

Therapeutic Potential of Ayahuasca: how it works, an overview of an extraordinary holistic medicine

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Ayahuasca presents at least three potentially beneficial therapeutic and personal growth applications. It is important to consider that most of what is known about Ayahuasca is drawn from anecdotal and empirical knowledge accumulated over millennia in the Amazon region of South America. Over the past twenty years, the socio-anthropological and popular contemporary literature has increasingly addressed the many dimensions of Ayahuasca use, culture, and spirituality.

It is interesting to note that Ayahuasca is among many "folk" medicines with a history of centuries of human use without apparent negative consequences so long as specific dietary and other preparatory guidelines are followed. Such a lengthy trial period with human subjects substantially exceeds the standards of contemporary drug approval studies conducted by the FDA and other regulatory agencies. In most Amazonian cultures even today, the majority see Ayahuasca as a beneficial holistic medicine when applied by those knowledgeable in its use and effects. Sadly, only limited scientific research has been conducted to date due to the western cultural stigma attached to substances producing visionary experiences.

It is often erroneously assumed that such experiences are undertaken primarily for recreational or frivolous purposes and therefore lack redeeming value. As anyone who has taken Ayahuasca can attest, it is far from a recreational experience. The normal course is one of personal challenge and struggle punctuated by flashes of agony and ecstasy as one works through the process of purgation and renewal. Physical discomfort is common and one often is besieged by inescapable images and thoughts of matters and issues one would prefer to avoid. This forced confrontation brings catharsis, and eventually closure to many of the psychological burdens most of us carry with us in our lives. The character and rigors of the Ayahuasca experience are simply not amenable to the kind of abuse that has occurred with other so-called "psychedelic" substances.

Ayahuasca clearly occupies exalted status alongside such culturally-renowned plant healer-teachers as Peyote, San Pedro (Huachuma), Teonanacatl, and Iboga. Like these plants, when taken in traditional natural plant form, Ayahuasca imposes its own effective autonomic discipline upon those who approach her with disrespect or undue arrogance.

Those familiar with Ayahuasca know that the lasting benefits begin to unfold after the immediate and most profound effects of the drink have passed. For days, weeks and months afterward, the blessings of Ayahuasca will be received, one step at a time, if one is receptive and attentive to the life lessons revealed. These blessings manifest in many ways, specific to the varied human needs presented to the medicine.

Among the positive processes initiated by the Ayahuasca cleansing experience are:

Catharsis. Catharsis is precipitated on the physical level as a vehicle for cleansing and detoxification. Spiritual catharsis occurs at a deeper level as Ayahuasca purges negativity, toxins, personal "baggage" and "garbage" accumulated through one's lifetime. The pace and depth of this process depends greatly on the willingness of the individual to surrender ego and pride to achieve the blessings of cleansing and rebirth.

Abreaction. Abreaction is a process of regression back to the situation or source of a problem or trauma. This process allows one to relive the experience to gain new understanding and insights enabling resolution or closure. The frequent result is a liberation from guilt or fear or whatever psycho-spiritual forces might have bound the individual previously. The process often results in candid re-evaluation of one's life course with strong tendency and resolution to pursue positive changes to improve one's life with renewed purpose and mission.

Spiritual Realization. Most people who experience Ayahuasca in a positive and nurturing environment report some sort of spiritual experience. While these experiences certainly have a personalized aspect based on the individual's past experiences and attitude toward religion and spirituality, there is also a remarkably consistent nature and character to the Ayahuasca experience when undertaken in proper set and setting. The character of the experience, and especially the visionary icons encountered, are greatly influenced by the cultural context in which the experience occurs, and equally so by the specific plants used, regardless of their chemical composition.

The quintessential Ayahuasca experience probably cannot be fully realized outside the natural and cultural environment of Amazonia. The reason is simple...all the inherently natural organic and cultural links are present. Here the spiritual connection between the plants and the eco-cultural union which brought the unique brew into existence is strongest and most profound. That the Amazonian plants are endowed with a special magico-spiritual dimension in their natural habitat is evident to those who have experienced both in situ (in the natural habitat) and ex situ (outside the natural habitat) types of Ayahuasca experiences. This is not to say, of course, that highly beneficial personal results cannot be achieved using Ayahuasca in other circumstances.

Holistic Healing. Ayahuasca has the noted capability to accomplish often seemingly-miraculous healing of Mind, Body, and Spirit. Not every person comes to this medicine with the same needs. The magic of Ayahuasca rests in its ability to find, focus, diagnose and heal the causes of one's personal problems or illness as well as the symptoms. The cleansing and healing is deep, to the core, and is therefore likely to have a lasting positive effect on the patient.