

The Art of Pattern Hunting

Toltec Teachings to Shift our Perception of Reality

Raffaello Manacorda

Calle Encarnación, 20, Barcelona, Spain

Tel. +34 936 672 272

info@raffaello.life

Ph.D. in Wisdom Studies

Ubiquity University

Abstract

This paper is a perspective on a body of teachings, commonly referred to as “Toltec Wisdom,” that originated in central Mexico around the X-XII centuries AD, and had its spiritual and cultural epicenter in Teotihuacán.

The Toltec Wisdom teachings are based on an understanding of reality that is both complex and profound. At the same time, they provide a relatively simple set of tools to change our everyday experience of life. Toltec Wisdom is a tradition that aspires not only to explain the philosophical basis of human existence but also to improve it in meaningful ways.

Of the full scope of the Toltec Wisdom teachings, I have focused on the aspect of changing our patterns of behavior. I will argue that Toltec practice of non-doing (performing actions with the sole purpose of interrupting existing patterns of behavior) is essentially a form of “pattern hunting,” understood as the attempt to find and shift our habitual responses to life. I will present a set of four hunting tools that can support the practice of pattern hunting. Finally, I will show how pattern hunting can lead to a beneficial dissolution of identity, through the process that the Toltec call “losing the human form.”

The Toltec Vision

The Toltec were sages of different tribes, united by a common framework and similar methodologies of inner knowledge. Their capital, Teotihuacan, was a sort of spiritual university where hundreds of people came to deepen their studies using both body and mind. It is possible to compare Teotihuacan to Eleusis, the seat of the Eleusinian Mysteries in Greece: a place where people of all social classes would receive spiritual instruction and undergo esoteric initiations. The Toltec Wisdom teachings can be considered part of the perennial wisdom tradition, because they tackle fundamental human issues largely independent of culture and age.

Today, we can have a taste of the Toltec philosophy and spiritual practices thanks to a series of contemporary authors who have undertaken the effort to preserve and divulge the teachings. Among these are Carlos Castaneda, Don Miguel Ruiz, and HeatherAsh Amara. Like with most wisdom traditions, the transmission of the Toltec teachings has had to face the challenges of time and space. In some cases, such as with Don Miguel Ruiz, the transmission happened within the family lineage: his mother was a powerful sorcerer and healer. In other cases, as with Castaneda, the method of transmission is less linear. Castaneda attributed his exposure to the Toltec Wisdom to the time spent in the company of Don Juan, a sage from the Yaqui people of Mexican Native Americans. The historical existence of Don Juan is still disputed; yet, whether he was a fictional character or a real person does not make a significant difference in terms of evaluating the Toltec teachings as a philosophical and spiritual framework. For simplicity, in this paper, I will write about Don Juan as if he were a real person. HeatherAsh Amara is a direct student of Don Miguel Ruiz.

One of the basic features of Toltec Wisdom is that it recognizes an ontological differentiation between two aspects of reality: the nagual and the tonal. The nagual,¹ sometimes referred to as “the abstract,” is the unmanifested, the formless, which acts as a substratum of all manifested reality. The nagual is both unknowable and all-pervading; it is the Void from which manifested reality emerges and into which it disappears every fraction of a second. The tonal is the visible manifestation of the nagual and constitutes the reality we can perceive through our senses. The Toltec teach that the manifested world continuously disappears into and reappears from the nagual. But this flickering in and out of existence happens so fast that, to our eyes, the tonal constitutes a continuous, solid reality. This phenomenon is similar to how frames appearing rapidly on the screen create the illusion of a continuous movement in a movie. It is important to note that the Toltec teachings do not belittle the tonal compared to the nagual. Instead, they teach to navigate between the manifested and the unmanifested, bringing messages from the nagual to the tonal in order to deepen our understanding of reality and enrich our lives. The “sorcerer,” the sage who has mastery over both worlds, is able to rest fully in the nagual while being involved and operative in the tonal.

Like most shamanic traditions, the Toltec recognize the existence of several “worlds,” which in turn represent different states of consciousness. There are many such states, but the main ones are the underworld, the middle world, and the upper world. The middle world is the realm we normally inhabit: the familiar state of consciousness that we experience during the waking hours. The underworld is a state of consciousness connected to dreaming, visioning, and deep regeneration of the body. We can access the underworld by symbolically

¹ The term “nagual” is also used to refer to a teacher or guide, a man or woman who can channel knowledge directly from intent. (Castaneda, 1991, L. 106). Don Juan is an example of a nagual in this sense of the word.

traveling down, deep into the Earth, through practices like incubation rites². Sometimes, life itself may force us into the underworld. This may happen when we endure significant deception or loss, catapulting us into what mystics have called the “dark night of the soul.” I will speak more about the dark night of the soul further on when considering what the Toltec call the “loss of the human form.” The underworld is also a place of deep rest and recovery. When we emerge back from it, we are as if reborn. Our inner state has changed because we have surrendered parts of ourselves to the shamanic death process and received new skills and insights. In order for an individual to keep evolving, a periodical journey into the underworld is essential; the same is true for a community. The upper world is the realm of subtle energies, the domain of angelic creatures, the abode of spirit. We may access the upper world through practices of meditation, prayer, or energy sublimation³. Entering into the upper world means accessing a state of consciousness characterized by subtle intuition and insight. When we abide in the upper world, we get a bird’s-eye view of our life, acquiring new perspectives and a sense of loving detachment from the day-by-day circumstances of our existence.

According to shamanic wisdom, to navigate our middle-world experience, we need support and information coming from both the upper and the lower worlds. This is the reason why shamanic cultures worldwide have developed practices to allow travel between the worlds. Facilitating access to other states of consciousness is one of the primary purposes of initiation rites and one of the most essential skills of the shaman. But traveling between the worlds is not the prerogative of a selected few; given the right conditions, anyone can do it. Today, we are witnessing both a resurgence and democratization of shamanic and esoteric

² In an incubation rite, one would spend a certain amount of time in total darkness, usually underground, with the purpose of healing and visioning. Incubation rites were widely used in antiquity.

³ In the Tantric understanding, sublimation is the process of evoking vital energy in the lower centers (such as the sexual center) and then, by means of Yogic techniques, raising it up to the heart and the head.

wisdom and practices. Within this context, techniques for traveling between the worlds, whether through plant medicine, sacred dance, meditation, fasting, or the conscious use of erotic energy, are becoming more and more accessible to the everyday person. Throughout my life, I have come across several methodologies that facilitated travel between states of consciousness. For instance, after having spent several years practicing Yoga and Tantra, I realized that, besides the apparent healing effects, the primary purpose of those disciplines is to allow access to different states of consciousness. Plant medicine has, in essence, the same goal: altering the chemical structure of our brain so as to allow us to access non-conventional states of consciousness.

Coming back to the Toltec teachings, the acknowledgment that reality is born from the interplay of *nagual* and *tonal* shows us that the Toltec's vision of reality is interactive and malleable. To understand how this happens, we need to consider that, according to the Toltec, the Universe is permeated by a force called "intent." (Castaneda, 1991, L. 94). Our interaction with intent is the fundamental way in which we create our reality. The Universe is made up of energy fields resembling filaments of light. Each one of us is constructed of the same filaments, woven up in a sort of egg-shaped cocoon. Out of all the filaments in the cocoon, a small group, surrounding a point of intense brilliance, is at any given moment lit up. Perception occurs when those lit-up filaments illuminate other filaments outside the cocoon. The point whose intense brightness is responsible for illuminating certain filaments and thus causing perception to happen is called the "assemblage point." (Castaneda, 1991, L. 141). Intent is what causes a specific assemblage point to become brilliant, and in so doing, allows perception to happen. Through this process of "illumination," our inner world (the cocoon) enters into resonance with the outer world (the Universe). Such rapport can be

established because both the inner and the outer world are made of the same substrate (the filaments).

The existence of intent ensures that the Toltec teachings do not fall into the contradictions of absolute idealism, such as affirming that everything exists only as long as we perceive it. At the same time, the mechanics of intent allow the Toltec to assert the fundamental role of perception in the construction of reality and, based on this assumption, give us tools to both reclaim and alter our perception of the world. The Toltec believe that reality rests on perception, and perception can be shifted. The ability to shift perception turns us into active players in the construction of our own reality. In fact, the word “Toltec” means artist and, by extension, “artist of the spirit.” (Ruiz, 2014, p. 49). Once we can take back the power of moving the assemblage point, we become exactly that: an artist who is creating their reality rather than a passive spectator.

Moving the Assemblage Point

The location of the assemblage point is what determines what part of the Universe we can relate to. Another way to put this is: our experience of reality depends on the location of the assemblage point. This point acts as the origin point of a system of coordinates; once we move it, the whole system shifts. If we want to change our reality, we need to shift our perception of it; by moving the assemblage point, we can engage the world in a different way.

The possibility of moving the assemblage point does not mean we have a god-like power to alter the surrounding circumstances. Our lives are affected by events we cannot always control. But though we cannot always change our external circumstances, we can take ownership of how we react to them, the meaning we assign to them, and the emotional content associated with that meaning. For instance, we can perceive an illness as a

catastrophe, a revealing journey, or even a blessing. Based on these different perceptions, the response we will give to the illness both in terms of emotions and actions will be quite different. In this capacity to choose our responses to life lies one of the most fundamental aspects of our humanness. Most of us, however, are accustomed to thinking of our response to events as something given and immutable: we see ourselves as passive spectators to whom things happen.

From the Toltec perspective, when we feel our reality is immutable, this means that our assemblage point has become stuck. We may have lost any memory that there is an assemblage point at all and fallen into determinism or even fatalism, feeling powerless in the face of events and circumstances. Or, on the contrary, we may be too attached to telling ourselves that we are free. We like to think that what we choose to eat, wear, say, do at any given moment is the result of our inalienable freedom. Yet, any honest observation of our behavior shows that an unchecked belief in our absolute free will is problematic. As the word implies, our conscious choices arise from consciousness; but consciousness is just a stratum in our multi-layered, complex psychic system. Our inner world features layers upon layers of psychic content we are mostly unaware of. Those subconscious and unconscious contents have at least as much say in determining our choices as our conscious opinions, intentions, and values.

How can we, for instance, assert that we choose to do whatever we do as part of our morning routine? Do we choose the way we brush our teeth, the order we put on our shoes, or even the food we have for breakfast? If so, how come we seldom opt to brush our teeth with a different hand or put on our shoes starting from a different foot? Much of our behavior is dictated by patterns that are semi-conscious or unconscious. Whatever our strategy to forget about the assemblage point, the sobering realization that we are locked in a fixed perspective

on reality opens the possibility of change. The next step is learning how to release the assemblage point from where it has become stuck. While a knowledgeable sorcerer by our side can surely help,⁴ the good news is we can learn how to move the assemblage point ourselves.

Before discussing methods and techniques, though, we need to realize that whenever we try to move the assemblage point, we run against the inertia of our already-formed prejudices, opinions, and patterns—in short, against our existing reality. Writes Castaneda (1991, p. 210) that when we have the chance to move our assemblage point, we are usually gripped by deep fear. The fear is justified because if the shift is dramatic enough, it literally feels as if our world is collapsing, and we are dying. We also must consider that moving the assemblage point is a risky practice. Don Juan warns us: once the assemblage point is dislodged, we are one step away from moving our perception into infinity. Projecting our point of perception into infinity would amount to losing all reference points, drifting away from any system of coordinates, which would render us incapable of operating in the tonal. (Castaneda, 1991, p. 72). In short, moving the assemblage point is a powerful tool practice needs to be approached with caution and integrity.

Lastly, while we may choose to move the assemblage point, sometimes life itself provides an experience that dislodges it violently and without our intervention. This abrupt shift of perception usually happens through loss, death, or disillusionment. One of my most potent experiences of such kind occurred as a result of a shocking revelation. The Tantra school where I was studying, and which I had chosen as my spiritual path, became involved in a series of scandals. Regardless of the objective truth about the facts, my inner experience was that of a sudden loss of identity. I had identified myself for years with the school's teaching

⁴ Don Juan helped Castaneda move his assemblage point in the most bizarre ways; for example, by pretending that he had gone mad (Castaneda, 1991, pp. 134-143)

and practices; I had become a teacher and an active member of the community; when the scandals were revealed, it felt like everything was being pulled off from under my feet. My whole reality was shaken to the core.

As a result, I experienced a year-long period of utter confusion. At the same time, unbeknownst to me, I was being granted the freedom and space to create a new reality for myself. Today, I am full of gratitude for those events. But at the time, the loss of identity felt like the most arduous experience I had ever endured, bringing me to the verge of wanting to end my life. The main lesson I have learned from having gone through that dark night of the soul is that when it seems like reality is collapsing, like nothing makes sense anymore, and like everything we knew to be true is being called into question, the best thing we can do is wait. I am reminded here of a few lines from the poem “East Coker” by T. S. Eliot (1943), words that helped me navigate through that experience:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope

For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love

For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith

But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting. (p. 13)

Toltec Wisdom gives us tools to alter our perception of reality instead of waiting for life to do it for us. These tools are not meant to spur a delirium of omnipotence or an illegitimate feeling of being totally in control of our life. Instead, they help us be current with life, ensuring our inner world hasn't become stuck in some snapshot from the past. To move our assemblage point by ourselves, though, we must learn how to find out and shift our frozen patterns of behavior.

The Toltec use the word “stalking” to define the art of controlling one’s behavior in order to move the assemblage point. (Castaneda, 1991, L. 153). By carefully studying and influencing one’s own behavior, one can melt the illusion that the world is unalterable and factual and experience a shift in perception such that the world changes (L. 129). Don Juan’s cryptic instructions on stalking explain that there are four qualities we need in order to stalk: ruthlessness, cunning, patience, and sweetness. (Castaneda, 1991, p. 65). These are known as the “four moods of stalking.” In this paper, I will offer a slightly different presentation of the same concept, which comes from my experience as a facilitator with the International School of Temple Arts (ISTA).⁵ In our seminars, we use the four moods of stalking as the main components of the practice we call pattern hunting. Beyond the differences in presentation, pattern hunting and stalking have exactly the same purpose: to allow us to unfreeze our assemblage point by identifying the automatic ways in which we may be responding to reality.

Pattern Hunting

Getting to see our behavioral patterns is, in a sense, like having a sneak peek into our operating system and discovering it contains all sorts of programs running in the background. Those programs correspond to patterns of behavior, some of which may be more useful than others. But all of those patterns are based on the past. For example, let’s say you’ve had an unpleasant experience as a child when speaking in front of a group of friends. They laughed at you, and you felt hurt and rejected. You ran away and took refuge in your room—that was the best response your body could give at the time. That powerful and painful experience

⁵ For more information about the International School of Temple Arts, check <http://ista.life/>

created a pattern, one we could define as “if required to speak to a group of people, run away and hide.”

Today, decades later, you may find out that whenever you need to present your work in front of a group of colleagues, that pattern gets activated, and your body and nervous system respond accordingly. Your heart rate accelerates, you start to sweat, and you look around, trying to find escape routes. Your mind comes up with all sorts of reasons for getting out of the meeting fast and running for shelter. All of this happens fast: the main benefit of behavior patterns is their speed, an invaluable perk when dealing with life-threatening situations where our survival depends on our reflexes. Springing into action whenever we see a shadow wriggling on the floor must have enhanced our chances of avoiding snakes for millennia. But those same quick-response patterns prevent us from being current and are ill-adapted to a life where our circumstances shift on a daily basis. Today, many of us live an existence where the challenges we face do not often fall into the “react-quickly-or-die” category. Our knee-jerk reactions are much more likely to get us into an old argument than save our lives. Our patterns have become maladapted and prevent us from giving an adequate response to life. Responding to what life presents us based on present conditions rather than on behavioral patterns forged in the past is an essential and lacking skill. I call the capacity of meeting life from the present moment “currency.”⁶ Ancient shamanic cultures seemed to be aware of the value of currency and provided ways to identify our patterns and open the possibility of a pattern interrupt. When an interrupt happens, we have an opportunity to act from a state of relative vacuum. This means we are less burdened by the embodied memories of past experiences, and therefore more available to the information the environment is presenting to us.

⁶ I have spoken at length about currency and how it is different from presence in Manacorda (2020).

In Toltec Wisdom, an action that is oriented to interrupting, or killing, a pattern is called a “non-doing.” In Amara’s (2020) definition, a non-doing is “an action that you take for no reason except to break old patterns” (p. 120). A non-doing, like taking a long, windy road to get to work or putting our shoes on in the opposite order, makes no sense from the standpoint of the logical mind, but it serves a deeper purpose: it helps us to break free from our patterns. In my work with the International School of Temple Arts, we use another name for the concept of non-doing: radical discontinuity. Practicing radical discontinuity means choosing to do things differently from what we are used to. In the example given above, this might mean choosing to take a deep breath and visualize a calm body of water as you’re about to start your presentation in front of a group rather than running away. We can practice radical discontinuity with simple actions that carry little emotional charge or with big, powerful behavioral patterns that have been with us for a lifetime. Killing a pattern, however, is no easy feat. Because of the psychic inertia carried by patterns, killing them means rowing against the current of our psychic habits. Subjectively, practicing radical discontinuity may feel like doing the opposite of what comes naturally. Identifying and interrupting our patterns of behaviors is what pattern hunting is all about.

Learning the nuanced art of pattern hunting is a lifetime endeavor; however, there are some tools that can help. Here is where the four moods of stalking that we encountered in the previous section come into play. In ISTA, we call these moods “hunting tools” and teach them as a toolkit to hunt and kill patterns. I prefer to share the hunting tools in a different order: sweetness, cunning, patience, and ruthlessness. Just like the hunter’s tools, they help us identify, stalk, and potentially kill our patterns, opening the possibility for renewed currency. Here is a short explanation of how the four hunting tools work.

Imagine you are going for a hunt. The first question to ask is: why hunt? A conscious hunter does not hunt for fun or to show off their trophy but to survive and thrive. Psychologically, we hunt our patterns to recover the frozen psychic energy they store, energy stuck in a behavioral loop or knee-jerk response that is not adapted to our current conditions. Therefore, the hunter that goes into the wild needs to approach the hunt with sweetness. A hunter who goes into the forest angry, frustrated, hating the deer he is going to hunt will most likely scare the wild animal away. In the same way, getting frustrated and angry at our behavioral patterns does not help. Those patterns were born as the best response we could muster to a challenging past situation. Judging ourselves because we are acting in ways that are not current will only take us even more out of presence. The first tool, sweetness, means committing to hunting our patterns with respect.

Once we are in the wild, the second tool comes into play: cunning. Cunning is the capacity to spot the signals wild animals leave behind them: a broken branch, a footprint, a particular scent. In our inner search, we can recognize signs that a pattern is about to take control: our heart rate increases, we start to sweat, our belly contracts. Those signs will differ from person to person, but they tend to be consistent for each specific pattern. Patterns, just like wild animals, are predictable in their behavior. By carefully following the signs of a pattern that is about to manifest, we can anticipate it and, with some luck, catch it just as it is about to take over. We follow the trail and see a deer drinking at the pond. Cunning allows us to recognize the prey is near, puts our perceptual systems on alert, and conjures the attentiveness and presence we need to carry through with the hunt.

Once we spot the animal, once our pattern is fully activated, we need the third tool: patience. A hunter that runs at its prey, screaming at the top of his lungs, will be poorly rewarded for his effort: wild animals are cautious and elusive creatures. In the same way,

once we are in proximity to a pattern, we need to enter into a state of readiness and patience, like a cat waiting for a mouse to come out of its lair, as if we slowed time down. Breathing slowly and deliberately is an effective way to call in patience. Breath brings us back to presence and allows us to notice the window of opportunity in which we can go for the kill. We wait, with patience, for the wild animal to expose a weak spot: the pattern will give us a small window of opportunity to interrupt it.

On a lucky day, the animal, fully satiated, will expose their neck and look at us straight in the eyes, as if to give us permission to kill. This means that as we watch our pattern unfold, we may come to a crossroads where we can either act as we have always done, thus reinforcing the pattern, or do something completely different. Although we would like these moments of choice to last forever, they don't: the window of opportunity is limited. This is why we need the fourth and last hunting tool—ruthlessness. In my understanding, and let me remark one more time that this understanding is complementary to Castaneda's, ruthlessness means the capacity to take action with immediateness and without a second thought. An excellent hunter does not hunt the prey or let it escape: he kills decisively, cleanly, and with compassion. In pattern hunting, this means acting in a radically different way from what the pattern would have us do. Here is where non-doings, or radical discontinuity, come into play. There are multiple ways to kill a pattern, as long as we do something radically different from what the pattern itself is asking us to do. If all my instincts tell me to run away, killing the pattern might mean staying instead. If harsh words are literally about to run out of my mouth, killing the pattern might look like shutting up and doing a pirouette. A pattern hunter can be creative with her weapon, yet she needs to be resolute, for a half-kill is not a kill at all.

How do we know that we have killed a pattern and the hunt has been successful? In my experience, one of the clear signs of having killed a pattern is the influx of life force into our

system. After doing something radically different, we might feel elated, shocked, exhilarated, or terrified; but we feel alive. Interrupting a pattern allows the life force stuck into that pattern to return to our system, where we can recycle and reuse it. To use a clarifying if not too poetic analogy, it is like finding and closing the annoying background mobile app that was draining all the battery from our phone. When we interrupt a pattern, we may experience a state of alive, energetic disorientation; this is what I sometimes call “good confusion.” Our assemblage point has moved, and we are susceptible to creating a new reference system for our experience of reality.

Hunting our patterns allows us to get unstuck from the frozen habits of behavior we have built during the years and is an effective way to shift our perception. But once we succeed in moving our assemblage point, what can we do? Here is where we start to taste the full scope of Toltec Wisdom. The ongoing practice of pattern hunting brings us to the threshold of taking full responsibility for our lives, and becoming the creators of our reality. This happens through what the Toltec call “losing the human form.”

Losing the Human Form

According to Toltec Wisdom, our experience of life is akin to a dream, a dream that we constantly co-create with the Universe. Although we are not always the literal makers of events that occur to us, we are responsible for creating the stories around these events. By assigning meaning to what happens to us, we write our own story, even though we are mostly unaware that we do so. We are unconscious dreamers, forgetful that we are dreaming at all. By contrast, Toltec Wisdom empowers us to take full responsibility for our dream-making. With the realization of our role as the dreamer comes the acceptance of full responsibility for

our lives. This realization is what the Toltec call “return to common sense.” (Ruiz, 2014, p. 57).

Common sense, in the Toltec understanding, is based on the recognition that everything in my dream is about me. Acknowledging that we are at the center of our own story is a sobering and empowering realization. When I recognize that everything in my life story is about me, how can I blame or shame anyone else for making my life miserable? How can I put them on a pedestal for making my life wonderful? We may think we have all sorts of issues with the characters of our story, yet our main problem is with the main character (Ruiz, 2014, p. 67). This character, called in Toltec language the “Little Soul” (Amara, 2020, p. 8), is the protagonist, the one that holds center stage, grasping with all its strength for an identity. Everything hinges on his or her happiness or despair, success or demise. Common sense involves looking at the main character in the story as if it is not us, but someone else. (Ruiz, 2014, p. 130). Decoupling from the main character of our life story, however, is not easy. If this complex character, who I spent years creating, is just a character—then who am I? Questions of this kind can dynamite the edifice of our identity and catapult us towards bewildering although spiritually rich experiences of loss of identity.

Here is where the Toltec teaching of the return to common sense links with the practice of pattern hunting. Our patterns, stories, and beliefs connect like pieces of a three-dimensional puzzle to create a stunning structure. The Toltec call the edifice made by those patterns, stories, and beliefs our “human form” (Ruiz, 2014, p. 124). Our human form is, in a sense, what makes us unique. But over time, the human form crystallizes, and eventually, it becomes a prison. Wisdom traditions have always emphasized the periodic need to tear down the prison of our identity and make space for something new to arise. The Toltec call this process “losing the human form.” When we stalk and kill our patterns of behavior, we

unfreeze our assemblage point. When we move our assemblage point, there is a chance that everything we knew to be true will reveal itself as an illusion. Ruiz (2004, p. 151) explains that when our knowledge is shattered, we are on the verge of losing our human form—a liberating but frightening and perplexing process.

A decade ago, when my identity as a Yoga and Tantra teacher collapsed, I felt both lost and relieved. It seemed to me as if I was precipitating in an endless pit, where I could not reach out and grab to anything, for everything I knew or believed had vanished. The system of references through which I had been guiding my life thus far had all but collapsed. And yet, there was also incredible freedom and space, the freedom to become anything I wanted to be. In short, those events catapulted me into a new life. After spending a significant amount of time in a state of disorientation, to the point that at times I did not know whether I should put my left or right foot forward, gradually a new set of beliefs and patterns started to emerge. I was building a new human form.

We need a human form, an identity, to be able to interact with the world and with people around us. This is one of the reasons why the experience of a loss of identity can be so excruciating—it feels as if we're losing our interface with the world. Building a new identity is a necessary part of the process of moving forward. And yet, the new human form is often not as thick, as impermeable as the old one. Once we've lost our human form at least once, it becomes impossible to take ourselves too seriously. Our identities become more porous. Our persona starts feeling more like a useful piece of clothing that we can wear and take off when necessary, rather than a fragile treasure we need to defend at all costs. The Toltec teach that when the edifice of our beliefs collapses, we don't actually lose anything: instead, we gain something precious. Once we lose our human form, we gain an opportunity to direct our

attention and build a reality based on our conscious choices. The Toltec call this new life the “dream of the second attention.” (Ruiz, 2004, p. 152).

The new life we build after losing the human form is, in a sense, similar to a lucid dream. Knowing that we are the builders of our own story enables a different perspective on life. For starters, our unwarranted identification with the main character in the story is put into question. We perceive ourselves as one more character in the story. At the same time, being conscious of our role as creators forces us to take full responsibility for the existence we choose to live. Once we shift our perception of reality, we can do things that wouldn’t have been possible before. This increases our power dramatically, and with power comes responsibility. For this reason, when I facilitate groups with ISTA, we ask participants to make a solemn agreement at the beginning of each seminar: “I agree to take full responsibility for the nature of my experience.”

What does it mean to take full responsibility for the nature of our experience? We know for a fact that the way each one of us perceives whatever happens to us is unique. The same event may be perceived as harrowing and traumatic by one person and merely annoying or even enjoyable by another. Therefore, something happens within us that determines the quality of our experience. Making those internal processes conscious, and accessing a degree of freedom over them, is one of the milestones of inner work and a necessary step towards greater spiritual adulthood. Yet, taking this agreement does not mean that we should blame (or congratulate) ourselves for everything that happens to us. Taking full responsibility does not convert us into some god-like beings with the capacity to manifest anything we want. It does imply, however, that the responsibility to assign meaning and emotional content to an experience lies with us. Life presents us with an endless stream of circumstances. But our reality is not made of those circumstances—it is made of our response to them. And of those

responses, we are the primary source. This is the inevitable consequence, on the ethical plane, of embracing the Toltec teaching around the assemblage point.

Naturally, being willing to take this agreement does not equate to having mastery of it. Rather, becoming conscious of our assemblage point and learning how to move involves a decision: we commit to looking at life as something that we can take in our hands. We also commit to doing our best to investigate and, if necessary, shift our perception of reality, becoming active, lucid dreamers rather than unconscious sleepwalkers.

Conclusion

Is there an ultimate purpose to the teachings of Toltec Wisdom? I will venture an answer knowing well that it is a necessary oversimplification. Based on the assumption that we are the creators of our own reality (a belief shared by many shamanic spiritual traditions), Toltec Wisdom has as its main objective to help us refine and improve the experience of being human. With this vision in mind, the Toltec Wisdom teachings offer both a practical way to change our reality and a framework for a deeper understanding of life and the human condition. As part of this framework, the Toltec present a refined methodology for stalking our unconscious patterns and reclaiming the energy stored therein.

Why then should we stalk our patterns? As we have seen, hunting patterns requires dedication and perseverance, and there's no guarantee of success. I have noted elsewhere (Manacorda, 2020, p. 14) that we are often "not current," engaging in behavior that is not responsive to the conditions of life. The state of not being current is a psychic epidemic that seems to be intrinsically connected with the evolution of our consciousness. The more refined and complex our consciousness becomes, the more we step away from the simplicity of a direct response to life. And yet, when we are not current, we don't really live. We react to life

rather than responding to it, enslaved by patterns of behavior that were created in a distant time and place. Drawn to its ultimate consequences, our collective lack of presence and currency is co-responsible for how we treat ourselves, each other, and the environment. We long for currency and presence every time we desire to access a simpler, more responsive way of life, closer to nature and to our own hearts. Yet, it does not serve us to look back with nostalgia at simpler times any more than it serves us to look back at our childhood. Both individually and collectively, we cannot go back. What we can do, though, is learn how to shed some of the mental and emotional clutter we have accumulated so that we can step into more responsiveness, simplicity, and ease. Perhaps part of the reason why Castaneda's and Don Pedro Ruiz's books gained so much popularity among educated, middle-class Americans and Europeans is that precisely those readers feel most acutely the consequences of not being current, of being trapped in old crystalized habits and patterns, and ultimately in an outdated human form.

Like other shamanic traditions, Toltec Wisdom can help us break down our outdated, crystalized perception of the world, and build a new one. But when we look under the surface, we realize that the Toltec teachings are neither simple nor easy. Toltec Wisdom is based on a deep metaphysical foundation, and it features profound and complex philosophical contemplations on the nature of reality.⁷ Fortunately, as is the landmark of all perennial teachings, Toltec Wisdom can be approached at different levels of depth. If we simply seek to improve our lives by recognizing patterns and breaking habits, the Toltec teachings will surely help. Those of us who want to engage in deeper philosophical musings, meditate on the ultimate nature of reality and contemplate the purpose of human existence will find where to sink our teeth.

⁷ The essence of Toltec philosophy and metaphysics is contained in the eighteen "abstract cores." For more information on the abstract cores, see Castaneda (1991, p. 2-5)

Writes Ruiz (2014) that the key opposition to be aware of is not between good and evil, but between truth and untruth (p. 19). This is not an invitation to moral relativism but a recognition of our responsibility in discerning the truth amongst our illusions. The most radical act we can do, according to Toltec Wisdom, is stopping our fantasies, discontinuing the habit of lying to ourselves, and returning to common sense. As we continue to unravel the intricate tangle of our own identity, periodically undoing and rebuilding a new human form, moving our assemblage point so to keep pace with an ever-changing reality in a state of permanent flux, we commit to doing our best to keep ourselves current. The Toltec teachings, if understood in this way, support us in being more present, more responsive, and more alive.

Wisdom traditions in the most diverse cultural and geographical environment have made huge efforts to give answers to the conundrums of human existence. The Toltec tradition claims its rightful place in the ensemble of bonafide spiritual lineages who have given their best to provide us guidance so that we can live a fuller, more integrated human experience.

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