that we encounter in other writings that involve consciousness. I would contrast this experience to the one where the protagonist is guided and guarded by benevolent beings in various realities, while at the same time he feels that love “moves the stars” (Dante), and that his individual purpose is intertwined, in a deeply meaningful way, with the purpose of the cosmos.

One of the overriding messages conveyed by Don Juan and Castaneda, and the one that I am focusing on in this essay, is that humans can access other states of consciousness, and implicitly gain knowledge about alternative realities that are as valid and as real as what we consensually call “the objective reality” through, in this case, the ingestion or smoking of specific types of plants. The author provides a map and main guidelines for this endeavour, partly as they were received from his teacher, and partly from the conclusions of his own practice.

Furthermore, a secondary message conveyed by Castaneda, nevertheless equally significant for consciousness studies, is that alternative states inform our everyday lives. For example, Don Juan urges Castaneda, at the beginning of one of the exploratory sessions of the subtle

realms, enhanced by the mescalito plant, to “ask a question” before ingesting the plant, and moreover “to ask *Mescalito* a question.” By that time, according to Castaneda’s narrative, Mescalito represents a distinct consciousness into which the novice can tap into, a distinct being/entity, and a bearer of knowledge. Towards the end of the session, Carlos received the answer to the question he posed, through something like a movie running in front of his eyes, during which he witnessed his own death. As Dr. Christian de Quincey maintains, “energy flows, *consciousness knows*,” thus the novice perceived glimpses of what “consciousness knows” in the transphysical worlds.

I would say that the value that can be gained when alternative states begin to infuse into ordinary reality resides in the fact that we get access to new information, other than the information we have available through our ordinary perception. For example, it is the case of information about potential future events in our own lives or at planetary level, that we may be able to avoid or at least prepare for (*e.g.*, dreams about accidents or natural calamities, that hence inform our decisions to act to prevent them or move to a safe distance from them.) Nevertheless, I would caution about the fact that we have a handicap while dealing with this type of new information, because we tend to interpret it through the same lenses of perception that we use during our everyday lives. We are biased by our existence within the physical world. Consequently, to embark in a systematic and in-depth exploration of the transphysical worlds, we need to be careful about how we manage the new information.

On the other hand, I would argue that the value of alternative states of consciousness should not be in any case limited to our individual stories, to our subjective quest for happiness, or to our subjective need to avoid or bypass suffering in our lifetime. On the contrary, even though we explore the transphysical worlds using our subjective perspective, we need to maintain an objective manner of systematising and interpreting the new information. Experiences of alternative realities shift or change ordinary life because they give us the sense of a greater meaning, something we can relate to, benchmark against, learn from, and be inspired by, at least towards taking better decisions within the physical world.

Eric Weiss states that our human existence is influenced by cosmic aims (i.e, not only by individual aims), when defining the notion of “intergrade” relations, as causal interactions between high-grade and lower-grade actualities. Higher-grade occasions produce a causal effect in the waking world, yet they are transphysical because they do not inhabit the same time and space as low-grade occasions studied by physics. Consequently, when we perceive the subtle realms, we get the chance to grasp more knowledge about the cosmic aims.

As Juan Matus argues, the consciousness of the cosmos is *one*, and the entire cosmos is energy and consciousness:

*“You have the vanity to believe that you live in two worlds. (...) There is only one world.”*

## **MAPS AND GUIDELINES FOR THE TRANSPHYSICAL WORLDS**

I would position at the core of this essay one of Carlos Castaneda’s statements that encapsulates his conclusion of many years of practical studies:

*(The teachings represent) “... an extremely vast system of beliefs, within which search itself represents an experience that is leading to bliss.”*

This statement represents Castaneda’s characterisation of the approach to consciousness studies professed by Don Juan, and structured into a specific body of knowledge encompassing specific methods, values, and principles, *i.e.*:

1. **Apprenticeship:** There is a *clear systematic approach in studying, practicing, and experiencing* the altered states of consciousness induced by plant ingestion. There are several steps and procedures, and they should be applied in a specific order. This principle refers to the overall apprenticeship, and to the way plants are prepared for ingestion or smoking. During the entire period spent as a student, Castaneda must pass several tests to be able to access the next level of the teachings. Moreover, Don Juan mentions several times that “he chose” Castaneda as his apprentice, and that the teachings are transmitted by way of mouth from teacher to student, during many years of joint work and collaboration.
2. **Practice and Ritual:** What Castaneda defines as “beliefs” may as well be considered as a *body of knowledge constructed gradually through first-hand experience* by

generations of *brujos*. The “beliefs” represent steppingstones of the teachings, and they encompass the conclusions gained through practice—*e.g.*, referring to cautions that need to be taken, risks to be avoided, typical experiences obtained by ingesting or smoking specific plants, ways to use and prepare plant parts, etc. For example, it is interesting to follow the level of detail of preparation needed for managing the plants—the cutting, burying, splitting, mixing, etc. As a parallel to other practices, we often find a significant role attached to rituals during consciousness work. Most of these practices imply prescriptive steps, a rollout of stages, symbols, and tools (*e.g.*, Reiki, meditation, T’ai ch’i, Aikido etc.).

3. ***Path With a Heart:*** Given that Castaneda, Don Juan, and all their predecessors walked through “uncharted” territory when they used plants for attaining altered states of consciousness that led to the perception of transphysical worlds, the *pioneering dimension of this quest* for knowledge remains crucial for all those involved in the practice. Consequently, what Castaneda mentions about the constant and consistent *search*, remains a principle that stands at the core of the teachings. One needs to assume an attitude that reflects an incessant thirst for finding out more, for discovering more, for adding new information to the already existing body of knowledge. In this respect, Juan Matus uses the phrasing “*Caminos con corazon—Avenues with heart* [aka: “The path with a heart.”]: *All roads lead nowhere, yet one has heart ... Por ahi yo recorro mirando, mirando, sin aliento.*” The commitment is enduring, recalling a marathon, with no apparent prizes. I will come back to the idea of the “path with a heart” later in the current essay, when I shall refer at the aspect of the meaning that a human being may or may not grant to this quest.
4. ***The Bliss of Transformation:*** Castaneda’s statement accounts as well for the “blissful” experience of this knowledge quest. Thus, after his first “unusual reality” experience from the book (and the sole way to learn, in Don Juan’s opinion, while “learning from conversation” is nonsense and loss of precious time), Castaneda finds himself coming back to the “normal consciousness state,” which he calls “serious and sober,” and says, “I forgot I am a human!” He continues that the sadness he felt brought him to tears. Indeed, from the practice of alternative and higher states of consciousness, I can testify that the experiences usually bring a profound sense of joy. I strongly believe in the joy attached to following a path of “knowledge,” to

come back to the terminology of Don Juan. Perceiving the ineffable brings tears of joy and sadness, at the same time. It is important to observe this characteristic of blissfulness experienced through higher states of consciousness and by perceiving subtle realms, given that this sense of profound joy might indicate that there is something beyond the suffering within the physical world, something beyond the ephemeral life, that there is no “difference between things,” as Juan Matus maintains:

*“The Protector showed you the world of happiness, where there is no difference between things.”*

Once we perceive (the one) consciousness and energy of the cosmos, then separation, antagonism, and polarities vanish.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR APPLYING THE TEACHINGS**

There are several key aspects to be noted by the student about the use of the teachings, and Don Juan repeatedly refers to them:

### **Discipline of the practice**

Besides the procedures of plant harvesting and preparation for smoking or ingestion, Don Juan highlights the importance of the right attitude, consistent practice, and discipline in acquiring and working with the new knowledge transmitted by the *brujos*. Don Juan demands the application of the same well-organised principles as he received from his teacher, empowered by courage and a decisive attitude:

*“A human being proceeds towards knowledge as if he goes to war: awake, with fear, with respect and complete trust.”*

For sure, it was a big challenge for the *brujos* to explore the transphysical worlds with the support of the plants, and to structure a body of knowledge ready to be expanded by future generations. Even with the risk of losing their lives, they managed to systematise, communicate, and then teach others about the new knowledge.

### **Finding, losing, and re-gaining the sense of meaning**

Castaneda's book reflects human efforts to give meaning to events that are outside our day-to-day experience. Juan Matus may, in some cases, as a teacher, provide guidance, yet in other cases, he does not cease to stress the fact that such an attempt to give meaning is useless and that it does not make any sense to even try it.

Is there an absolute meaning in a *brujo's* quest for knowledge? Is there an intrinsic value to the quest? One potential answer lies in the reference to the "path with heart" (*caminos con corazon*) meaning that there is no overriding answer to our questions, not one single option, yet the human explorer into the consciousness of the cosmos (or of self) chooses with love and courage (i.e., attributes of the heart,) hence gathering the motivation and commitment to pursue the path of knowledge.

### **Perception and interpretation**

The ingestion of certain so-called plants "of knowledge" or "of power facilitates-gaining perception about transphysical worlds:

*"Mescalito shows us true life.  
(...) What you perceive is the reality."*

Carlos Castaneda makes a significant attempt at describing, defining, and granting autonomy to the so-called reality of special consensus. He points out three features of it: stability, singularity, and lack of a usual consensus. Moreover, he stresses the fact that this new type of reality is "equal" to our reality of normal consensus. I would define Castaneda's "reality of special consensus" as a concept/notion that refers to a realm of consciousness that is different from the physical realm, and that we do not understand yet (i.e., how it functions, how to move within it, how to interpret it, how to make sense of it, etc.) For us to even attempt to figure it out, we need to construe and construct a distinct and systematic knowledge, a new consensus around it.

Furthermore, I would create a bridge between the above and what I consider to be our ability to adapt to the perception of unusual realities. After all, during most nights, our perceptions and feelings within dreams are very different from the ones during awake time. During meditation or active dreaming, once more our experiences vary from everyday life. I observed many times how people who are completely new to such practices familiarise

themselves very quickly and easily with them. It seems like we are endowed with skills that make effortless our exploration of other states of consciousness.

Don Juan affirms as well that, as the student advances through experience and practice, the state of consciousness induced by plant ingestion can also be tapped into without the chemical aid:

*"Given that the smoke is my ally, I do not need to smoke (it) anymore. I can summon it anytime, anywhere...I go to him freely/at will."*

This aspect is important to note, as it indicates the fact that human beings are able, once having accessed alternative states of consciousness through a plant enabler/facilitator, to replicate the dynamics (or process) of consciousness shift, without the enabler, yet by involving a consistent practice.

## **PANPSYCHISM AND THE RETURN TO THE LOVING COSMOS**

The narratives of Carlos Castaneda reflect the worldview of panpsychism, according to which *matter is intrinsically sentient*, as well as both subjective and objective. As Christian de Quincey explains, radical naturalism or panpsychism<sup>2</sup> offers the foundation for a new science of "consciousness-within-matter," by affirming that consciousness is the interior dynamic of matter. The student of Juan Matus expressed the same ideas, yet with a different wording:

*"Everything around (me) was alive, complicated and wondrous details, and yet, everything was so simple.*

*I could be everywhere."*

I would wrap up this essay with a call to action. From the perspective of the "integral mutation of consciousness"<sup>3</sup> heralded by Jean Gebser many decades ago, and with the "integral man consciousness," we might not be satisfied with the maps that our predecessors drew of the transphysical worlds. We might feel that there is more to be

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<sup>2</sup> de Quincey, Christian. *Radical Nature: The Soul of Matter*. Inner Traditions/Bear & Company. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Gebser, Jean. *The Ever-Present Origin*. Ohio University Press, English translation in 1985.



added to the practices of the “magical” or the “mythical” human, or that the words used by indigenous cultures to describe other states of consciousness provide partial explanations.

Nevertheless, we are relying on our predecessors’ body of knowledge, in the form and content that it presents itself. Now it is up to us to collect and interpret, from first-hand experience, more information about the subtle realms. To continue to draw maps, and in doing so, to expand our understanding about the laws that govern the transphysical worlds. With the sole purpose of blissfully tracing our way (back) to the universal *sentient energy*.