

THE LEARNING CIRCLE: NOTES, THOUGHTS & PROJECTS

I. Practical Tobacco



Most people introduced to the Old Ways through survival, primitive skills, plant uses and tracking eventually encounter tobacco as it is used in ceremony and as a simple offering to say thanks when plants are gathered or when an area's wildlife is shown appreciation for what it has taught or given.

We learned a bit about tobacco from early classes we took from Tom Brown, Jr., but traditions of tobacco use are so universal that we would have picked them up from any number of places. In his definitive work, *Tobacco Use by Native North Americans*, Joseph Winter documents the use of tobacco by more than 320 native groups from Central America and the Caribbean, throughout North America to the Canadian and Alaskan Arctic.

There are ample resources that record specific ceremonial and recreational use of tobacco by tribe and region, for example in ethnobotany references, but my purpose in this article is not to summarize that information but rather to provide some guidance to modern folks who want to use tobacco properly for offerings and expressions of thanks.

(Tobacco was used for ceremonial smoking and healing by many native groups, but we advise strongly against your doing this unless you are taught the proper way by an elder directly connected to traditions. Also we recommend against the recreational smoking and consumption of native tobacco due to possible dangerous side effects. We must remember that ethnographers who documented tobacco use did not ask all the right questions and thus the information they pass on is superficial at best.)

How to Use Tobacco

Tobacco seems to have been considered a special and sacred plant among many native peoples, and accounts of it being used as an offering and a means to cleanse one's surroundings are many. Our own principal use of tobacco is to take a pinch and scatter it when thanking an area for hosting and teaching us, when harvesting a plant for food or medicine, or for any other similar gesture of appreciation. The expression of thanks need not be said aloud but should be done from the heart. Our students are familiar with being given this opportunity after a class, for example to thank the animals who have left their tracks or to thank the plants for what they provide.

Besides being simply good manners, expressing thanks maintains in us the humility and gratitude essential to a proper relationship with nature. Or course if you don't have tobacco on hand, you may say thanks in another way, perhaps leaving a hair or some other offering. But as tobacco has been cultivated and used in this way for thousands of years, it's an important opportunity to tap into that tradition.

Sometimes, before entering an area for a special purpose (learning or ceremony), one scatters some tobacco to the four directions, a pinch to each one in clockwise direction. While the four directions are often associated with native people from the Plains, I've seen references to such traditions with tobacco among California native people as well.

What Tobacco to Use

Native groups either used a native species of *Nicotiana* growing in their area, sometimes cultivating it, or traded for tobacco from other groups. In southern California, the species that we have found locally is *N. attenuata*; more about finding that below. In southwestern North America, *N. rustica* was the species commonly used. It appears that this tobacco originated in South America and was brought north and cultivated in North America for at least the past 1000 years. *N. tabacum* was prevalent in eastern North America and is the species currently cultivated for commercial use. Note that the introduced "tree tobacco," *N. glauca*, found in California, was not used ceremonially and has been considered invasive.

I'm going to suggest two avenues for procuring tobacco for the purposes cited above. For our local people, the native *N. attenuata* grows naturally and can be found after the rainy season in late winter or early spring. This species tends to appear in disturbed areas, for example in soils that have been recently graded or after a forest fire. It seems that seeds may lie dormant for even years before the right conditions cause them to sprout. *N. attenuata* produces good-sized leaves at the plant's base given enough water, but leaves higher up the stem become relatively small. Unfortunately, I've not successfully cultivated this species from seed; it seems to need cold treatment, scarification or heavy watering to sprout. This species grows when and where it wants to!



My second recommendation is to get some seeds of *N. rustica* and grow the tobacco yourself, which is what we do. Seeds sprout easily in seed starter pots and can be transplanted to a garden or even to larger pots. This species produces much bigger leaves than *N. attenuata*. Growing this tobacco in shade with ample water prevents the plants from bolting too early. I prefer this species because the seeds, available from Native Seeds Search, come directly from ceremonial varieties that have been cultivated for centuries in New Mexico.



Our native *Nicotiana attenuata* growing wild, and detail of white tubular blossoms

Native Seeds Search
3061 N. Campbell Avenue
Tucson AZ 85719
520-622-5561
<http://shop.nativeseeds.org/>

Just as the blossoms begin to appear, it's time to harvest the plants. Cut them off near the base, hang the plants upside down in a shady area or indoors, and harvest the leaves after they've dried. If you leave a couple of leaves at the base, the plant will send up new growth for a second harvest.

There's nothing preventing you from using other tobacco species, but we suggest you find tobacco that is grown organically, not cured, and without additives.

Making a Tobacco Container

In our Fall Plant Uses class last October, we made simple elderberry stem tobacco containers. With one, you can carry tobacco around your neck as you collect, or keep it in your glove compartment or day pack for when you need it. Elderberry stems were used traditionally for carrying tobacco by the Chumash for example.

Cut a dead elderberry stem about $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch in diameter and 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 inches long. Ream out the pith and scrape off the bark, sanding the outside. Take a lump of beeswax and soften it in the hot sun or by a flame, just to the consistency of soft putty. Quickly mold this to one end so that the hollow chamber is plugged and the wax extends to the edges of the stem. Tamp it down while the wax is soft; then trim off excess wax. Make a plug for the other end, carved from wood (or use cork). A hole drilled in the stopper allows you to thread a cord to hang the container from your neck or belt. You can decorate the outside as these examples show.

There are some interesting accounts of local *Nicotiana* use in: Jan Timbrook, *Chumash Ethnobotany* (2007) and Lowell Bean and Katherine Saubel, *Temalpakh. Cabuilla Indian Knowledge and Usage of Plants*.



II. Beyond the Wall: Nature Connection Techniques from Recent Classes

The biggest challenge of my nature-teaching career has been to point the way beyond the wall of distraction and modern craziness, to the pure and deep conversations with Nature that make us sane and give us grounding. It's a challenge because the wall is a nasty, pervasive structure, and each of us carries it with us all the time!

At the moment the challenge is burning within me, but it's not out of control; it's a nice fire that's going to take me and our students to good places. In 2013 we made progress with a couple of new initiatives and will share the results with you.

I realize there's a spectrum of actions that get one out of society's tangle and into a more immediate connection with nature: Quit texting. Turn off your phone. Cease the conversation with your walking partner about the stock market. These merely chip away at the wall that still exists. I'm talking about a much more serious vault beyond it, and the question is, can it be achieved pretty quickly, on demand, rather than just after a weeklong solo hike?

Some of you know that this very question permeated my "Wall Project," a two and a half year effort to become a better tracker and especially an intuitive one. (I wrote of the results in *Walk with the Animal*, released last March.) The answer to the question is yes, and my experience led us to teach a pilot series in intuitive tracking, and to initiate the Day Scout class in 2013.

The insight we're trying to convey is how important it is *to belong to the natural space you're in*, in this very moment. How else can you tap into the many threads connected to a track? How else can you expect to become unobtrusive, even invisible, to the wildlife around you?

The Way You Walk

We've often told our awareness students, "Quiet your mind, and the body will follow," because wildlife tolerates some noise as long as the energy behind it is muted or calm. This last year we instead followed the principle, "Quiet your body and the mind will follow." That is, in our Nature Awareness and Day Scout classes, we began with quiet, balanced movement to make the transition and found that this technique works very well too.

Whether your goal is to see and touch more animals, or to enter very deeply into tracking, the first physical steps you take shouldn't be those of an outsider. And to be honest, that's almost always the starting point of an outdoorsperson. The car (or even bicycle) that brought you to this open space doesn't belong there. The mind that chatters, evaluates, plans and categorizes is alien to that space. And the feet that walk the trails are city feet until they learn to move as though they belong.

City feet are conscious of where they want to go; they look for the right trail and compare their location to a map. They avoid rocks and step over logs, and seek the easier route. They are laced up and protected. They are conscious of making noise. Feet that belong, though, feel no separation from the earth they walk upon. Always in balance, they adjust without thought. They don't follow a trail, they *are* the trail.

"A nice concept," you say, but how can this happen? Your primary goal is to take your mind off of where you're going and how you're walking, and sense your balance and the ground you walk upon, deeply underneath if you will. Here are a few techniques adapted from our recent classes.

Limber up your body with some simple balancing and stretching exercises: crouch down slowly and back up, move your weight from one leg to the other, forward and back and from side to side as your arms move slowly this way and that. With this, you're sort of programming the body to natural movement mode so you don't have to think about it consciously. Then, take off your shoes or put on some moccasins, a double pair of thick socks or footwear with very thin soles.



It's not enough to put your phone away; you need to be present in the way you walk and the way you are.

Pick an area with uneven terrain and begin walking randomly, not looking at the ground. Using wide-angle vision, put your attention on something that's moving on the landscape—a bird, another person, an animal or a tree blowing in the wind. As you walk, all the while changing direction and moving your head, keep your awareness constantly on that thing you've chosen to notice. After a bit of walking, pick a second thing and now continue walking while being aware of both of these. (If you have a couple of partners you can do this together, all at the same time, being aware of each other.) This simple exercise relocates the control panel for your movement and balance, as it were, to a baseline underneath, and brings your awareness to the forefront. The two tasks, moving and awareness, then begin to combine as one. Eventually, you might realize that your feet and the ground cannot be distinguished from one another, and you've arrived!

Another method to reset walking and balance to the here-and-now is simply to walk blindfolded. Definitely do this with a sighted spotter at first. And a long walk at night without a flashlight may accomplish the same goal. There are some other very cool techniques, hard to describe here and better practiced with a group, which we use in Nature Awareness and Day Scout, courtesy of instructors Moti and Tanya. Think of merging techniques from military scouting and Argentinian tango, and you may imagine some effective and crazy methods. But if you can't join us for those classes, just keep your eye on the goal: to eliminate self-consciousness about moving and become confident with your balance to the effect that you never think about it.

The Way You Are

As I was learning how to let an animal show me intuitively where it went, the wall I often encountered was my inability to listen purely. All of us know what it's like to have a conversation with another person who's not completely present—the fingers texting beneath the table, or the eyes and mind wandering off to some other place. Our modern society rewards multi-tasking, but nature rejects it as being scattered and disconnected. I discovered that trailing an animal required that I be completely present and open; if I wasn't I hit the wall, it's as simple as that. My challenges and successes are described in *Walk with the Animal* so rather than repeat them here, I'll move directly to some techniques.

In our intuitive tracking series (this year expanded and renamed Walk with the Animal), we spend the first day entirely on the subject “making contact with the animal” because the proper approach is so critical. We begin the day with physical and mental relaxation: walking as in the section above and sitting quietly while letting the mind's chatter float away. We practice a simple breathing technique in which with every exhalation, the mind goes to the heart or center, then goes outward to dissolve.

There are other methods you might discover or already be familiar with, but some or a combination can really bring you into present awareness within minutes. Then, the process of making contact with the track begins. As you would when beginning a conversation with a close friend, start by making a commitment to listen completely and to put your entire attention to this track and the animal which left it. In doing so you're not only beginning the conversation with the animal, but you are also pressing the reset button as to who you are: You are the tracker who can do this and who is committed to the task. Our intuitive tracking students from last year pointed out how important this determination and positive attitude is. Just as important, though, is humility, so remember to thank the animal for what it will teach you, and ask for permission to track it. This sets the space in which a direct communication with nature can occur.

You are now beyond the wall, and conversations can begin. Sometimes they take you right where the animal went, and sometimes back to details in the track which you missed. The animal may require that you analyze its gait more fully, so that you understand its mood—and so that you prove that you are still committed to the relationship. At any event, interesting things occur and you will learn a lot as long as you monitor and maintain “who you are”: committed, open, and a part of the web rather than its center.