



AYAHUASCA

THE FAST TRACK TO ENLIGHTENMENT?

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I Am Enlightened..... I Have a Bucket!

I am sitting on a cushion in the anteroom of the temple, on the grounds of our retreat in Pisac, Peru. It is freezing cold and pitch black outside, with a few stars twinkling, but I don't notice those things. My attention is totally focused on my bucket. I am sitting bolt upright, with my arms straight down at my sides, and with a bright orange plastic bucket tucked tightly under my chin. I look like an alien space creature with a bucket-shaped head, but I am not aware of how I look from the outside. The muscles of my neck and chin are fiercely gripping that bucket as if my life depends on it, because having that bucket RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW is the only thing between me and oblivion.

How did I get here?

How can this possibly be the road to enlightenment?

Our original plan was to take the 4 day trek to Macchu Picchu, but that plan got squashed. The tour group I had chosen told me that due to my extremely restrictive diet, I could only do the trek as a private party, not as part of a group. I decided it was time to reassess and get clear on what I really wanted out of this trip.

I sat down to meditate, and what came up for me was, "I want to learn about shamanic healing practices of Peru." I googled that phrase on the internet, and what immediately popped up was, "ayahuasca retreats".

This was only the second time in my life I had heard the word "ayahuasca". The first time was a few months before, when I told a friend of mine I was planning a trip to Peru the following summer. The first word out of his mouth was "Ayahuasca!", then, "Do it! It is totally legal down there. It has been life-changing for me." I had no idea what he was talking about, but if he had to reassure me that it was legal "down there", that probably meant it wasn't legal "up here", and I was pretty sure I didn't want to be involved with it, whatever it was.

But now, here was the word again, in the context of shamanic retreats, with other spiritual activities, and most important, offering a simple, healthy diet that seemed to fit what I eat, AND a plant ceremony on Macchu Picchu. Before I really had a good grasp on what I was getting myself into, Penny and I decided to do it.

My daughter Penny was the first one to start researching ayahuasca. Facts started to emerge: traditional plant medicine from Peru. Originally from the Amazon jungle. Similarities to peyote. Used in ceremonies for thousands of years. Cleansing. Healing. Psychedelic properties. Can make people throw up. Can make people have visions.

My husband and I watched some you tube videos. Always people said it was profound, it was life-changing. I had some fear and resistance, but the plans seemed to be rolling forwards. I was already on the train, and it was moving out of the station.

I was jittery on the evening of our first ceremony. Our group had already experienced a san pedro ceremony the day before - a masculine energy plant medicine that is taken outdoors, during the day. It had been a powerful and profound experience for me. Earlier in the afternoon, a few members of our group had been walking into town, discussing how the san pedro would compare with what was awaiting us that evening. At the very moment this question was voiced, a powerful gust of wind came from nowhere, blasting and swirling through us. To me, it felt like the wind was saying, "you ain't seen nothing yet, baby." Immediately, I felt my intestines clench.



At 8pm we met in the “temple”, a low circular building on the grounds of our retreat, that was dedicated to housing ayahuasca ceremonies. The area was beautifully landscaped and lush. Green grass, brilliant red flowers, eucalyptus trees with their uneven, silvery grey bark lining the entrance to the property and around the temple, a windy pebble path through the trees, connecting the temple to a building with a kitchen and a bathroom, a little brook running through the grounds, and near the edge of the temple, a small log bridge for walking over the brook. Now, however, it was dark, and I had to feel my way past the evergreen, up the little hill, and over the bridge to the entrance of the temple.

We took off our shoes in the anteroom. There was a long, cushioned bench built into either side of the narrow room, with windows above, showing the clear black sky and little pinpoints of light from the stars. I carefully tucked my shoes under the bench to my right directly next to the door. I wanted to be sure I could find them if I had to go to

the bathroom in the middle of the ceremony. I picked up my purging bucket from a stack just to the left of the door, and entered the main room.

Ayahuasca represents the feminine energy, and the round shape of the temple was built to look and feel like being in a mother’s womb. There was no furniture, just built-in cushions

around the perimeter of the space.

The window-openings were covered with traditional hand-embroidered “ayahuasca cloths”, and more cloths decorated the walls. There were stacks of alpaca wool blankets and ponchos, and a pile of pillows just inside the door. We each staked our claim to a piece of cushion, creating a nest of pillows and blankets, with our water bottles to one side, and our barf-buckets on the other side.



Edmunds, our ayahuascero (leader of the ceremony) and shaman, placed two lit candles and some ceremonial objects on a woven

cloth in front of his spot. He had his ayahuasca brew in a bottle next to him and a small ceramic cup on his cloth. His assistant, Leticia, was sitting next to him. They both had guitars and corn-husk rattles behind them.

Since 4 of us were new to the ayahuasca experience, Edmunds spent some time preparing us. A few phrases stuck with me: “There is no negotiating with ayahuasca”, he said, “but you can affect your experience with your breathing.... If you don’t like what you are experiencing, sit up straight... It may not seem like it at the time, but there is an end.... Your bucket will be your best friend.”

Then it was time to begin. We went around the circle counter-clockwise, starting with Edmunds, then Leticia. Each person knelt in front of the candles, as Edmunds poured the



ayahuasca into the cup. Each took the cup in two hands, spoke the word, "Kowsaipal", the prescribed toast in Quechua (the indigenous language of Peru), internally said 3 words expressing what he/she wanted to call forth in this ceremony, then drank up the tea in one gulp.

When we had applied for this program, we each were asked to write about our purpose in wanting to take the ayahuasca. I had written about wanting to be in touch with my life's purpose, gain confidence and ability in my energy work, see angels and guides. But when it was my turn in front of the "altar", the 3 words that came up for me were, "I am enlightened". I heard my thought, "if it works, I'll only have to do this once." Then I drank up.

Grateful that I was able to get to the bathroom and back before the effects of the medicine kicked in and while the candles were still lit, I settled in among my blankets. When we finished going around the circle, Edmunds blew out the candles. We were sitting in complete darkness.

Almost immediately, the visuals started. At first, I saw hanging tapestries on ancient stone walls, and dimly lit, cavernous, spaces. The stones were rectangular and huge, and there were some larger-than-life sized stone statues as well. I was traveling through high post-and-lintel doorways, up and down curving stone steps, around corners - almost as though I was in a Disneyland ride, smoothly and silently gliding through these spaces. Just as I had the thought, "this isn't too bad, I can handle this", and just as I started to relax, the landscape changed.

The colors started to get bright - neon bright. I remember yellow, red, and white.... The shapes became mechanical. The energy started to get more and more intense, and whatever it was I was looking at, was in my face. Instead of traveling through an ancient landscape, I was looking at something like a huge arcade game, or maybe a giant pinball machine. Up above there were gears and pulleys, in the middle were huge arrows moving around and around in an infinity loop, and down below, where it was all antiseptic, hospital white, way down below, was....the bucket.

I was being enticed to the bucket..."give it up....throw it up.....release..." the feeling was eerily seductive. There was also the sound of the ball, a small white ball, starting at the top, going around the gears, being led through some obstacles, and then, down, down,... "plop", into the bucket. I was being drawn to the bucket. I tried to throw up. I was noisy, but not much came out. Edmunds had said, "express your feelings with sound if you are purging". "Ptuiii!!! Ptuiii!!! over and over in loud, disgusted sounds. I wanted to throw it up, I felt I was being drawn to leap into the bucket - but I couldn't, or didn't dare. I didn't trust. What was this force drawing me?

Was the ayahuasca energy I was feeling a force of the light, or was it a force of darkness? It was all so unsettling, oily...like an evil snake slithering across the floor....I started to believe I was in the power of a demonic force - more and more insistent, pulsing, yet insidious. "Into the bucket, into the bucket....the arrows kept showing the way, the ball kept falling, I was drawn closer and closer.....

I was sweating. "Sit up straight", I remembered. "Breathe". I started having a conversation with myself, to get my bearings, to calm myself down, to get grounded:

"Well, even if this ayahuasca vine is a force of evil, I know there is good". But no sooner had I uttered those words to myself, then I heard a voice answer;

..."Maybe not".

Rattled, I came back with, "I know there is God".

Again, I heard the voice....."Maybe not".

Really shaken, I replied, "Well, I know there is an end to this experience. I have been told there is, so I know that to be true."

Then came,....."Maybe not".

At this moment, my trust in the universe, in everything I thought I knew, began to crumble. "I KNOW I HAVE A DAUGHTER!" She is sitting right next to me in the circle, on my left, though at this moment she feels as though she is a million miles away. I feel strident, almost desperate.

Then, the answer; "No! Give it up!"

How can this be? But my knowledge of everything is slipping away.

"I HAVE A BODY! I KNOW I HAVE A BODY!"

And then comes the reply, "No! Give it up!"

Not able to fight, I have only one thing left. "I HAVE A BUCKET! I am screaming, though it is all silent, within me. I am clutching my bucket with a death grip. It is on my lap. My arms are wrapped around it. My head is bent over it; "I HAVE A BUCKET!"

Again, I hear, "NO! Give it up! Give it all up!"

I won't let go. I have nothing, I am nothing. I have no foundation to stand on, nothing to believe and trust in.....but I have a bucket!!!

At some point during this interaction, Leticia has come by. Seeing me so desperately clutching my bucket, she has gently lifted me up and led me to the anteroom, where she ever-so-gently has set me down on one of the cushions, sitting me up straight, and setting the bucket on my lap with my hands holding it's sides. Two or three times she has come back to check on me. Each time I was back in my original posture, clutching the bucket for dear life, arms wrapped around it, body slumped over it. Each time, she has set me up straight again, put the bucket in my lap, with my hands supporting its sides.

Finally, I figure out, "I guess it's better if I sit up straight". But, I NEED my bucket. I HAVE to have it ! So, I sit up straight, take the bucket, tuck it under my chin as tightly as I can, and put my hands straight down by my sides.

This is how Leticia finds me.

I am doing my best to do what Leticia wants, but when she comes by again, she takes the bucket out from under my chin, sets it on my lap, and positions my hands to hold the bucket in place.

As she leaves, I finally let go of that last piece. "Alright, it's ok if I don't have a bucket. If I have to throw up and I barf on my pants, that's ok".

But enlightenment isn't here yet!

I so desperately want to let go of everything, purge everything, jump into the abyss, and come out on the other side cleansed and renewed. I am ready!

But I can't. Leticia brings me water. "Drink it all up" she says.

"This will make me throw it all up" I think. But it doesn't. I can't let go with abandon. I can't be like a drop of water leaping off the edge of the waterfall.

My neck and shoulders are aching from hours of hunching over and clutching my bucket. My breathing is shallow and erratic. "I am nothing, I have nothing. I can't sit up right, I can't breathe right, and I can't even throw up right." I have failed.

My despair is so deep and so complete, that if I could only figure out a way to die, it would be a welcome relief - but of course that is way beyond me. So I sit, alone, in the cold, in the dark, in my pool of misery.

Intermittently, Edmunds and Leticia have been playing music or singing during the ceremony. Mostly, I have not been aware of the music, except to subliminally note that it felt like "shake it up, let it out, let it go" kind of music. Sometimes they used rattles to enhance that effect. Now, in the distance, I hear strains of a beautiful, soothing, gentle melody. Edmunds is singing with a clear, thin and pure voice. I feel as though angels have swooped down to rescue me.

My heart leaps. "There IS an end to this hell! The music lasts for a moment and then stops. The struggle comes back, but I can last it out! There IS AN END!

Now I remember Leticia's kindness. She brought me water, she kept checking on me, she spoke with gentleness. She cared! There IS good in the world.

I see myself in a barbed wire cage. I see that I have put the cage around me. I see the cage is all the harsh judgements I have put on myself - "you can't sit right, you can't breathe right, you can't throw up right...." Everything in my life, judging, judging...

The cage is lifting up and floating away.

One by one, I am able to unwind the conversations of the last few hours: I look down at my legs. Right now, I DO have a body. It's ok to have a body. And - I DO have a daughter! So much joy to have a daughter again!

The ceremony is almost over. Leticia comes back one more time and leads me to my place in the circle. I feel love. I feel light. I am uplifted by the beauty and comfort of the music. I am at peace.

Later, as I reflect on this experience, I realize how perfectly it played out for me. Had I experienced the Grand Purge, the leap into the abyss the way I thought it should look, I would still be tying my results to my accomplishments. As it was, in MY eyes I hadn't earned reprieve, but grace came anyway.

The Research



I began with the little ayahuasca drink, and I ended contemplating the most basic and far-reaching questions of our existence in the universe. In my research I wanted to answer some basic questions about ayahuasca and fill out the knowledge I gained from my own ayahuasca experience and interviews. Each question I researched brought up larger questions for me; so here are my questions, some answers, and some new questions.

Where does ayahuasca come from?

Ayahuasca comes from the Amazon, primarily from the areas that are now Peru, Columbia, Ecuador, and Brazil.

What exactly IS ayahuasca?



Technically, ayahuasca is a tea. It is generally, though not always, made from two plants, the ayahuasca vine and the chakruna plant. The word ayahuasca means “vine of the souls”, “vine of the spirits”, or “vine of the dead”. This name indicates that ayahuasca was used to assist in contacting the souls or spirits of the dead.

It is in a class of substances that are variously called hallucinogens, psychedelics, and psychotomimetics, (literally, mimicking psychosis). All these names tell us that something is happening to our minds, our perceptions and our sense of reality when we take ayahuasca. However, because there are negative connotations to each of these labels, in the 1970’s the word “entheogen” was coined. This word means “generating the divine within”, and is more closely aligned with the purpose and effects of the drink as reported by the indigenous tribes who used it. The shamans simply call ayahuasca the “plant teacher” or “plant medicine”.

We in the Western tradition call ayahuasca and other entheogens “drugs”, though that designation lumps them together with substances such as cocaine, heroin and alcohol, that dull the mind, are physically and psychologically addictive and potentially harmful to a person’s health. Ayahuasca is known to expand the mind, is not physically or psychologically addictive, and often improves a person’s health. What if we were to simply call ayahuasca “plant medicine”? Would that change the way we look at it, think about it, and feel about it?

How is the ayahuasca tea made?

The bark of the ayahuasca vine is pounded to break up the fibers; the leaves of the chakruna plant are washed and sorted. Then everything is mixed together and cooked in a large pot. Traditionally, the making of the ayahuasca brew is a sacred ceremony. It is also a



time-consuming process that requires a sophisticated knowledge of chemical interactions.

Why do I say this? The vine does not have in it the properties that create the visions for which this drink is famous. That property is in the chakruna plant. The chakruna plant contains the DMT molecule (dimethyltryptamine), made famous by LSD, a modern, man-made entheogen. Making a tea from the leaves of the chakruna plant will not induce visions either, because the chakruna plant also contains an enzyme, monoaminoxidase (MAO for short), which metabolizes, or eats up, the DMT in the stomach.

In other words the chakruna plant counteracts, or neutralizes, the vision-inducing aspect of itself by the time it is digested. Now, here's the amazing part - the ayahuasca vine contains a substance which inhibits, or de-activates, the MAO in the chakruna plant. This substance, called an MAOI, (monoaminoxidase inhibitor), allows the DMT in the chakruna plant to become active. Therefore, when the vine and the plant are combined, a person can experience visions.

Another important aspect of this combination is that the ayahuasca vine usually induces vomiting and/or diarrhea. The physical cleansing produced by these activities is a vital part of the experience. It brings physical healing as well as opening the doors to profound psychological and spiritual insights, and contact with other realms of reality.



Sometimes other plants are used instead of the chakruna plant. These other plants all contain naturally occurring DMT and create a similar effect when combined with the ayahuasca vine. Occasionally shamans would add other plants or herbs with specific healing properties to the mixture depending upon the particular situation. Shamans could also vary the proportions of different plants used. For instance, if a person was requesting physical healing, the shaman might increase the proportion of the ayahuasca vine to intensify the physical purging.

Before laboratories, before modern chemistry, before the "scientific method", the shamans knew about these combinations and the subtleties of how to combine each ingredient for its maximum result. The ayahuasca vine and the chakruna plant do not look like each other and do not grow near each other. They grow in the Amazon jungle which is teeming with thousands of varieties of plant life. How did they know what plants to use, how to combine them, or how to create this powerful drink? How could they have known what profound mind-opening effects would be created? Was it just chance, or - as one author has stated - were they, through trial and error, just looking for "a better way to vomit"? When asked these questions, shamans have traditionally answered, "the plants taught me".

What has the ayahuasca been used for, and in what context?

Traditionally ayahuasca was used for out-of-body travel, location of lost objects, assistance in a hunt, contact with the dead and healing for sick members of the tribe. In addition it opened the user up to connection with nature and other realms of reality, and an enormous amount of wisdom, clarity, and insight. The shaman, who was the doctor, teacher, and priest all rolled up into one, spent years apprenticing with a senior shaman before guiding others - using the brew personally, learning how to find and prepare it, learning about the thousands of other plants in the forest and developing wisdom. A small group of people, one sick person with his shaman, or the shaman alone would go on an ayahuasca “journey” to bring back answers or healing for the people and the tribe.

One of the shaman’s areas of knowledge was the ayahuasca “dieta”. Starting about two weeks before an ayahuasca ceremony, a participant is instructed to start eliminating certain foods. Gradually, he lightens and simplifies his diet. We now know that chemical reactions between ayahuasca and certain foods can have undesirable results, and combining ayahuasca with other drugs (especially antidepressants) or alcohol can be dangerous, even fatal. Traditionally ayahuasca journeys were prepared for meticulously, respecting the sacredness of the experience. In this traditional setting, ayahuasca has always been safe.

Another area of expertise of the shaman was the “icaros”, or song. During the ceremony, the shaman sings and plays the drum and/or rattle, to assist in the process of releasing and letting go. The songs were taught or “given” to him; they were part of his healing gift, and considered an essential part of the ceremony. The icaros moves unwanted energies out of the body and brings healing energies in. Modern science is discovering that sound vibration has a physical effect on the human body, and different tones and qualities of sound have unique and specific effects. These scientific findings confirm the ancient wisdom of the shaman’s song.

What is the History of Ayahuasca use?

Ayahuasca has been used for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years, but it comes from an area with no written traditions, so we have no material evidence of its origins. We do know that in the middle of the 1800’s, when European botanists started exploring the Amazon, the ayahuasca drink was widely used throughout the area. A scientist from England named Richard Schultz actually took some plant samples home with him, so we know the make-up of the drink being used.

Other circumstances have made it difficult to learn of possible ayahuasca use in the previous few centuries. We know that during the sixteen and seventeen hundreds, some Catholic priests who came to the area reported the use of a horrifying, intoxicating drink which they called the “drink of the devil”. From the time they conquered the Incas in the mid-fifteen hundreds, the Spanish would either convert, torture or kill these “heathens”. Given that scenario, if the drink the priests encountered WAS ayahuasca, of course it quickly went underground.

There is archaeological evidence from 2000-1500 BC of the use of psychotropic plants in the area. There are tubes and trays that were used for snuff, and a cup with anthropomorphic designs that some people say depicts ayahuasca-like visions. Ayahuasca is also in the creation myths of several of the tribes of the Amazon. Their oral tradition says that ayahuasca has been here since their people have been on this planet. If that is true, ayahuasca could have been around for as long as 10,000 years.

In our culture, we treat oral tradition as less reliable than written records, but for the indigenous tribes, their oral tradition IS their history. What if we could take the indigenous people at their word?

Modern History of Ayahuasca

In the 1900's three separate, seemingly unrelated sets of events combined to create an ayahuasca phenomenon. Due to these events ayahuasca burst out of its original confines of being used only by the indigenous tribes of the Amazon. It is now accepted in many parts of South America and is widely available elsewhere, especially in western countries.

In the mid 1900's in Brazil, completely independent of each other, two rubber tappers were introduced to ayahuasca; under the influence of its visions, they were told to found churches. The first, founded in the 1930's by Maestre Raimundo Irineu, was called Santo Daime. The second, created in 1961 by Maestre Gabriel, was named Unaio de Vegetal (Union of the Plants - UDV for short). They are both what are called syncretic religions, meaning they are a combination of traditions, including Christianity and traditional shamanism, with UDV also including elements of animism and spiritism. They have different rituals and structures, but they both include ayahuasca as their main sacrament. There are now offshoots of these two modern ayahuasca religions. These churches have spread throughout Brazil, and Santo Daime and UDV are also in North America and several countries of Europe. UDV, the most organized and largest of these churches, has more than 18,000 members world-wide.

Meanwhile, in the mid-1900's in Europe and the U.S. the psychedelic revolution was born. During WWII in Switzerland a researcher named Albert Hofman accidentally created LSD, and discovered its mind-expanding qualities. During the 1950's and 60's psychedelic research was THE hot new item in psychotherapeutic circles, with promising results for alcoholism, drug addiction, depression, and PTSD. A few people, such as Aldous Huxley, Timothy Leary, Carlos Castaneda, and (later) Terence McKenna, wrote books and talked about the mystical aspects of these psychedelic substances. Enchanted by their fantastical stories of mind-expanding, consciousness-raising experiences, many were anxious to get on board. The LSD experience was an integral part of the counterculture of the 1960's and beyond.

Initially only an adventurous few made the difficult, uncertain, and potentially dangerous trek to the Amazon to search out the "magic ayahuasca drink". Starting in the 1990's the political situation in South America stabilized and travel there became easier and safer. Peru, Columbia, Ecuador and Brazil saw that ayahuasca was a potential draw for tourists, and ayahuasca retreats began to spring up. A new phenomenon was born - "ayahuasca tourism".

Ayahuasca tourism takes many forms. Some retreats for foreigners are run by traditional native shamans, offering a more-or-less traditional ceremony. There are some run by people from other countries and cultures, who came to the Amazon and got inspired to study shamanism under a native. Some retreats are run by healers of other traditions, combining elements of shamanism with Western psychotherapy, Eastern mystical traditions, yoga, and meditation.

Most of the ayahuasca retreats offer a rich and supportive experience. However, there are some unscrupulous people anxious to tap into the ayahuasca tourist dollar pouring into these countries. They promise an ayahuasca experience, but don't provide the context or the support that is so important. They may also provide an inferior brew that is too weak, too strong, or adulterated with unauthorized ingredients, creating disappointing, overwhelming, or sometimes dangerous results.

Is Ayahuasca safe?

Context is everything. In a traditional setting with a knowledgeable leader, and with proper preparation that includes both dieta and proper intention, ayahuasca is safe. It is worth noting here that ayahuasca makes a poor candidate for a recreational drug given the potential unpleasantness of the experience. Between the legendary foul taste of the tea, the effects of vomiting and/or diarrhea, and the often terrifying visions, ayahuasca for the most part attracts only the serious spiritual seeker.

Dennis McKenna conducted a 6 year double-blind study to determine the safety of ayahuasca in Brazil in the 1990's, using members of both the UDV church and Santo Daime. The results showed that, in the context of how these churches use ayahuasca, it is safe. There was no evidence of ayahuasca being either physically or psychologically addicting, and there were no adverse affects to the health of any of the participants. Even more encouraging were the results of 31 subjects who, when they joined their ayahuasca church, were suffering from significant drug, alcohol, or tobacco addiction, or clinical levels of anxiety or depression. Over the course of the study, as the participants used the ayahuasca sacrament on a regular basis, all 31 of them overcame those problems. In addition all the subjects who partook of the ayahuasca rated higher on having a positive attitude, connection to family, and contribution to their community.

Is ayahuasca legal?

In the 1950's and 60's psychedelics were the subject of intense study for psychotherapeutic uses in the United States, and the results were promising. When researchers and research subjects crossed the line from research to advocacy, some officials reacted in fear. Widespread "drug" use was seen as a danger and threat to society. In 1970, the U.S. congress passed a law classifying all psychedelics, or entheogens, including ayahuasca, as a class 1 scheduled substance - meaning it was illegal to own, use or do research with. Canada and most of Europe followed suit.

The new ayahuasca religions, especially the UDV, have been challenging laws restricting the use of their sacrament. Currently ayahuasca is legal in the U.S. and in several countries in Europe as part of the sacrament of the UDV church. It is legal in Brazil as part of a religion, and it is legal in Peru as part of a religion or any kind of spiritual ceremony. In Colombia there is little government oversight at this time. The individual plants that make up the ayahuasca drink are legal, even where the drink is not. Some people order the plants and create the brew themselves.

The countries of South America see ayahuasca as a valuable part of their spiritual tradition, whereas most of North America and Europe still seem to view ayahuasca as a dangerous drug. However there is a growing group of North American and European ayahuasca users who see its value.

What is the effectiveness, usefulness, and significance of ayahuasca in our modern day? Is it truly a "shortcut to enlightenment"?

I have clearly seen the enormous potential for physical and spiritual healing through the use of ayahuasca. I have seen and heard of miraculous physical healing, and complete shifts in a person's way of thinking, feeling, and perceiving the world. The effects are, without question,

profound. Is it a shortcut to enlightenment? Sort of, but not exactly. Ayahuasca gives enormous insights and breakthroughs, but there's still the work of processing the experience. That part can't be ignored or short-circuited.

The effects of ayahuasca go beyond the personal, rippling out to the whole planet. The experience of ayahuasca tends to remove barriers - barriers between people, between cultures, between people and nature, between the material world and the world of energy and spirits, and even barriers between this world and other worlds. People who have had this barrier-dissolving experience tend to act differently. They treat each other with more kindness. They accept other cultures. They are respectful of nature and tread lightly on the earth. They feel connected to their own purpose and to a much grander cosmos than they had previously imagined.

Vines and snakes are common in ayahuasca journeys. The intertwining branches of the ayahuasca vine resemble the caduceus symbol (2 snakes intertwined around a staff - a symbol of the medical profession), and both look like the two intertwining strands of DNA. It has been theorized that when vines and snakes show up in ayahuasca visions, we are actually seeing down to the DNA level.



The serpent often shows up in ayahuasca visions to cleanse and to heal. In two of the creation myths of the Amazon region, the original people came from the sky, riding in serpent canoes. In one of these stories, the people arrived with three plants, one of which was "caapi". *Banisteriopsis caapi* is the scientific name for the ayahuasca vine. In the other story, the people came with a magic drink that promised to remind them where they came from and keep them connected to home.



What if we took the indigenous cultures of the Amazon at their word, that ayahuasca is a gift from the gods, offered to remind us of our divine origins? There are some advocates who say that this little ayahuasca drink holds the potential for raising the consciousness of humanity to a higher level, creating a more sane and sustainable world. What if it were true?

The Interviews

I conducted seven interviews with people who have been on some kind of ayahuasca journey. There was a lot of variety in my group. I talked with family, friends, and two whom I hadn't previously met. Five were women; two were men. They ranged in age from 24 to 71. They were in a variety of occupations, including nanny, tango teacher, two healers, a post-student, and retired. They ranged from having had one ayahuasca experience to more than can be counted. Their stories were rich and varied. Each was unique, yet I did see a common thread. Following are the questions I asked, the answers I received, and what I learned from the process.

How did you first hear of ayahuasca?

Of the 7 people I interviewed, 3 had heard of ayahuasca a long time before they actually used it, one as much as 15 or 20 years before. Because of what they had heard, those people were receptive to having an ayahuasca experience when an opportunity arose.

There was a fascinating variety of ways in which ayahuasca appeared in people's lives: Two had had profound experiences with LSD that opened them to the possibility of using ayahuasca. Two had friends call them over to tell of a life-changing experience they had had. Two had information on ayahuasca retreats appear on the internet at a perfect time. For one of those people, at the very moment she realized that her faltering relationship was over, an ad for an ayahuasca retreat popped up on her computer. Not blind to the serendipitous timing, she immediately signed up.

My favorite is the story of woman who actually took the ayahuasca by accident! She was being a nanny/house sitter for a family. She was looking for a way to heal her body from some issues she was having, and had heard that reishi mushroom tonic was a powerful healer. When she opened the door of the fridge and saw a bottle labelled, "reishi tonic", she was ecstatic that the universe had answered her prayers so quickly and specifically. After muscle-testing and finding that her body had a strong affinity for the contents of the bottle, she took a healthy swig. That evening she had an experience of a lifetime, as what she had actually downed was ayahuasca.

In each of these situations, something led these people to the ayahuasca. Seeds were planted for them, information was offered to them. Opportunities fell into their laps, or out of the fridge. It feels to me as if those of us who have had this experience have been drawn to it by an unseen, but powerful force.

What drew you to the ayahuasca?

Two people had very specific purposes; one, to heal her heart after a traumatic break-up, another, to get over a pathological fear of vomiting. Two were impressed by changes they saw in friends/neighbors who had used ayahuasca. One of these, at age 67, decided it was finally time to let down her barriers. The other wanted to break through limitations that came from a somewhat straight-laced mid-western upbringing. The two men, who are friends with each other, had had LSD "trips" as teenagers. They were so altered by those life expanding experiences, it wasn't a question of whether to do it. It was simply a path they were on. One of them learned through the internet how to make his own brew, and worked on it for two years to perfect the concoction.

Before conducting my interviews, I believed that having a specific, conscious purpose was vital in creating a valuable ayahuasca experience, because it was so important to me. What I discovered was that a purpose could be specific, such as healing one's heart, or general, such as being open to teachings from the universe. It could also be either conscious or unconscious; even the woman who "unintentionally" drank the ayahuasca had a purpose - to heal her body. And what she experienced (after the terror) WAS healing.

Was there a common thread? Each person had an interest in learning about him/herself and the universe, and an openness to something completely different.

Did you attend a traditional shamanic ceremony, or did you experience the ayahuasca in some other context? How did the format affect your experience?

Two of the people I interviewed went to Peru to experience the ayahuasca in a more traditional way, near the place of its origin, the Amazon jungle. One woman experienced a more-or-less traditional shamanic ceremony, but here in the U.S., and also a "Daime" ceremony - ayahuasca given as the sacrament in a modern Brazilian church, which is a combination of Christianity and ancient shamanic rituals. One woman has experienced ceremonies in the U.S. that are run by someone who is not a shaman, but who has extensive training in supporting such groups. Hers is a cohesive group whose members have chosen to learn and evolve together. Of the two men I interviewed, the one who makes the brew himself has taken it alone many times, the other one has taken it with his friend, in his friend's home. For them, there was no outside structure or support system. The woman who took the ayahuasca unintentionally obviously had a free-form experience that time, but she has since gone back to join several local (Utah) ceremonies, run by various shamans.

After my personal experience, I concluded I would NEVER drink ayahuasca other than in the context of a traditional shamanic ceremony. I felt that my shaman and his assistant, and the structure of the ritual gave me the support I needed to make my journey the profound, positive, life-changing event that it was. What I discovered was that everybody I talked with found their way of doing the ayahuasca positive and valuable. The woman who experienced both the shamanic ceremony and the Daime Church expressed a preference for the shamanic way, but found value in both. (Though the Daime church had more structure than she preferred for the ayahuasca, it gave her a softer, more accepting experience of "going to church" than she had had before.) What astonished me was the comments of the two men who had experienced the ayahuasca on their own. Though the one who makes his own brew expressed curiosity about a traditional shamanic setting, they both said they didn't want boundaries or control, and liked doing it by themselves.

What am I learning? The ayahuasca can have a profound, positive effect in a variety of settings.

What was the nature of your experience?

Many people had intense visuals, but not everyone, or every time. Some visuals were beautiful, intricate patterns, some were pipe-cleaner stick figures and cartoon characters. One person said his experience was musical. Often people said there was an undulation, an ebb and flow, or some other feminine quality to the experience. Some said they were floating in other realms, one said he had been shown "the structure of the universe". Others said they

were completely grounded and present to the experience of their physical bodies. Sometimes the experience was of absolute terror, other times of unimaginable bliss. The variety and richness were endless, and the experience was totally unpredictable.

“What, if anything, did you learn or gain?”

The woman who came to heal her heart felt it open up again, and felt it continue to soften after the ceremony was over. She had an opportunity to experience closure and new beginnings. The woman who went to conquer her fear of vomiting faced that fear and reduced it from a pathological level to a point where it no longer controls her life. The woman who wanted to let go of her barriers feels freer and more joyful, more energetic and healthier. The woman who wanted to break through the limitations of her Mid-Western upbringing found her courage just by stepping into this completely new experience. The woman who had the unwitting first ayahuasca voyage received cleansing and healing. She also got the message, “Stay grounded. Integrate your spiritual self with your physical body.” The two curious men had their perception of life and the universe expanded way beyond anything they could have imagined.

What fascinated and amazed me in hearing these stories is how each person received an experience that was tailor made for him/her. Each lesson was unique and profound. Sometimes the lesson presented tapped a level that was deeper than the person’s ability to ask, yet it was exactly what that person needed at the time.

Some common threads: Several of my people talked about cleansing and renewal. Two actually had a “death and rebirth” experience. One was the woman who had the “unintentional” ayahuasca trip. After she downed the plant medicine and started to experience its effects, she believed she was dying, and felt helpless to do anything about it. When she woke up the next morning and discovered she was still alive, she had an amazing feeling of renewal. Another woman (of the Mid-Western background), actually felt the ayahuasca vine moving up and through her body, cleaning out her intestines, her liver...then she felt herself being reborn “in His pure love”.

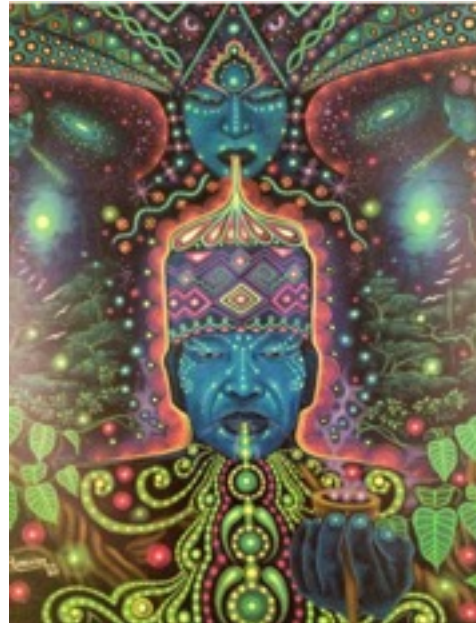
Several of the people had an experience of meeting and communing with “grandmother ayahuasca” herself, or with the feminine energy of the plant. Everyone who had this experience felt her energy as love. The woman with the fear of vomiting noted that love here is not necessarily soft. It takes the form of uncompromisingly showing us the truth about ourselves. Sometimes it is with humor, always it is with complete, non-negotiable clarity.

Everybody had an experience of opening up, breaking down barriers, feeling connected with others, nature, and/or the universe. Everyone experienced new realms, felt upheld, knew they are not alone, knew they are loved. The man who makes his own ayahuasca brew said the ayahuasca experience has been “the single most opening, powerful, transformative event of his life.” His friend said he learned more about himself in eight hours than in all the previous years of his life, and nothing has been the same since. Everyone said the ayahuasca was a profound, powerful experience that affected or changed their lives in a significant way.

Would you do it again?

Of the people I talked with, only one said no. The woman who went to heal her heart said drinking ayahuasca was a powerful and profound experience, but since she accomplished her purpose, she has no need to do it again. Of the others, four would like to, but have no specific plans at this time. One woman is in an on-going program with a steady, committed group. The

man who makes his own ayahuasca, drinks approximately every 2-3 months, though his ideal would be 2-3x a week. For him, drinking ayahuasca is an on-going “practice”, which keeps him expanded, aware, and learning.



Conclusion

I had expected the quality of people’s experiences to be dependent upon their intention, preparation, and/or the guidance they received during their ayahuasca journey(s). I expected there to be a wide variety of answers as to the importance ayahuasca had for them. I was not prepared to hear that in spite of all the differences in their ayahuasca experiences, each of my interviewees has found ayahuasca to be extremely significant and/or life-changing in a positive way. I have the feeling that ayahuasca is a “larger-than life” force, with a significance that is deeper and larger than I could have imagined. I am humbled and in awe in its presence.

What Did I Gain from my Ayahuasca Experience?

Confidence: First, and foremost. It was one of the things I asked for, and it came, of course, not in a way I would have expected or wanted, but in a way that worked for me. My first ayahuasca journey was the most terrifying experience of my life. Simply knowing that I had the ability to live through it, and to go back a second time, gave me confidence.

Courage: Not only did it take courage to come back for a second ayahuasca journey, I have also found that since then, I have more courage to face people and situations that are frightening, even terrifying, to me.

Self-acceptance: Though I wish I could say that the harsh self-judgments have stopped, I can say that I am more aware of them and their arbitrariness. Sometimes just noticing that I am judging is enough to allow me to let go.

Energy work: I am accepting my energy work. Instead of fighting with myself at every step, chastising myself for not sensing more, I am accepting what I get, working with it, and acknowledging that I am creating powerful sessions for my clients. Also, I am finding that it is easier to get energetic information. I am not feeling a spectacular shift, but I do feel I am on solid ground, doing something I have the ability to do, and to do well. Actually, that shift IS spectacular.

Magic, Wildness and Chaos: Here and there, I find myself in touch with the magic, the wildness, and the chaos in life. I am able to allow it, even sink into it, embrace it. I know my life doesn't go in a straight line, but weaves and undulates. Sometimes there are upheavals and sometimes smooth paths. I am finding myself much more willing to trust the process.

Connection to Nature: I now KNOW there is a consciousness in all living things, and we are all connected.

Food! Even though I have enjoyed the food I eat, because I have such a basic diet, I have felt somewhat restricted, limited, left out. Now I have rediscovered the Joy of Food! My diet is still almost the same, but I am experimenting some, widening my repertoire of dishes a bit, and just enjoying eating! Since I was 20, when I developed an eating disorder that I lived with for 10 years, I have had a tumultuous relationship with food. To just simply enjoy food is a great, and not so simple, blessing for me.

Eating Habits: When I was 30, I learned to tame my eating disorder through eating healthy food. Over the years, I got in touch with, and worked with, the emotional component of my eating habits. The compulsive aspect of my eating was tamed, but never conquered. For a month after returning from my ayahuasca journey, I had no feelings of compulsion whatsoever. The freedom and joy I felt are indescribable!

Gradually, over the next couple of months, being in what felt like a pressure-cooker situation of so much to do, the compulsiveness returned, this time with heightened awareness of the debilitating shame I felt each time I gave way to an impulse. Finally, I decided that, as hard as it was, the easier way to create self-esteem was to create mastery over my eating habits. Is it easy? No. Every day, I have moments of struggle. But, as of this writing, I am 5 months into eating consciously, not compulsively. Each day, I am choosing another day, or now, another week or another month.

What was the Nature of My Experience?

Terrifying. Profound. Enlightening. Connecting. Life Changing.

Would I Do it Again?

.....Maybe.

Postscript

It is 3am. I am wide awake, with no chance of sleeping. I dread closing my eyes and falling back into the abyss, so I sit and reflect on the events of last night.

Every evening for the last week, I have been doing a meditation to call in the spirit of ayahwasca. I have been asking for her to assist me in creating the ayahwasca meditation I am to run at our August retreat. Secretly, though, I have been hoping she won't show up, because I have been afraid of re-experiencing the terror of my first ayahwasca journey.

Last night it happened. I was in free-fall, plunging, tumbling into darkness, in a place with no good, no bad, nothing sacred and nothing to count on. I was in a black hole of meaninglessness without end. The bottom line of existence was nothingness. Grasping for grounding points that were not there, I fell into despair and hopelessness that was everywhere and forever, where I didn't even have the wherewithal to wish for death.

Now, however, as I sit the terror breaks and the breakthrough comes. In my ayahwasca journey, I sat with that terror until it bottomed out. What it bottomed out into waslove. Because of that experience, I know the universe is benevolent. Though I may experience fear, I have no need to experience that black abyss of terror, since I KNOW the bottom line of existence is not nothingness, but love. Thank you, grandmother ayahwasca. I have felt your wisdom and your power. Now I feel your love.



After that experience, instead of fearing contact with the ayahwasca energy, I was able to sit, listen and create a meditation for our retreat.

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