

ILLUMINATION

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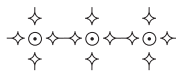
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ILLUMINATION

The Shaman's Way of Healing

Alberto Villoldo, Ph.D.



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*To Marcela Lobos.
You showed me the way.*

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PREFACE

A Taste of Infinity

I have spent many years in the Andes Mountains and in the Amazon Rainforest studying the indigenous wisdom keepers and documenting their healing practices. Although these men and women are also shamans, I will use the more traditional name of Laika to refer to these wisdom keepers, to differentiate them from the ordinary herbalists, midwives, and healers. Initially, I sought to understand how their spiritual medicine could help alleviate the host of ailments that humanity suffers from today. It took me many years to understand that shamans don't subscribe to the model of illness that we hold in the West. For them, all disease has spiritual origins, and illness is manifested through subtle bodies—the energy body, our emotions, our thoughts—and lastly the physical body. For the shamans, physical and emotional challenges provide an opportunity for initiation and spiritual rebirth into a new way of being. If the opportunity for initiation is missed, a second wake-up call might come in the form of an even more serious malady.

In this book you will discover that the most powerful way to successfully face physical and emotional problems is to undergo a sacred initiation that leads to the death of your old self, to rebirth, and to your illumination. The illumination is not a distant achievement attained after years of sitting on a meditation cushion, or something that strikes suddenly. Most shamans dismiss these as

religious flights of the imagination, or a postponement to a distant future what is readily available today. Nor is illumination merely an understanding of the nature of good and evil, and how in a metaphysical sense neither exists. For the shamans it is a series of awakenings and realizations that we pass through again and again. These illuminations are a part of our developmental journey, and we don't discard any of them as we ascend to the higher rungs. We transcend and include them and grow beyond our earlier levels of understanding while including each illumination as part of an integrated self.

Illumination helps you attain an exalted understanding of your life journey; it brings you freedom from emotional suffering and an awareness of the true nature of reality. Along the way, emotional and physical healing can take place, and, like many great shamans, you may develop the power to heal others, to read the signs of destiny in nature, and to face death fearlessly. For the shaman, illumination is not an internal state of awareness only. You must bring your gifts forth into the world in the form of compassion, courage, and humility, which are rare attributes to come by these days. Illumination has been called by many names in post-shamanic societies—*samadhi*, bliss, enlightenment, and it is distinctly like the Christian concept of grace. Many religions teach that grace can only be bestowed by God, as happened to Saint Paul when he had his conversion experience on the road to Damascus, or to the Prophet Muhammad when he received the Qur'an from the angel Gabriel. Traditionally, we've believed that grace cannot be gained by our own individual efforts. But is it true?

The Laika intuited what researchers in neuroscience are discovering today: illumination is an inherent faculty of the brain, and not just a gift that some higher power bestows upon us. And while indeed it was possible to receive truth and knowledge directly from Spirit through mysterious means, they discovered that they could attain illumination by successfully completing certain initiations into the mysteries of life. There are seven life passages we all experience during our lives—birth, manhood or

womanhood, first love, marriage, parenthood, sagehood, and death. To experience these as initiations requires us to face and defeat our inner demons, comprehend our oneness with Creation, and understand our duty as the stewards of all life.

Anything short of illumination is not a complete healing. Shamanic healers don't distinguish cancer, diabetes, or heart disease in their cosmology. They see these conditions and many others as symptoms of a spiritual illness—the loss of a sacred sense of oneness with the universe, and our neglecting our role as participants in Creation. To a Laika there is no difference between being killed by a jaguar and being killed by a microbe. To Westerners, being killed by a microbe is an illness, whereas being eaten by a jaguar is an accident, pure bad luck. A Laika knows that he has to be in sacred relationship with jaguars and microbes alike, or else both are going to look at him as dinner. In addition, the Laika knows that he must take part in dreaming the world into being as a participant in creation, or else continue repeating the nightmare of history and have to settle for a world that is being dreamed by others.

Religions have portrayed illumination as something nearly impossible for ordinary humans to attain. The Laika believe that illumination is possible for all who are willing to embark courageously on their journey of initiation. The maps for navigating this territory have been drawn by the great masters, including Christ and Buddha, but we must be willing to follow the path of initiation ourselves, as all great teachers have done. When we do so, we become explorers and pioneers. We break free from the genetic and psychological legacies that we inherited—traits that predispose us to live and die in certain ways. Only then can we begin to craft truly healthy, authentic, and original lives. We are able to grow new bodies that age and heal and die gracefully. We are illumined.

Are our brains programmed for enlightenment? The evolutionary journey from matter to mind to soul to spirit—each step of which transcends and includes the step below it—makes me

think that illumination might be an inherent guiding force of nature. First it's the lone individual reaching for the heavens and touching infinity, then more and more of us follow, until all of humanity discovers our transcendent nature.

Perhaps this is the stuff of daydreams. My scientific education taught me that matter sprang out of nothing during the Big Bang, and that life is making its way darkly and soundlessly to a cold death at the end of time. For many years I believed the explanation of scientific materialism to be the only true one. But after my own initiation, and after having tasted infinity, I discovered I prefer the company of visionaries, of men and women who know that their destiny is to dream the world into being. I hope you'll join us!

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