Listening to Ayahuasca

New hope for depression, addiction, PTSD and anxiety (a summary by Pat Evert)

- **Introduction**
  The medicine is a tea composed of two plants — the ayahuasca vine, *Banisteriopsis caapi*, for which the brew is named, and the leaves from the *Psychotria viridis* bush. Many have used psychiatric drugs for years with no help. These people were suffering with what psychiatrists call treatment-resistant depression — they were the unlucky 30 to 50 percent of depression sufferers who don’t respond to antidepressant medications. It doesn’t budge. Nothing helps. So they tried Ayahuasca.

- **The mission**
  The US government under President Nixon, in a reaction to the cultural revolution of the sixties, declared a “war on drugs” that was not consistent with the available research findings on hallucinogenic drugs. This decision stopped all further scientific exploration.

  During an ayahuasca ceremony, I was more open than I was at the stressful time of my father’s dying, better able to fully receive my father’s final message, ‘I have always loved you.’ His words reached back into my childhood, subtly changing childhood memories so that my perspective shifted. I felt more loved, better able to recognize and receive the love that was “always” there but not always felt. Tears warmed my cheeks. Gratitude flooded my heart. I was grateful to relive this last moment with my dad, to feel the full impact of his words. I knew this experience had shifted my personal history in an essential way that somehow allowed my heart to be more open. In 2008, three years after my first ceremony and long after I’d given up trying to understand how the shamans do whatever it is they do, Grandmother Ayahuasca came to me during a ceremony and, in a no-nonsense way, told me to do a research study. I took her request as a mission — she, in all her wisdom, had chosen me (ME!) to do this work. I have no doubts that Grandmother Ayahuasca personally asked me to do this study. I heard her voice repeatedly along the way. I felt that she opened doors for me, making the whole project evolve smoothly without even a minor hassle, which is unusual in research. I wanted people to know that I understood the ayahuasca experience from the inside. I was not just an observer — I was a participant, a kindred spirit.

  First, this was not a controlled study. For my humble purposes, I only had to accept that the potency and dose of the tea couldn’t be controlled or even documented. Instead, this research focuses on your intentions before and your experiences after. Again, the question of spirit
doctors is beyond the scope of psychological research, but my first interviews brought me face-to-face with the limits of my understanding. The decision to focus the research on integration was totally my own. Grandmother Ayahuasca asked me to conduct the study, but she gave me no guidance on the content of the research. Sometimes the help was immediate, falling into the category of miraculous cures. Other times, healing required patient discipline, learning new ways of dealing with emotional moods and relationships. Personal experience is an important factor in determining what questions to ask in designing a study. The impact from ayahuasca ceremonies is strong, powerful, and able to persist over many years. For myself, I have been permanently changed, it is almost as if something has been imprinted into my operating system. I thought it was important to discover what people were already doing to help themselves integrate their ayahuasca experiences into their daily lives. Is Grandmother Ayahuasca real? She doesn’t have a consistent voice, although she does seem to be an independent entity. Her voice takes on an appropriate tone for each conversation.

- New hope for healing

“I eat less and feel better. I’m less negative, more sensitive to my spouse, less harsh, more loving. I feel better about myself, more alive. I learned how to live, how to love, how to help others.” This was Nathan’s description of how he changed as a result of participating in one hundred ayahuasca ceremonies over a ten-year period. A sixty-three-year-old teacher with a master’s degree, Nathan’s most recent experience with the medicine was two months before participating in the study. A thirty-three-year-old graduate student, Anna said, “I finally feel like myself. Yes, I love myself!” She had never been in psychotherapy and had attended about fifty ayahuasca ceremonies. Philip, age twenty-nine and a graduate student in psychology, described an important inner shift that implies having greater compassion, possibly at a spiritual level beyond psychological acceptance. George, age twenty-seven and in graduate school, made a similar observation regarding how he deals with mood swings since drinking ayahuasca. “No changes in emotional moods, but my ability to handle them is 100 percent better!” George hadn’t had any psychotherapy, but he had participated in twenty-two ayahuasca ceremonies over several years prior to the study. My relationships are no longer codependent. I no longer feel self-esteem problems. I feel incredibly happy and centered and more able to deal with adverse situations.” George’s parents, born-again Christians, wrote that they “couldn’t fathom how a plant had helped George find so much health and love.” William, a forty-five-year-old medical doctor, wrote that, since drinking ayahuasca, “Marijuana use is down 75 percent. My relationship with my wife is deepening. I’m more compassionate and affectionate. I have more confidence and feel a renewal of hope that I can create a meaningful life. I feel an opening of my heart to the scope of mystery.” We hear the intimations of a spiritual path unfolding. William had been in almost one hundred ceremonies, I have to admit that I and many others feel the same way —those of us who feel we’ve received some sort of mission from Grandmother Ayahuasca and that she’s guiding and helping us rise to the challenge she’s assigned. Nancy, a forty-two-year-old college graduate and farmer, had attended seventy-five ceremonies during the six years before the study. “I’m more stable and grounded, less likely to get swept up in my own dramas. I now love myself. I have compassion for myself. I relate to my inner selves as parts of myself, not as enemies.” After
all that, Nancy still felt compelled to add an additional note: “It’s not an overstatement to say ayahuasca saved my life — more than once.” Lewis was a fifty-three-year-old college grad working as a telecom technician who’d never had therapy. At the time of the study, Lewis had been a member of the Santo Daime Church for three years and had about eighty experiences with ayahuasca — or the “Daime,” as the medicine is known in the church, where it’s revered as a sacrament. Lewis wrote, “I’m more socially outgoing, more attentive to others, and less self-absorbed; more open, spontaneous, and expressive. I’m less self-critical, more accepting with a better understanding of who I am as opposed to who I thought I was. I feel much less sadness, less anxiety and gloomy thoughts. The self-reports describe the therapeutic benefits of ayahuasca: better sense of self, improved interpersonal relationships, less depression and anxiety, healthier lifestyle, and relief from addictions.

The questionnaire asked participants to describe any changes in attitude toward themselves as a result of their ayahuasca experiences. The most common responses were, to paraphrase: “I’m more accepting of myself, more loving, kind, and patient. I have more self-confidence, take better care of myself, and have greater understanding. I’m less critical.” “I was caught in a hell realm, stuck in my self-hatred loops,” said Steve, a seventy-year-old somatic therapist in private practice. He quoted this loop as saying, You’re not good enough, not smart enough, not successful enough, not anything enough. The difference was that Steve now had the power to silence these destructive messages. In my psychotherapy practice, I divided clients into two categories: those who did or did not feel loved as a child. As research from brain development and attachment theory was applied to psychotherapy, I realized that I was distinguishing whether or not the client had a secure attachment. This develops during early childhood when we learn that we can count on our parents to meet our needs in kind, caring ways. It’s estimated that about 55 percent of people have a secure attachment. The other 45 percent experience three other categories of attachment: anxious attachment, which develops when our caretakers sometimes meet our needs and sometimes don’t, so we never know what to expect; avoidant attachment, in which we give up on getting our needs met; and, worst of all, disorganized attachment, in which our caretakers are cruel or abusive. One of the most common healing experiences during ayahuasca ceremonies is a sense of being flooded with love. This sensation ranges from the comfort of a warm bath to ecstatic heights of feeling loved as a child of the universe. Greater compassion for oneself and self-acceptance are mentioned the most frequently. One man said, “You can hear something one thousand times and still not get it. With ayahuasca, the message [of being loved] drops down into the cellular level, and all of a sudden you know it in your bones.” People with secure attachment know how to be married. They “get” each other, and they’re there for each other. In this study, people reported feeling more accepting, loving, and compassionate toward themselves after drinking ayahuasca. Many also said they felt the same way toward those closest to them. For those who reported an improvement in their relationships, there was a clear trend toward more honest, direct, and open communication with deeper connections. Changes in relationships depend not only on how the person feels but on how that person behaves.

Relationships raise the issue of integration. People’s responses showed a trend toward having more patience and tolerance in family relationships. Two very important themes that others mentioned about post-ayahuasca changes: better behavior and spiritual awakening.
“Depression is GONE. I now have a feeling of self-worth. I’m slower to anger and quicker to smile,” wrote Ben, a thirty-one-year-old man. He said he’d been on antidepressants since his teens and had undergone five years of psychotherapy. Before the study, he’d been drinking ayahuasca every two months or so for about a year. How long does the relief last? What percentage of people enjoy such a miraculous cure? In my study, two-thirds of the people reported improvement in mood after drinking ayahuasca. Only a few described a miraculous cure like Ben’s. Most people noted a general improvement in mood: more feelings of love and compassion, increased optimism, greater serenity, increased confidence, and more joy. People seeking help for depression or anxiety may need to drink ayahuasca on a regular basis. In terms of depression and anxiety, people seem to develop a distance between themselves and their moods that allows them to consider the most constructive way to handle their emotionality. Amy wrote, I now have more space between action and reaction to respond in a more level-headed, caring way. . . usually.” Goleman explained that \textit{widening the gap between impulse and action is exactly what mindfulness training does}. In this case, ayahuasca is helping Amy to do the same. A forty-five-year-old salesman wrote how he’d changed in relationship to his emotions: \textit{“I now embrace happiness and sadness equally,”} reminiscent of the Buddhist quality of equanimity, the capacity to see what is without judgment, without getting caught in desiring one emotion over another. Everyone describes the same \textit{lessening of depression and anxiety}, symptoms that they’ve suffered with most of their lives. The difference is that people drinking ayahuasca describe a spiritual process as well.

In a more general approach to health, the reported changes in diet and exercise after drinking ayahuasca are remarkable, they far exceed any other intervention. The responses about dietary changes after ayahuasca followed a strong pattern: less sugar, junk food, and red meat; more vegetables and fruit; and smaller portions. A number of people became vegetarian, some vegan, and a few were trying a raw food diet. These changes were not the result of willpower or discipline. Rather, \textit{the desire for a healthier diet seemed to unfold spontaneously} as if based on some kind of revelation. People described being more aware of their bodies and their energy levels, along with a greater desire to take care of themselves. Grandmother Ayahuasca had given me straightforward advice: \textit{Eat lite.}

The overall number of ayahuasca ceremonies represented in this research project was 2,267. At the extremes, twenty-four people reported having twenty or more experiences, and ten people reported having only one. But almost thirty of the eighty-one people in the study reported that they drank alcohol less or stopped drinking altogether after ayahuasca. The changes are not a result of white-knuckle self-control but of an internal shift that seems to happen organically. People describe this shift in a variety of ways, but the pattern is clear: \textit{“I can hardly drink now.” “Alcohol is not appealing anymore.”}

When asked about their intentions to drink ayahuasca, \textit{most people said they were seeking psychological and spiritual healing}. Psychological intentions referenced healing childhood wounds, emotional cleansing, opening one’s heart, personal learning, self-knowledge, and improvement. Spiritual intentions were more mystical; people described wanting to connect with their higher selves, the Divine, and other realities.
Although reactions to the medicine can vary extremely, vomiting is common. Most ceremonies included live singing of icaros, or healing songs usually in the Quechuan language of the Amazon basin.

- **Transformational medicine**

Many who filled out the survey responded as follows, “I appreciate Nature as Divine. The spiritual world is primary; the world of the rational senses is secondary. I feel like I’ve found heaven on earth, and it’s a state of being. I experienced a very prolonged state of pure joy and bliss and understood that that is who I really am. I went from self-hatred to love and from emotional knots to spiritual opening.” It’s one of the hallmarks of this medicine that it works on all levels. My best description of the impact of ayahuasca is that it’s a rocket boost to psychospiritual growth. The people who used ayahuasca scored high on the two factors related to spirituality, “Joy in Life” and “Relationship to the Sacred.” Seventy-five percent of the eighty-one subjects reported an ongoing relationship with the spirit of ayahuasca. I was shocked by this finding, even though I was also, admittedly, receiving guidance from Grandmother Ayahuasca. I was hearing her voice and listening to her advice on data analysis, no less. “She helps me to do beneficial things for myself, like showing me how to forgive myself, how and why I should live healthier. I have increased feelings of love for people, a renewed spirituality.” The image of the plant working at the deepest levels of the body is a common one. “She still guides me but on a more subtle level, yet a most profound and influential one.” A forty-four-year-old woman said her relationship with the spirit of ayahuasca “transforms everything in my life. . . . I ask questions, the answer arrives immediately, never the way I want, always the way it is truly.” A number of people described their relationship as unfolding “slowly, surely, softly, lovingly” and that they felt guided, cared for, and protected. Confirming the authentic spiritual nature of the ayahuasca experience the author compared it with a culturally accepted spiritual experience, a Catholic retreat. I heard Grandmother Ayahuasca’s voice say, “The two groups are the same.”

Ayahuasca, with its attendant intestinal challenges, doesn’t lend itself to being a party drug and it’s far more difficult to differentiate people according to qualitative questions: How has your life changed? How have you grown from your experiences? But those are the real questions. Spiritual experience does not imply integrity or maturity. The responses to ayahuasca appear to be extremely individualized, independent of the amount of tea consumed and unrelated to the number of ceremonies attended. Now I also have to accept that I don’t understand how the medicine yields such a wide range of results in people or how it’s therapeutic for such a varied array of psychological issues without any negative, long-lasting side effects. Certainly, there’s no western medicine that manages to impact self-esteem, relationship issues, weight loss, trauma, depression, or anxiety without side effects over time or addictive concerns. The indigenous view of ayahuasca as a master plant teacher with full sentience and intention. From the tens of thousands of plants in the rain forest they somehow knew to combine these two plants to get the medicinal Ayahuasca that we know. When asked how this happened the Amerindians explained, “The plants told us.” They all insisted that “the spirit of the plants taught them all they know.” From an indigenous point of view, the spirit of ayahuasca is seen as a teacher, from the western
underground it’s seen more as a guardian angel or an all-loving female archetype with therapeutic healing powers.

- Magic and mystery
Before the ceremony the shamans clear the space of negative energy. Part of the ayahuasca belief system is that once ayahuasca enters your body, she is always present. This merging is part of the relationship a student has with a plant teacher. I don’t know that I believe that, but I certainly feel the ongoing connection. Amaringo’s paintings capture the magical worlds of ayahuasca replete with Oriental domed architecture, gigantic boa constrictors, spirits of all stripes, dense jungle foliage, winged dragons, magicians, and flying saucers all teeming with multicolored dots and lines that seem to undulate with energy. Amaringo made no distinction between this world and a spirit world; they are one and the same, both real and coexisting. Ayahuasca, like other psychedelics, opens our neurological gates so we can see more of the world that is already present — spirits and dragons and snakes, oh my!

The medicine opens portals to other worlds, including spirit realms and people who have died — the word ayahuasca is translated as “the vine of the spirits” or “the vine of the dead.” Either way, it links both worlds. Access to other realms offers unique opportunities to resolve relationships with important people in our lives who have died.

Throughout the night the shaman will use his intuition and spirit helpers to know when to sing what song. Some icaros serve as music to purge by, encouraging and strengthening participants to surrender and transforming the sounds of vomiting into a sacred healing process. Other icaros might calm the energy, leading the participants into beautiful visionary realms. Depending upon the needs of the moment, the shaman will use his singing to guide the ceremony, supporting the process of each person and the group as a whole. They are as potent a source of power in the shaman’s arsenal as the medicine itself. The Shipibo-Conibo designs, intricate maze patterns that the women of those tribes weave are an early level of visions. When he began to sing, I could feel the song and the designs move through me. I knew then that the icaro is the medicine is the design is the vision is the power. The icaro clears energy channels in your body, tunes your vibrations for alignment, strengthens and nourishes you so you can play your part in the great net of being. Visions cannot be separated from this matrix of song, spirits, energy, medicine, and deeply felt experiences in other realms. Visionary scenes can range from shape-shifting into spirit animals, a virtual reliving of childhood events, some traumatic, others representative of lifelong psychological issues. When the vision is of the otherworldly variety, replete with reptilian entities or mythic creatures, the general advice is to ask a question to whatever or whomever you encounter: What can you teach me?

Ayahuasca acts as a nonspecific amplifier of what’s present in the psyche, highlighting anything from current conflicts, deep unconscious issues, and past lives to mythic revelations. The general attitude is that what needs to come up will be revealed, if not immediately, then eventually. We are never the same again, having entered a previously hidden dimension, not accessible to most. Perception is refined to the extent that a person learns to see, hear, or intuit on increasingly subtle levels. The process of perceptual refinement is not about learning content; it’s about shifting a way of being in the world, becoming more observant on subtle levels. In this
way, everything changes and we are never the same again. It’s as if we’ve entered through a door that others don’t even know exists, and trying to describe this experience to them is almost impossible. The “deep heart” is the home of the innermost sanctuary, the Divine in-dwelling. Sufis say that this heart of the heart functions as an organ of perception, seeing both the profane and the Divine, the visible and invisible worlds. All levels of the heart have to be softened, cleaned, and polished. It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye. In my experience I saw the design pattern expanding over everything, moving closer and closer to cover me as well. I heard a machinelike sound as the design approached and began to cover me, starting at my head and working downward. The design is the medicine. It not only covered me, but it interpenetrated my body and moved through me. When the design got to my chest, it tried to reach behind my heart and cleaned the wall in front of my spine along the back of my rib cage. The level of gratitude following an ayahuasca ceremony is more like the gratitude following a near-death experience. It’s part of a life-changing event that is branded into the soul, leaving the person changed forever. It’s not enough for me to celebrate my ecstatic feelings of gratitude for my divine healing. I also want my therapist to help me consciously let go of this crap and intentionally let go of my inclination to create more crap to store in my heart space. Even years after that ceremony, I can breathe into my heart space and behind my heart. I can see and feel the medicine designs filling up that space. They are always available to me in or out of ceremony, always cleansing and healing.

- Church sacrament

The reasons for drinking this amazing and challenging brew now range from improving your luck and skill at hunting in the jungle to sorcery to curing health problems to finding love to resolving childhood trauma to communicating with spirits to spirit possession to purging to removing parasites to freedom from addictions to spiritual healing to cultivating meaning in life. Quite a range. Regarding spirit possession one describes it as, “When the spirit goes, it will take my anger with it —I help the spirit and the spirit helps me.” Professor Bill Barnard described this same process: “As they are redeemed and transformed, so are we. Their healing becomes our own.” The mediums say that they are personally helped as a result of doing good works, improving their karma, and letting go of whatever personal issues in themselves that the suffering spirit was attracted to. It seems that the suggestion “Let it go toward the light” is the treatment for most any situation.

Since 1971 the United Nations’ Convention on Psychotropic Substances considers DMT to be a dangerous drug with high potential for abuse and no medical benefits. In 1993, the Medical Studies section of the UDV invited an international consortium of scientists to develop “the Hoasca project,” since there was then no preexisting data on the physical and psychological effects of ayahuasca on humans. The Hoasca project looked at fifteen church members, all male and ranging in age from twenty-six to forty-eight years old, who’d been ingesting the sacrament every two weeks for a minimum of ten years. Six of the fifteen were deeply involved in the UDV, serving as maestros (church leaders) or related to maestres. However, their life stories before joining the UDV revealed a much different picture. Eleven of the men had a history of alcoholism, with five of them admitting to violent behavior and two having been jailed as a
result of violence. Four reported that they’d used cocaine and amphetamines. They described themselves as “impulsive, disrespectful, angry, aggressive, oppositional, rebellious, irresponsible, alienated and unsuccessful.” Neither a pretty picture nor a description of an ideal psychotherapy client. They all attributed their positive changes to the ritual consumption of Hoasca, giving full credit to the UDV for guiding them “down the path of simplicity and humility.” After joining the church, none of the men suffered with alcoholism, depression, or anxiety diagnoses. According to the report, they were “able to eliminate their chronic anger, resentment, aggression, and alienation, as well as acquire greater self-control, responsibility to family and community, and personal fulfillment through their participation in the hoasca ceremonies of the UDV.” This is remarkable, especially when viewed in the context of the far lower rates of recovery seen with Western therapeutic interventions. The changes in the men reflect the values of the church, highlighting the fact that it’s impossible to know the extent to which the Hoasca sacrament was the determining influence or the socialization inherent in church membership. Long-term use of Hoasca seems safe. However, there is one possible serious exception. It’s a common practice for pregnant women and there is a higher incidence of Down syndrome in this population. Although the churches have cooperated with research that includes psychological variables, this does not change their stance that the tea is a sacrament, not a medicine. They acknowledge that the tea may have therapeutic properties, but they support its use only within sacred church rituals. The Daime has a natural fail-safe, in that it will lead to nausea and vomiting before it reaches potentially toxic quantities. This is, unfortunately, not true for alcohol, over-the-counter drugs, and prescription drugs. Nor does the Daime or Hoasca lead to addictive dependency. In addition, the tea may prove to be an important part of a therapeutic treatment program for such addictions.

- The shadow side
Although ayahuasca has consistently been found to be safe, there are reasons to be cautious about drinking it. For certain people, ayahuasca is not recommended, such as for pregnant women; for people with a history of psychosis or bipolar disorder, or who are taking antidepressants; and for people with cardiovascular disease. The International Center for Ethnobotanical Education, Research, and Service (ICEERS) issued a “Technical Report about Ayahuasca” by the leading researchers in the field and concluded the brew is “physiologically and psychologically acceptably safe.” One needs to enter an Ayahuasca ceremony with a sense of sacredness surrounding the ceremony, the importance of the shaman’s skill and integrity, the sense of communal experience and sharing, and the psychological necessity of time to reflect and integrate after the ceremony. The most disturbing aspect is the fear of going crazy or having permanent brain damage, which leads to the suggestion that reassurance is the best medicine. The issue of anxiety arises as a central theme and confirms the importance of a safe setting. The author had a bad experience in one ceremony. What she experienced wasn’t surrender. Surrender is a conscious act, usually involving belief in a higher power or trust in the process. “The way I collapsed was closer to depression, an existential giving up. In my case, it was a passive giving permission to those maniacal maggots to consume my life force, to kill me. There
was no mystical experience on the other side of this giving up —only unconsciousness.” Nobody has yet said their experience was without value, and all said they’d go through it again because they learned so much. Integrative health advisor Yalila Espinoza works with people who have used ayahuasca. Her observation is that bad trips “illuminate and exaggerate old patterns and give us a chance to see how we entangle ourselves to create our own suffering.” I’ve done many different kinds of therapies, but none gave me the clarity of that miserable night when I felt like I was dying on ayahuasca. What’s called “ceremonial time,” is the hours or days surrounding a ceremony when the effect of the medicine is present even though it hasn’t yet been consumed. The relationship with Grandmother Ayahuasca lasts beyond the ceremony, the medicine working in ways that go beyond the pharmacological effect.

- To believe or not to believe
I continue to be caught in an ontological crisis, stuck with not being able to believe completely in the existence of plant teachers and spirits despite having heard Grandmother Ayahuasca’s voice and having followed her instructions. I’ve remained in this untenable position of not knowing what to believe for years, and I am not completely out of it. In taking Ayahuasca you permanently cross a threshold into a new reality, so the world you once took for granted is irrevocably changed. Aldous Huxley described the same transformation after experimenting with mescaline. He wrote, “The man who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never be quite the same as the man who went out. He will be wiser but less sure.” A frequent shamanic suggestion is to turn to Grandmother Ayahuasca for help during a ceremony, especially when feeling overwhelmed. Likewise, many of the people in my research study who reported an ongoing relationship with her said they turned to her for support in day-to-day life, especially during stressful times. With her support and guidance, these people described how they made major lifestyle changes in career, health behaviors, and personal relationships. Their relationship with Grandmother Ayahuasca served as the secure base from which they could change their lives. Stan Grof, an expert on entheogens said, “The only substance with which I have experienced having such a transpersonal therapist was ayahuasca.” Many claim feeling supported, accepted, and loved almost as if the unseen other is the perfect therapist or parent we all wish we’d had. Who doesn’t want to feel supported, accepted, and loved, especially when the core therapeutic issue for many is the lack of precisely those feelings?

The aftermath of my bad trip was, in part, a journey from projecting malevolence onto the shamans to owning the projection as part of my shadow. Grof emphasized the importance of such “disciplined internalization.” If I had not owned my shadow at that point and had continued to blame the shamans, I might have gone down a paranoid pathway. **I had to face the fact that the maliciousness I projected onto the shamans was what I actually do to myself.** It’s unpleasant to face my shadow —the parts of myself I don’t want to accept. My self-destructive tendencies don’t align with my view of myself. The confrontation with the shadow is often the central issue in a bad trip —that’s why **bad trips hold so much therapeutic potential for profound personality transformation.** Everyone talks about integrating these kinds of experiences, but few do anything about it.
1. Now that you have had this experience, what would you like to remember, carry forward or complete?
2. What visions or information are you bringing home to your community?
3. How can you manifest these visions on the physical plane? In your life? Work? Relationships?
4. What was your intention before taking the substance? (There is always some intention, even if it wasn’t consciously considered at the time.) How did your experience reflect your intention?
5. How does your experience affect your identity? Who is the person you want to become in your life and how can this experience contribute to your growth and expansion?
6. What are your intentions in life and how did this experience contribute to your larger goals and desires?

Scheduling quiet days after a ceremony to spend time in nature allows the medicine to permeate deeply into the body. If you’re in a quiet, calm environment, you’ll be better able to pay attention to the subtle changes within. It’s almost as if you’re developing a new relationship with your ayahuasca-infused body, learning to listen more deeply inside. This process may take weeks or even months, manifesting in nighttime dreams, artistic expression, or changes in behavior. It’s important to seek therapeutic help to integrate.

Will we commercialize the medicine the way we’ve turned yoga classes, along with yoga pants, into growing businesses? Unfortunately, plenty of other unethical and untrained ayahuasca entrepreneurs are turning the sacred beverage into a business.

Your brain on ayahuasca

Biochemically, ayahuasca contains both DMT (dimethyltryptamine) and harmine, both of which are psychedelic and affect the serotonin system similar to LSD and psilocybin. These psychedelics bind to serotonin receptors in the brain and stimulate them, which means they mimic the action of serotonin. Some speculate that ayahuasca also works directly on the serotonin receptors in the intestinal tract, which acts like a second brain that is neurologically independent, for the most part, of the cerebral cortex. It’s commonly accepted that while you don’t always get what you want in a ceremony, you do get what you need, dragons often guard treasure. Most ayahuasca experiences include both dragons and treasure in one form or another. Just like the sailors of old who placed their faith in the stars for navigation, ayahuasca explorers place their faith in the medicine for guidance.

Grandmother Ayahuasca seems to have both sentience and intention in her therapeutic recalibration of a person’s energy field and psyche. She seems to know, like a heat-seeking missile, how to target the core issue. The core issue for most of us is that we yearn to be loved and accepted for who we are. Ideally, this need should have been fulfilled during our earliest years in a secure relationship with our parents, but that’s often not the case, and so we search for feeling loved in romantic relationships. However, finding unconditional love in adult relationships is rare, and when bad behavior is involved, such as alcoholism, it’s downright unrealistic. Ceremonies often open up deep feelings of wanting to be accepted and loved. The
therapeutic issue of needing to be reparented was recognized with the earliest psychedelic research, when the tradition was established to use a male and a female sitter, who represented kind, caring parents. This helps to reduce the fear and loathing of the shadow parts of the person’s personality, there arises a peaceful acceptance of whatever is encountered, and an unaccustomed compassion for himself, an acceptance of all the aspects of his own nature, giving and selfish, kind and vengeful, loving and despicable. Shulgin described this experience as “being held in the loving hands of God, one of the most healing experiences any human being can have.” The therapeutic value of this experience of unconditional self-acceptance and absolute validation spontaneously leads to the falling away of old, defensive habits. It’s no longer just a psychologically corrective experience but an ecstatic encounter with the Divine. A compelling urge for creative expression often arises out of the depths. Also, the person should not tell and retell his or her experience of cosmic love, turning it into just another self-aggrandizing story. My advice “to hold the experience in your heart” is literal. A person should keep it internal, only externalizing it in creative expression. The experience will continue to work on the person from the inside in its own time and way. In the case of Grandmother Ayahuasca, the experience of feeling loved by her will both deepen and expand. Trust this process, nourish it with attention, notice subtle changes, and cultivate gratitude for the unfolding process. What sometimes follows is a gradual rearrangement of inner architecture with a new benchmark for feeling loved. The old self-schema —“I’m unlovable or not good enough to be loved” —might morph into “I’m lovable and deserve to be loved.” People who feel in their heart of hearts that they deserve to be loved will make different decisions in both friendships and romantic relationships. In other words, a person will be reprogrammed.

After such revelatory experiences, people report going through a fundamental change. They feel different inside, and the world looks different outside. Major life decisions about family, relationships, finances, or career should never be made while still enthralled with the entheogenic experience. The shaman I work with said his initiating shaman, who still wears only a loincloth and lives in the jungle, said, “Take your time. Ask the spirits again.” People report a sense of ego dissolution and disintegration linked with greater flexibility and openness. Habitual patterns of thought and behavior are disrupted, allowing for novel connections and creative possibilities. dismantling reinforced patterns of negative thought and behavior. The habitual architecture of the personality is loosened, and the opportunity for rewiring and reprogramming is made possible. Mindfulness meditation carves new channels in the stream beds of the mind. The more our thinking follows pathways that involve less anxiety or depression, the easier it becomes to take this new route; we are self-reinforcing in a positive way. Almost no matter what we’re actually doing —driving to work, answering emails, or sitting in meetings —our minds are often wandering, drifting with no relationship to the here and now. As a therapist, I don’t shy away from suffering en route to insight, but rumination leads nowhere — it’s suffering with no redeeming value. It only deepens the neurological patterns in the brain, leading to the likelihood of yet more rumination. To the extent that our DMN gets stuck in neurological ruts, leading to repetitive mind wandering, we inadvertently reinforce our core issues and basically drive ourselves nuts. When this happens during a psychedelic journey, the negative effects can be intensified. In an ayahuasca ceremony, there’s always the chance of
Grandmother Ayahuasca intervening to help break the negative loop. Integrative psychotherapy afterward can help us become aware of how we broke free so that we can do so again.

In the early sixties, scientists said of psychedelic experience: He experiences himself as a far greater being than he had ever imagined, with his conscious self a far smaller fraction of the whole than he had realized. . . . Behavior patterns, worn in with many years of usage, are not easily nor quickly changed. Nevertheless, because the individual’s new knowledge of himself results from deeply felt experience and is not merely intellectual, with the passage of time his behavior does tend to change to become more appropriate to his expanded picture of himself. . . . An antidepressant response was identified as early as forty minutes into the ayahuasca experience, and this was found for all volunteers regardless of the severity of their depression going into the study. The healing capacity of the ayahuasca experience resides significantly in the plant’s ability to evoke the painful experiences of childhood self while having those experiences witnessed by the empathic curiosity of the adult self. ‘I went to all the sad places of my childhood,’ one participant shared, ‘but I accompanied myself there with understanding and love.’ Healing means reliving the trauma in the presence of inner resources and interpersonal support that allows the trauma to be metabolized or integrated into a new sense of self. New meaning has to be created for past experiences. The good news is that “the me after” has found a way to survive and live with the truth, but there are always feelings of loss for the “old me and the person I might have become.” Grandmother Ayahuasca hits just the right therapeutic balance of devastating confrontation along with an abundance of ecstatic love. Ayahuasca can help through all these layers of what healing means beyond the physical cure.

Decades ago, a Jungian analyst published a description of her last six months of life, in which she had a spirit guide who prepared her for dying with this advice: “Follow the numinous, whether it appears from within or without.” The hope in using psychedelics while dying is to have access to the numinous — particularly an experience of ecstatic love, as in, “all is love, love is all.” The ecstasy might not last, but the knowing does and is wise preparation for dying. Even in the midst of dying, a person can expand spiritually to embrace both the life they’re leaving and the death they’re facing to experience what it is to be “bathed in God’s love.” The word ayahuasca is Quechuan, a South American indigenous language. Aya means “souls, dead people, or spirits” and huasca means “vine.” The vine of the dead, ayahuasca has a unique relationship to dying. It seems to open the door between worlds, so access to those who have passed over becomes readily available via dreams, visions, intuition, or mediumship. After ayahuasca ceremonies, people frequently report life-changing conversations with loved ones who have died. The opportunity to reach through the veil may be similar to what happens to people during the final stage of dying, when they appear to communicate with loved ones on the other side who are waiting for them, perhaps helping them to pass over. Ayahuasca recalibrates our relationship to death and dying. We have a more intimate connection with an inner sense of Self that transcends this personal
lifetime. What emerges is a greater acceptance of the mystery of death, the adventure of the transition, and most of all, what it means for living today.

- **The perennial quest**
  We’ve searched for meaning through the induction of altered states of consciousness. It’s considered to be an innate drive, following hunger, thirst, and sex. What we don’t have are institutionalized ways to enter into a nonordinary state, ways that are culturally approved and valued, and ways that are transformative rather than addictive. What we do have is often accompanied by **the fear of going crazy or being seen as going crazy**. Jung said that the approach to the sacred or numinous is the real therapy. This is probably the best explanation for the life-changing reports following all of the entheogens. People do not usually have the intention to totally overthrow their worldview and disorient their belief system, yet that is precisely what can happen. The world ordered around the ego is shattered. Shamanic initiation is a process of death and rebirth. The old worldview and belief system die, not to mention the ego.
  We die to our old selves, our habitual ways of being, and perhaps literally, we die to our entrenched neurological patterns. Often there’s a sense of disorientation, of feeling lost or confused. This is an ambiguous, free-floating state—we have lost our usual anchors in the world and feel neither grounded nor safe. We are especially vulnerable: open to suggestion on the one hand, and prone to depression or panic attacks on the other. If anxiety or fear escalates, we can enter into a full-blown spiritual emergency. This process of deconstruction can turn destructive if the person has not already developed a solid sense of self. Sufi mystic Hazrat Inayat Khan gave this description: “There can be no rebirth without a dark night of the soul, a total annihilation of all that you believed in and thought that you were.” It is to deconstruct one’s former identity, allowing the person to reemerge with a changed identity. The promise of a “new kind of existence” includes awareness of a larger Self and integration of a new worldview. Alcoholics Anonymous has the model of “hitting bottom,” or being so far down and out that the options boil down to **transformation or death. The carefully constructed ego has to die**. Many people have fallen apart, or come undone, after an ayahuasca ceremony. Psychologist Steve Taylor described this stage of dissolution as a “dismantling of the self-system,” a “suffering-induced transformational experience” that leads to “a permanent shift of consciousness and identity.” Part of the reason for worldview transformations following ayahuasca ceremonies is that people regularly experience “downloads.” These involve an overwhelming sense of data, information, and cosmic truth flowing from a higher source directly into a person’s individual consciousness. No matter what my original intention for this ceremony, **ayahuasca will ferret out inner spaces of my body that require her attention**. There is no point resisting. It definitely feels like a healing treatment, albeit not exactly pleasant.
  If ayahuasca is such a psychospiritual medicine, why isn’t everyone who uses it healed and holy? Alas, things obviously don’t work that way:
    - First, **we can resist healing** even when we know something is good for us.
    - Second, the architecture of **our personality has been designed to protect us**, and if it has kept us alive up to this point—why change it?
    - Third, **that level of change feels like dying**.
Defenses that were originally designed to protect us now limit our capacity to grow. We all resist at one time or another, and there’s some safety in understanding that such resistance is to be expected. Noticing that we’re resisting helps as long as it doesn’t descend into self-critical attacks for resisting. Just notice. Remembering our original intention also helps. I tell my clients who are in romantic relationships — pay attention to behavior, not promises. This turns out to be very practical advice on many levels. It means we have to be willing to see people as they are, not as we want them to be. **Then we have to turn inward to the Self, our own spiritual center.**

**- This enchanted world**

Working with ayahuasca is a process, not an event. If I were to answer my own research questionnaire about how I’ve changed since drinking ayahuasca, I would write, “The central change is that my sense of inner space has been expanded.” Notice the passive tense — I don’t feel like I accomplished this but that a way was opened for me. I can describe my experience, but I’m only beginning to understand what it means. It’s not that my ego has shrunk; it’s that the rest of the space has expanded so my personal self occupies a smaller percentage of psychic real estate within my Self. I feel more spacious. One psychological consequence of this spaciousness is that I seem better able to “hold” my life story, especially all the disappointments, mistakes, and suffering. Perhaps my sorrows have even deepened in an almost impersonal way. The old, bad news hasn’t changed, but my container is larger. I have more room to be grateful. A **shift has to happen to move from resisting to accepting**, and this requires inner space and fluidity.

I’ve long known the granite boulders, deposited by the sea on Boom Beach near my Maine island home, are alive. We would breathe together, and they healed me in ways beyond my understanding. Since Grandmother Ayahuasca, I’ve learned that I have not appreciated them enough. I commune with the island in the same energetic space in which I listen to Grandmother Ayahuasca. This is surely the imaginal realm of angels, prophets, and visions that come alive. The most important thing I can do in that realm is to tune myself to a more subtle and refined vibration and listen with my whole body. Our experience of the forest is nothing other than the forest experiencing itself. We are all, always and forever, in this together. Send a message to your plants describing your health problem. Buhner continues: “When plants receive this kind of communication, they begin altering the chemicals they produce in anticipation of your gathering them as medicines. Psychiatrist Humphry Osmond first coined the term psychedelic in 1957, meaning “mind-manifesting.” These medicines, ayahuasca included, reveal what is already present in the person’s conscious and unconscious mind. Just when I think I’ve made the leap into a shamanic worldview, I find I am not the same. I soften my gaze, feel into my heart space, and know that there are greater mysteries at work. The English language doesn’t do justice to the great, green healing potential in the plant world.

I think Grandmother Ayahuasca traveled from the Amazon rain forest to the Western world to heal us so we can heal the earth. Westerners have been disconnected from our wild roots for so many centuries that we need personal healing to be able to experience “wilderness rapture,” an initiation into the world of natural beauty. **By falling in love with this enchanted world, we’ll realize that we are the caretakers of the earth,** and we need to heal the environmental crisis we’ve created. There is now a burgeoning amount of research to support
what Grandmother Ayahuasca teaches us about our interdependence with the natural world. Spending even a very small amount of time in nature as manicured as a city park will reduce depression and anxiety, improve cognitive and psychophysical functioning, and lead to greater health and well-being. **Ayahuasca opens us up to embrace the world in just this way,** and what follows immediately is gratitude for all the greenness, for all of life and for the promise of healing. We, ourselves, are part of these unbridled healing forces of nature — we breathe in that energy, and that energy resides in us. Ayahuasca gives us the opportunity to reorganize our psychic architecture, the very structure of our self-identity, in new ways. Our worldview is shattered. The ceremonies deconstruct us, but it is the conscious work we do in the weeks and months that follow, the process of integration, that creates a new template, a new way of being in the world. **Grandmother Ayahuasca is present beyond the ceremony, available for guidance and support during this rich integration process.** My process of working with ayahuasca is, in part, learning how to be in this world with the full awareness that I am part of a loving matrix, the imaginal realm, the dreamtime, the world behind the world. I am not separate. I prefer to live in the magical realism of ayahuasca, where the potential for all possibilities exists and miracles are frequent. I prefer to live with access to other worlds, to visit loved ones who left this world years ago. I want to live in mystery and not knowing.