

A General Introduction to the Ayahuasca Experience: one person's opinion

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What is this Document, and why did you write it?

I get asked about ayahuasca often enough, that I have decided to try to put a fair overview into words. I think a secondary motivation for putting down my version of this would be in response to so much misinformation I have seen out there, and the kind of *reporting* where a person has imbibed the tea once, or a very finite number of times, and then proceeds to expound on all of the un-nuanced generalizations they could put together based on that limited knowledge and experience.

This piece is intended to serve anyone looking to understand the ayahuasca experience. It is meant to balance giving a curious person an idea of what that might look like in general, but hopefully stopping shy of programming or limiting any concept of what it could be for her or him. No matter what you hear, from how many sources, I always suggest filing all of that *due diligence* in the back of your brain, and coming in as a clear slate, driven only by your pure intention and what you are asking for out of your experience.

This piece details one person's experience and is not meant to represent the range of experience possible. I am able to speak to the Santo Daime tradition, which I have been involved with for over 15 years; and I have also apprenticed with a Shipibo curandero, and feel I am able to compare and contrast those two styles neutrally, without an axe to grind either way. I trust that each person will follow their own counsel, take personal responsibility for what they do or do not do in their life... and I believe we all get guided to where we need to be. Disclaimers: this is for information purposes only, I am not a doctor, I do not know the legalities of ayahuasca where you are, yada yada. Again-- this is offered up *in service*, so no trolls please.

Finally-- at the end of this piece I will jot down just a little on how I came to this work. It doesn't have to matter to anyone, but in this world where so many are operating with some agenda, it might be of interest to someone to know where I am coming from. If you are suspicious in any way of why I might write what I write, you can read that first.

Ayahuasca: What is it?

I am not a biochemist, so here is my best basic understanding (I am open to being corrected on errors and will incorporate corrections into future drafts of this document). Ayahuasca is a plant-spirit-medicine which comes out of the Amazon of Central and South America. It is a combination of a vine (banisteriopsis caapi, aka Vine of the Soul, male component) and a leaf (chacrana-- psychotria viridis-- or other, aka the Queen of the Forest, female component). The active ingredient in ayahuasca is DMT (di-methyl-tryptamine), which is a compound naturally found in the brain, said to be active in the pineal gland (third eye), and which activates during peak experience-- including the transition of the death process. The Chacrana contains the DMT. The vine adds an MAOI (monoamine oxidase inhibitor) component, which keeps the experience open for the participant-- allows it to stay active beyond the digestive track, and pass the blood-brain barrier. There are a number of names for this medicine, which one drinks in the form of a brown tea: ayahuasca, hoasca, yagi, Santo Daime, etc. People find this tea to taste anywhere from unpleasant to tolerable.

The vine is cut, cleaned, portions of the bark stripped, and pounded (generally with wooden mallets) into as much of a pulp as possible. The leaf is also cleaned and prepared. These are brought together in a large pot and boiled over a fire for many hours, until they combine and reduce. In most traditions this is an extremely sacred process, with prayers and high, clear intention brought to this *alchemy*. It is also possible to yield various increased concentrations by taking a pot that has, for example, boiled from full to half full, adding in more ingredient, and boiling down again. It is important to note that you might be given a certain amount of tea to drink within any ceremony or *work*... but from round to round, ceremony to ceremony, you may not know what concentration you are drinking, and so more tea might not necessarily equate to *stronger*. One just trusts that those leading and facilitating the experience are conscious of the nature of the medicine, and

guided by their guides, etc., in choosing a given combination for a given ceremony, purpose, circle of participants, *the space*, etc.

One can take other forms of DMT, but one of the realities of that was/is always that the window that is opened during the experience, is said to be a very short one, and that as it slams shut, much of the experience can be soon forgotten. The blending of the two ingredients comprising ayahuasca contribute to keeping the experience open longer and managing it in a way that allows one to return with the information one gathered or was gifted within the experience. This boils down to the concept of MAO-inhibitors. The combination of the two ingredients inhibits the aspect of straight DMT that would otherwise close off the experience as stated.

To me-- the idea that various cultures, separated by many years and miles, and unknown to each other... each stumbled upon this magic combination of mashing together two plants which can deliver this experience... speaks to there being no accidents, and a divine, non-coincidental nature of this compound making itself known to such seekers.

Ayahuasca is considered an entheogen (is used in a spiritual context), and would be considered more a “visionary”, as opposed to a “hallucinogen”, as one can pretty much instantly reclaim a hold on one’s reality from within the experience.

What about the purging/vomiting?

Perhaps the one universal question or concern about the ayahuasca experience is with respect to vomiting, purging, aka *taking a healing*. I advise anyone I orient that-- you must trust that **you will always be given the experience you need**. Period. Some people have worked with this medicine for years and never purged; some have worked for this same period of time and maybe *taken a healing* almost every time, or more often than not. It absolutely does not matter. There is no badge of courage given either way. It is a non-issue within the *current* or circle of participants.

I have historically gotten a lot of *stomach stuff* in most of my *works* (the term for ceremonies in the Santo Daime tradition). As Santo Daime translates to “the sacred give me”, I have always known I could ask for what I needed within the ceremony. Whether you work within this tradition or not, I encourage you to know that you can commune with the spirit which resides within the medicine, and also ask for what you need at any point you remember to do so. I inwardly ask-- if it can come as burps and farts, please let it do so. If I need to purge, then bring it on. And-- as I might be feeling I am about to purge, I like to think of what it might be representing, and to do my part to maximize on that: if it might have to do with anything symbolizing letting go of something that no longer serves, surrendering, etc... I just ask that I be helped to do so. I believe looking at the whole vomiting/purging/healing circumstance in this way renders it a non-issue.

I will say it again and again-- I consider every work to be my best work, because I am given exactly what I need in that work. I don’t compare my experiences to anyone else’s or previous of my own.

What a ceremony looks like-- Santo Daime style

I will go through some of the things a person might want to know about a ceremony. I will first go through what it looks like in the Santo Daime tradition-- not as a brainwashing/recruiting method, but because I have to start somewhere. Whether you are interested in this specific tradition or not, I believe I will illustrate things to help prepare one for his or her first experience, in any tradition/style... and throughout I will compare and contrast with what I think are the main differences one might find between this way and an experience with a shaman in Peru or somewhere. Personally, I don’t think the approach is too different between these: mostly a difference in feel due to the nature of setting and language considerations. There is a tenet within Santo Daime that I really honor-- “all are welcomed, but none are invited”-- which is to say, you won’t find Santo Daime people recruiting or enrolling or passing out pamphlets. It is just the tradition I have stuck with in the states. You will find reviews and accounts that can say that this tradition is a bit cult-y. I think I can address some of why a person might say that, and will spread thoughts on that throughout this section.

In most ways the Santo Daime is no different, per se, than what many would consider a more traditional ceremony. This tradition-- syncretic as it has incorporated multiple traditions (indigenous, Catholic, the pantheon of African Orixas, etc.) impacting on the man (Mestre Raimundo Irineu) who received the material-- is still practiced much as it was in villages deep in the Brazilian Amazon. And in this simple format it has pretty much just been shared throughout the world... with maybe the main difference being... in what language(s) its sacred songs are sung.

- Preparation

Within the orientation one receives prior to attending a Santo Daime work, there is a focus on diet and other considerations. I find this to not be much different than the concept of *the diet or dieta*--within a shamanic/curandero type setting, only perhaps because we are these *busy westerners* we might not devote as much attention to it. And maybe with the effect of lessening the full potential of the medicine to work its magic.

In the traditional cultures *the diet* has two intertwined meanings. 1. When you *diet* with a medicine, you are basically communing with it in every possible way, in order to learn its secrets-- what a given plant might be for, what healing properties it has, etc. Ayahuasca is considered a Master Teacher, and is used to assist in dieting with a given plant. The curandero I studied with, Don Enrique, has dieted with over 200 plants. So, a diet would consist of sleeping with some leafs or branches or bits of the plants under one's pillow, eating/drinking of it, just doing everything to show respect, and to come to know everything it would tell you of itself in any way possible... and then from within the teaching aspect of the ayahuasca ceremony as well. 2. There is also the purifying nature of an actual, conscious diet-- of considering all the food/drink one partakes of during their time of *the diet*. This would encompass the ideas of purifying, burning clean, fasting, etc. And within both of these aspects of dieting would be a general conscientiousness in thought and intention, of being reverent, humble, harmonious, receptive, etc.

A person in the States, and most likely in most arranged groups in Peru or elsewhere, would be expected to fill out a questionnaire and/or release/waiver that would include physical and mental condition, medications one would be taking, a waiver of liability (basically operating on *self-responsibility model*), etc. As this is biochemistry, the consideration as to medicines/prescriptions one is taking, as well as certain food combinations just prior to or after a ceremony or work, is extremely important. There are conflicts that would preclude the medicine from doing what it does, and also those that could be downright hazardous. Full understanding and disclosure of such is the absolute responsibility of the participant. If you don't know if something is a conflict-- ask a doctor. Do not leave this to conjecture.

The psychological state of a participant is also extremely important. One must guarantee to do harm to none, including oneself. One must also generally not have suffered a major loss, or be in some depression or condition that might tempt one to not return from the "blissed state". This, too, is something to which you will be contracting to by way of your release/waiver-- that is, your word. Here you must not put others in harm's way, or on the hook for your well-being, due to your lack of integrity.

An orientation would include explanation of what will happen in a ceremony, what to expect from others, what is expected of you, etc. You want to come in as familiar as possible in order that you understand the environment, know it is safe, know what failsafes, protection and support are in place to assist you or any other who might work oneself into a *narrow passage*, dark night of the soul, crisis situation or any degree of this type of thing along a continuum of possibility. Knowing what to expect allows you to release a lot of the left-brain concerns that would inevitably be in place in such a new situation. Knowing what is expected of you just allows you to not dissipate another's experience or distract them from their work. Any tour provider or group or spiritual group or teacher/leader/healer with which you might be considering doing this work... ought to-- at minimum-- be able to convince you that a safe and protected environment and process is in place.

I don't want to put an emphasis on safety, etc., in a way that puts someone on more alert than they might need to be; I just equate this to when I learned to fly or scuba dive, and the first things taught had to do with

what do do if a plane stalled, what do do if a tank ran out of air underwater... failsafes learned first, so that one had these at one's instinctive disposal, and in a manner in which they could then let thoughts of all that go... knowing and trusting one would know what to do should a sketchy situation arise. To me-- this is all of what a proper orientation prior to an ayahuasca experience would, should and can do.

I know a person can express interest in such a thing as this, and then need to let it all simmer and sort out, and wait for the timing to be right. This is one more nuance of the "everyone is welcomed, but none are invited" nature of my preferred tradition. I don't keep asking a person if they are ready; rather, I pretty much wait for them to prove to me that they really are feeling the inner call to be there, and doing everything from their end to make it happen.

So-- trust your own process as you go out and acquire information and listen to stories and recollections and anecdotes and advice. Let it work. Continue to periodically check within, check with your guides, your higher self, as to when this might be right for you. Do not be pushed or hurried, pressured or rushed. Your primary duty is to honor your process and your path, in alignment with the highest goals and purpose of your soul. You will know if and when you are ready. And-- if not this, then something else will come in and serve the purpose that you are looking for this to serve.

- *Intention and the Sacred Nature of the Ayahuasca Experience*

The nature of the ayahuasca experience is generally considered to be highly sacred. As opposed to other processes one enters into in the name of simply *having an experience*, you will benefit greatly by bringing your highest intention to bear upon an ayahuasca ceremony.

The medicine will have been prepared by folks who have established and maintained sacred intent throughout-- including blessing/praying/chanting/singing sacred, channeled icaros or hinarios (hino- a hymn, hinario- a block of hymns) over the medicine throughout the entirety of the process.

As you contemplate what brings you to each experience, it can be helpful to take stock of what exactly is and isn't working in your life at this time, that might be looking for illumination and/or correction... and to bring all of your intention to bear in achieving this during your ceremony.

- *The Ceremony*

First-- what a Santo Daime work looks like. You will come to the location of the work. The actual room is called a salao. It can be inside or in nature.

-- *What to wear*

There will most likely be separate changing areas for men and women.

Fardados are the people who have been coming for however long, and who have *taken the star*, which is basically to say they have answered a call within themselves, and with Spirit (by whatever name to any person, the Spirit within the medicine, etc.) to be of service. Think deacons or acolytes or similar ideas in any given tradition. It should be said that in this tradition a maxim is-- none higher, none lower. There isn't a seniority, and no one is better than another. *Fardados* will wear blue pants, white shirt, blue tie for men, and blue skirt, white blouse and little blue tie for women, in certain works... and a more formal white suit in a *white work*.

Non-fardados-- anyone who hasn't taken the star-- all the way from a first-timer, to someone who has come for years but not taken their star for any reason whatsoever (and one never has to) would wear all white-- something comfortable, white pants, shirt for men, white skirt, blouse or shirt for women.

Red and black clothing are generally prohibited, as one can get into a dark spiral where those are perceived as evil, etc., and so such possible triggers are removed as a precaution.

In a traditional environment, the curandera/o (female- curandera, male- curandero), and possibly all participants might wear a cushma-- an intentional full-length smock of-sorts, painted with patterns received from past ayahuasca ceremonies-- just one more way for focused thought to be directed deeper into connection with the medicine. Here, the cup from which you drink, and many other common implements will all have these similar patterns painted/etched on them. Wherever you look in this environment, you will find reminders of the sacred nature of what takes place here.

-- Behavioral Guidelines

There are general guidelines for how fardados work within a given situation, and almost none of these would apply to a non-fardado. Shy of doing something to really disturb another or the energy of the group, a non-fardado pretty much has free reign.

The overall intention of any guideline in this tradition is to allow the energy to be contained in such a way that the *spaceship* (just a metaphor) takes off with everyone on it and lands back safely. As with *the groove* kicking in at a concert or drum circle, you know when you have all gotten there and achieved that place or state. You are in this joint thing as a group, and yet each person is also having their individual experience within that collective experience.

There is a general concept that the Doctrine of this tradition is-- there is no doctrine; it is really between each person and the being(s)/guide(s) within the medicine. Period.

BUT-- *and here is where I think a lot of people take up issue with this particular tradition, and where some throw out the "cult-y" accusations with respect to it--* there are some guidelines that we follow with the intention of containing the energy, facilitating the space, in a way which has proven to be the most time-tested effective means of allowing people to go as high as possible within the structure, by way of this medicine.

This is the intention. Here or there someone might not *execute* this intention as proficiently as another (a personal style issue). Equally-- some person new to this tradition, might buck up against any of their *authority stuff, control stuff*, or some other reactivity which really doesn't have anything to do with any controls or controlling actions that they perceive to be in place. I ask only that you consider this and be on the lookout that what I say is true or not. Just as you would not go into a church or temple or ashram and *free-form* it, one must come into this tradition knowing it is an established religion or spiritual tradition (I believe various participants would consider it either), and to respect it as such. Hence the idea of the orientation and guiding people within the range of what is to be expected.

I would also say that this tradition is a different kind of animal, in a way. More along the lines of Buddhism, which is a spiritual practice that might be taken on by one of any possible religious, spiritual or other belief... the Santo Daime, while being its own thing, with its own history, also accommodates anyone with basically any belief system, again in a way that allows each person to *ride their ride* and take away what they get from the experience.

-- Santo Daime History

This tradition would have pretty much spurred or branched off of existing traditional practices with ayahuasca within the Brazilian Amazon. A rubber tapper, Raimundo Irineu, referred to as Mestre Irineu, would have done ayahuasca... and then *received a download*, I will call it, or a call, to take this out in a slightly different way.

I consider this pretty much no different than the traditional way of doing; just perhaps with a little more languaging for what goes on, really. With over 15 years in this tradition I am constantly amazed at the pristine nature of some of the guidelines within the tradition... that allow the experience to be maximized for all. Nothing is in there by accident, and one truly *receives* (gets *instructed* by one's guides on) a lot of the *whys* of it during the course of their works.

I believe I saw the same attention and same way of doing in the way Don Enrique facilitated his ceremonies in the Peruvian Amazon; but there was just not as much explanation as to why things were/are done as they are done (and this, no doubt in part, due to limits in languaging-- Shipibo to Spanish to English). I see the masters in this work doing the same thing; just as I see the masters in numerous traditions and practices that might facilitate consciousness, enlightenment, ascension, etc., all pretty much doing the same thing(s) in their own way. But then-- I look for similarities as opposed to differences.

This tradition combines symbology of Catholicism/Christianity, as well as invoking the pantheon of African Orixas. It also includes just a lot of reverence for the natural world. And I thought I had heard once (and never seem to be able to confirm this-- but truly always feel a lot of it within me within my works) that there was some Judaism somewhere. The point, to me is-- there is a good possibility of the hymns speaking to you, here or there, and meeting you wherever you resonate with respect to the sacred. There is a lot of inclusion as I see it; a lot of touchpoints, from which you are bound to find something that floats your boat. Hymns that might mention male or female, this or that saint or ascended being, gratitude and vivas to the elements, just numerous ways of honoring spirit in many of its aspects.

-- *The Hymns/Hinos/Hinarios/Icaros*

The throughline of a traditional or a Santo Daime ceremony or work... is the music. Traditional curanderos receive or are downloaded with their Icaros; in the Daime a given Padrinho or Madrinha (male or female leader of a work) receives his or her Hinos (individual hymns) in blocks that become Hinarios.

In the Daime, hinarios are sung in blocks. There might be different blocks and different hinarios chosen for works that might be for different purposes:

* There is the Concentration-- in which much time is taken, once the force of the medicine comes on, to sit in silence and allow the *miracao* to occur. Here one receives whatever guidance, instruction, correction, visions, what have you, that is for them to receive in a given session.

* There is a Cura-- which means healing-- which might be called: on occasion for a specific person in-crisis; as it is felt that the current (the group) or circle requires some healing as a collective; or if there is something *in the ethers* in which we are clearing something for society as a whole.

* And there are Festivals and dance-works, all on a schedule that is followed year upon year.

A general guidance is that if you can sing, sing. In this tradition you generally have lyrics in front of you-- in Portuguese and English. Hymns might be sung in either, and if in Portuguese and you can't keep up-- at least you can follow the English and know what is being sung.

The hymns are written in a call-and-response fashion, with each section generally being sung twice, so a new person can begin to follow along quickly.

As you might get in some downward spiral; as one might get a bit lost in their *stuff*, remembering to try and come back to the singing of the hymns... often gifts you with clueing into lyrics being sung in that moment, that seem to be describing exactly where you are-- which actually can feel as if they are being sung to, or for, you. And this can be the trail of breadcrumbs you can follow *back to the Light*.

My strongest recommendation-- the harder a time you are having, the harder you try and sing and stick with the hymns. It also doesn't hurt that they are beautiful and focus on a lot of gratitude.

Now as far as what I believe is a fair pro-and-con to mention at this time, in comparing and contrasting a Daime work with a ceremony with a curandero: one can sing along and find their way back from a hard place, by way of the lyrics provided in a daime work; one might not be able to so, in a particular way, by way of listening to a curandero's Icaros, as one doesn't know the language (con). It could be that a person has a left-brain, logical

brain whose experience is hindered by literally having to follow the hymns, and this kind of person might have a better time receiving an icaro, energetically, without the literal understanding (pro). So-- feel into this idea and maybe figure out which of these might work best for you. It is really one of the key differences, to me, between these two styles of working with ayahuasca, and simply boils down to the degree of fluency in the language in which the hymns/icaros are sung.

-- Do I feel like I can come back to the group energy?

As one falls out, lies down, steps away from the energy of the group here or there (perfectly allowable), there is an incredible amount to be gained in the asking of this question of oneself. As a new participant you are given much leeway as to having your own experience. But it may be that where you fall into separation in the outside world... you might attempt to take advantage here of the group dynamic, to help you re-connect where you might generally not have the inclination or ability elsewhere.

A guardian might ask or suggest here or there to try and come back to the group as it is possible. Here it is your decision, and the timing of this can reveal itself in simply asking yourself if you feel it is time to come back to the group energy, or when?

Coming back to the support of the circle-- where you may still continue to do your work in whatever way-- might also just be a way to be of service to others as well-- in singing again as you can, for those unable in that moment. So many times we might transcend our own narrow passage, as we remember to show up in service for others. This is the magic of how we each claim what we need in the time we need it, and then give what we have in the name of others as *our medicine, our center, is strong*. As you return again and again, you will find that balance which allows you your experience, and which supports others in theirs, all in a seamless way. This is the way we all show up in greater and greater ways in the world, with more shoulders under the canoe making for lighter work.

-- Using the Medicine and the Group and Spirit to take you further than you could go on your own

As a non-fardado in the daime, you don't have to sing, and you don't even have to sit up in a chair-- you can go lie down, for as long as you need. But in this case I would try and bring myself to asking every so often-- as just mentioned-- do I feel like I can come back to the group energy? You may allow for yourself as much time to be a babe in the woods in this work as you wish; and hopefully, as you decide this practice is for you, you will spiritually mature and take on the carrying of your own weight, at minimum... and the burdens of others as they require the extra support.

One thing I truly believe this work is about is-- learning to process more Light. As you might directly experience the Creative Force of the Universe (by whatever name you feel comfortable) more often, more consistently, in greater doses, in a work, and ultimately using this as training to facilitate more of it in your life, one can be spurred on-- through rough patches-- to go further than you might otherwise go on your own, by latching onto the music and the energy of the current/group.

Think of the military, who have co-opted the idea of music and marching in step-- from the spiritual world-- in order to propel their troops further than they might have gone on their own.

As you might get disoriented, or lost, or go through a narrow passage-- orient your body toward the table and all of its symbols-- cross, candles (Light), images of spiritual personages. Ground your feet into the earth-- send your roots down, and call up that power and connection which is available to you from the earth. And use the hymns to take you further-- to carry you when in need, *just as* your voice can help carry others in their need.

If we remember the disconnected places we work ourselves into in our lives... that cause us to seek out peak experiences (such as the ayahuasca experience, and many others) as a way of correction... then I offer to you,

that there are ways to do this work that you can use to anchor in ways to work your way back to ok, when back outside and on your own.

As far as *nothing being by accident*, I even believe that the ceremonies within the daime are called *works*, to drive home the fact that this can be taken on as a *spiritual workout*, of sorts. Work as hard as you can, go as far as you can, from within the current and the force of the medicine, and you will progress in such ways in your life. I highly encourage you to take advantage within a ceremony-- of all that is available along the lines of support which can take you further than you might be able to go yourself... and to anchor in such a faith in spirit and the universe, and your fellow wo/man that this can be so.

It is tempting to enjoy the *honeymoon* of a first experience-- and to maybe not upset the apple cart by potentially diving into another round of processing by way of that next round of medicine. Understandable. But also perhaps gently inquire within, whether there might just be something more to be achieved as this window is open, that might further help you *back out there in the real world* the next time things get worrisome?

You are gently encouraged to drink every round (checking in, of course, within yourself, and exercising your personal power and your understanding of your self). Especially if you are in a tight spot, ask yourself if you might just be helped *over the hump* by drinking a next round you might be resisting. This is not a contest, and you are not forced to do what you cannot or ought not-- but just get clear what might be available out of drinking again or not. The decision always rests on you, and indeed honoring yourself and your inner knowing in such ways may be part of the work for you in a given ceremony.

-- A Word on "Visions"

** A strong bit of advice: in the Santo Daime we wish someone, "Bom Trabalho" (Have a good work) before a session begins, and might ask afterward, "Did you have a good work?" This allows a person to share or not, as s/he feels appropriate. Sometimes any of us might feel it is best to keep esoteric knowledge within, to allow it to continue to unfold... and sometimes we are *complete* or even brimming, and might feel like sharing it with another or others might be right at that time. It is important to allow each person this courtesy. I also believe this is much preferable than instances in which I hear (especially) a new person being asked, "Did you have visions? Tell me about your visions." Not everyone receives visions, and/or not in every work. I have witnessed people who haven't had visions being asked this, and watched them become saddened, up to the point of despondent and wishing to leave a scheduled training or retreat days or weeks early... because they hadn't received their visions.

Again, again, again- *-one has to trust that we get exactly what we need out of an ayahuasca experience... every time!* There may be other healing, correcting of the past, we don't know what-all, that has to occur in any given ceremony or work. So be it. Sometimes we come out in immense joy; sometimes we are still churning and assimilating, in-process. I feel that Spirit knows what we need. Everyone comes to this work having done x amount of personal work in their lives; everyone is on a different timeline and trajectory along their path; so just, please, trust that you will get what you need. And it might just take some time before you can look into the rearview mirror and know exactly what you might have gotten out of an experience... which could be way more than you would have ever wished for, or thought you had received on the day.

Respect this in yourself, and please respect this in others.

-- The Space (the Salao)

The space where we work can be indoors or out. There will be either a rectangular or six-sided table in the middle of the room. The group will be divided into men on one side, women on another. In the case of a six-sided table there would be 3 men's sections corresponding to 3 sides of the table (like slices of pie), and 3 sections of women opposite. These all have meaning, and you will be asked to sit somewhere, again with the underlying reason always being-- to increase the experience for the group, maintain the highest, most concentrated energy, etc. If you should be asked to move by a fardado, it is not personal. Hopefully their style

will be such that you understand this; if it doesn't come across, know their intensity is not some power trip, but again, just a deep wish for all to attain the maximum they can for themselves out of the session.

An indigenous ceremony is generally held with all sitting in a half circle in front of the curandero, but there are all kinds of variations.

-- *Guardians*

The separation of women and men is actually a nice thing. Both sides will have their Guardian or Guardians. This will be a fardado who basically *stands watch*, on shifts of an hour or so, and rotating through from person to person. Men handle men's business; women handle women's business. This can look like just holding space, as would any silent, sacred, compassionate witness. This aims to be a representation in the physical of what we like to think of as Guardian Angels or guides in the spiritual realm.

If a person is taking a healing, a guardian might place water and Kleenex within reach. They might get you a blanket. They might empty your bowl or bucket after you are complete. They are basically there to symbolize support, but to not interfere with you. Some people are better at it than others, and so-- just try to see them as having the positive intent to be of service, and make allowances that they too are:

- a) under the force of the medicine along with you, and
- b) wherever they might be along their path on this journey.

We are all working to perfect ourselves. I would say that a good deal of the criticism of this tradition, that points to its supposed control issues and cult-i-ness... boil down to a guardian here or there who is not, perhaps, as deft as could be, with respect to dealing with issues of maintaining the space and energy to the degree we might seek.

The aim of a guardian is to be pretty much as invisible as possible. To serve, but not draw attention to oneself, to the degree possible. The Padrinho or Madrinha leading the work might call upon a guardian for this or that. In my turn at guardianship I attempt to err towards heart and compassion.

If you have a question or concern please always feel free to call upon any guardian on your side. You might wish to go outside for a few minutes. This is generally allowable, but know that a guardian needs to keep track of everyone's whereabouts, and keep tabs that everyone is ok. So please check in, and know that as they check in with you, they are just maintaining vigilance in minding the flock, and not trying to interfere in, or control, your experience. Think too, what it would be to be in a lost place, and not have had anyone look for you, check on your well-being, etc.? Guardians are not mind readers, but the intent is to bring everyone back home safely. People have wandered off, gotten themselves in bad spaces, and we have all heard the occasional story of a ceremony or situation where participants were not overseen or cared for properly. So, just give the benefit of the doubt to someone who is intent on all making it through the evening safe and sound... and we will all, together, perfect such abilities over time, such that everyone's journey is a satisfying one.

One of the relatively few non-negotiable rules within this tradition is that-- everyone stays until the end of the session. The process is designed to lift everyone off and land them safely. The concentration and amount of medicine is aimed at trailing off the experience so that everyone-- after whatever *post-game process* they need-- is safe to drive home, etc. Also-- it is known that we can get really wound-up and turned-around and get taken to some bad or uncomfortable places within a work. There could be an urge to run, escape, etc., from a place that it wouldn't be ok to do so. One agreement you make-- a part of your sacred contract to be at such a session and something to which you sign your name as part of your waiver and release-- is that you will stay to the end of the work.

As you are in a bad place, you will be given as much space, of the sort that you might need, to have your experience. You might want assistance, you might want to be left alone. You will be accommodated to the

degree possible, and with an acknowledgement that a guardian or senior fardado or the leader of the work itself, might feel called just to check-in with you and see how/where you are.

People that have come up against such a tight spot have also issued scathing criticism that they were being controlled, or attempted to be controlled while under such duress. I will tell you that experienced participants trust the medicine to do its work, and that it is ok to have just about anything you need to have-- from anger, emotion, screaming, crying, whatever-- up to the point that you might hurt yourself or another, which will not be allowed.

Some people like more of a free-form experience. If you are geared to move energy through the physical body, you can be allowed to move or dance or whatever... within a reasonable degree.. as the space allows. You might be asked by a guardian to take some of that to the men's or women's healing space, or if you are too close to another participant, who also might be in their own version of a narrow passage, you might be guided to move here or there or just be responsive to that, so that you each may have your experience.

None of this, to me, is control; all of it is intended to provide the best experience for all, while still allowing everything that needs to happen for all to heal and clear and grow.

-- *Firmeza (Firmness)*

There is a concept within the Santo Daime, that I believe would be of value to anyone experiencing ayahuasca within any group context: firmeza, or firmness.

Firmeza can look like nobody getting into anyone's space-- vibing them, etc. It is acknowledged under so many spiritual traditions and practices that we can become extremely open, and from there be in love with everyone. Spiritual maturity dictates that we don't act on this until a sufficient window of time has passed. Or one might fixate on any other for any number of reasons. Within the daime you might feel attraction to another (or repulsion, or they might trigger something in you as they remind you of someone who once did something to you). You cannot act on it and you must not continue to vibrate them. Some people are intensely sensitive-- to energy-- and their abilities open dramatically under effect of the medicine. They do not need their work impaired by your energy. Just catch yourself, give a blessing and go back inward, into your own work. Over the course of this work you will find yourself in immense joy at the Light you experience emanating from any brother or sister. Just leave it at that: being in witness of, and gratitude for, each and every sacred being.

Firmeza can look like going deeper and deeper into the release of any ego attachment you have toward letting go. The *monkey mind* is a powerful thing, which has held sway for a long time within us. I witness many getting hooked or distracted in any number of ways from going deeper into the work-- deeper into release into more Light, Love, Wisdom, Compassion, Connection, etc.

A book I recommend to many is *The Psychedelic Experience* by Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert (Ram Dass) and Ralph Metzner. This is a translation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Here monks have trained themselves and each other *in preparation for a good death*. This has to do with all of the ways the ego will resist from letting go-- out of fear that it will not survive, or will no longer be needed, or whatever. The experience of ayahuasca, like numerous other ways to simulate such release into the large and deep pool beyond this illusion... can be looked upon as a *small death* while within the body-- a simulation of what is to come later on. That is essentially a main purpose of such practices. To shed the skin. To see the forest for the trees.

And so-- firmeza helps us to pay attention... to our attention... and to assist it to focus on deeper spiritual connection, to the degree possible, for as long as possible, within this spiritual workout that is the ceremony or work.

This is a process not-so-much of cutting away bits of yourself that are not ok, as it is of allowing them to harmonize in greater connection and communion with all which is in and around you. It is a process, perhaps, of cleaning the windows and seeing things more clearly. It allows us to gain and grow-- wisdom and compassion,

heart and mind. Here you become more of yourself. Here you catch glimpses of the perfection that has always been-- of you, of all which surrounds you-- and in such a way that you work yourself toward more and greater degrees of it.

You will be instructed, under influence of the medicine-- in your presence, in your dialogue, in your interaction, in your instruction from spirit and your guides within your experience. And so-- be firm in your place-- and get as much out of this as you can. Breathe, be present, *get out of the way of it*, and receive.

In the daime tradition there is a very nice prayer that I believe sets the space nicely, called the **Consecration of the Sanctuary** or **Consecration of the Space**. A copy of this will probably be found close to wherever I stage a copy of this article on my website (dbhealer.com or davidmichaelbartholomew.com). The general gist of this prayer is that there is only one Presence here... of Harmony, Goodness, Love, etc., and that all of the divine beings present and supportive of this space are aligned within that. I believe you will experience this prayer as authentic and true and supportive of your entertaining of this work in safety.

Another lesson which has always helped me frame firmeza, as pertains to the goings-on of the *monkey mind* that attempts to keep spiraling us out of the deeper potential connection... is that of the *pressure cooker*. In learning of the receiving of a power song in some shamanic work, it was advised to let everything simmer and percolate and build... without dissipating the energy... in order that the power song would present itself fully, without being lost in premature attempts to bring it forth. I find that within the ayahuasca work the greatest lessons, instructions, visions, what have you... all wish to birth themselves from within the stillness between thoughts. With a focus on the deepest, original, conscious Creative Principle that works for you... just allow your information to come. Breathe through every discomfort and distraction... invoke your firmeza... do not try to open the lid of the pressure cooker before it is ready, thus dissipating all which is building.

This type of encouragement-- in so many ways that it comes within a given work, from within or without-- can be received by those in their resistance... as control. I suggest that you can see it otherwise-- as the highest support for your experience, perhaps even beyond the degree to which you thought, or were willing, to go. As you can give the benefit of the doubt to those who might be checking in with you or suggesting this or that, as coming from the highest, in the name of your peak experience, you will be well-served.

-- *Trust*

I would interject something here about trust. A person who has not known safety, who has been messed with, abused, had boundaries violated, etc., can possibly find that the medicine *is not working*, is not taking them to that amazing, high place they have heard others talking about. Should this be your experience, just attempt to ask yourself if this might be the case, then just sit with it, open, allow, breathe, forgive yourself or those others or this process, and give yourself for exercising your boundaries, for maintaining watchfulness over this experience and these new, weird people...until such time that you feel you can relinquish any control which you have-- consciously or unconsciously-- been maintaining as a valid attempt at self-protection. This could be the primary thing you take away from your first ceremony or ceremonies. Relax. Stick with things and it can come-- sometimes just out of the recognition and naming of this condition being at-play.

-- *Duration of a Ceremony/Work*

Different types of ceremonies and works can last for different amounts of time. I would give a rough guesstimate that a Santo Daime work might generally last 5-6 hours, though there are longer specialty works (as touched upon earlier) and other circumstances... of which you would be prepared before entering. Daime works can be on weeknights, weekends, any time. They occur on a Calendar of Works that is dictated and is the same every year. It is pretty strictly adhered to, though necessities of *modern life* might allow a given work to be scheduled a couple days earlier or later, like to the weekend.

A general guideline of ceremonies in the Amazon, with a curandero, would be that they start at or after sunset, and can go deep into or through the night. And this format holds for most peyote ceremonies in the Native American Church as well.

When you are having *a good one* it might be hard to think of it ending, while there will be the hard ones that you can't envision ending soon enough. It is what it is. Hang in. Do your best. Throw some water on your face. Sit up straight. Ground your feet. Call upon the current and your guides for strength. And you will make it-- and often further than you thought you could go.

-- A Few Words on Mediumship

Within the Santo Daime, and within traditional ayahuasca ceremonies as facilitated by a curandera/o, mediumship is an integral part of some of this work. Within the daime there is the cura, or healing work. Here, a willing participant may invoke his or her caboclo (spirit guide) to facilitate an obsessor spirit to the Light. One person might give permission for a presence to occupy him- or herself. And, by one's own experience, or with the assistance of another participant who consents to have a healer-being-caboclo of a different sort occupy him- or herself, the unsettled being is worked with.

Firmeza here is again key. As such things are taking place around you, you are simply to focus more attentively on the Light, on your own work, in your place, with your singing, to maintain the energy of Light, and not to resonate with or sink down to the resonance of the unhealed, or be a *lookey-loo*. The thread of the hinario continues to carry the Light forth, and all learn their place over time in this aspect of the work. We serve each other best by maintaining our connection to Spirit, seeing it all as One, and trusting that between guides and guardians each person will be helped through such passages.

There is a definite opening and closing to mediumship aspects of the work. We do not indulge it at other times. And we must be disciplined in allowing and facilitating it, so that we are in control of it. There is study into the working with mediumship and caboclos, and this becomes just one more aspect of the healing which is possible by way of this work. There are many ways to frame this within one's mind, and you are free to compartmentalize it in the way which works for you. To me-- it is all One, and healing of any aspect of any of us... gets us all that much closer to the finish line. So-- as with purging or any other aspect of this work, *don't get hooked*. Just use any distraction as a means to teach you to focus more deeply in your place, to maintain your center and your connection despite any worldly thing going on around you, and to work toward receiving that which you deserve.

- After the Work

As the work completes and final prayers are offered, there may be a time for sharing or not. There is often an encouragement to bring food to share. You can sit down, lie down, take a nap, walk around outside, be more with people or alone, journal, draw... basically you can find your way to complete and assimilate before you travel anywhere. You are responsible for being able to safely drive home-- or get that ride, or arrange to stay until morning. We are not about losing any precious soul, and you have to again be accountable for what you know of yourself, and to arrange or ask for what you need.

I strongly recommend drinking plenty of water-- after the close of the ceremony, before bed, first thing the next day, and continually. You will be dehydrated. And you will find that your grogginess clears more seamlessly if you can continue to hydrate.

I always encourage people to journal their experience. Peak experience is such that the piece of us that likes operating from within a comfort zone... looks to quickly negate great things.

I once learned of a concept called "Splashout" and have carried it with me since. Splashout can occur after a peak experience. Again, the piece of you that wants to negate it, might start acting out a bit. If you are cranky or worse in the day or days after a work/ceremony, ask yourself if this might just be splashout, and if so, you will be able to facilitate yourself better through it, having named it for what it is.

You can keep the channel open after a work for, it is said, 3 or so days. As you follow the more detailed orientation guidelines of what to maybe not eat for a few more days, about considering not having sex for a

couple days, etc., you may receive additional, ongoing *miracao*, information, healing, etc. This would be the post-side of the diet, and dieting suggestions you took on prior to the work.

- **Conclusion**

I trust that we all get where we need to be. If this is for you and/or when it is for you, you will know it. Don't force it. Be for others in your ceremony or work, what you might wish them to be for you. Allow that there are all kinds of personalities and levels of enlightenment that we each bring to this work. Ask yourself-- within the experience-- what gift, lesson or opportunity is available to me in this moment? By way of example-- maybe a person with less firmeza who is vibing you, might just allow you to either be better at defining your boundaries, or to work toward more centeredness, greater focus from distraction, whatever. Come in with clear intention what you might be open to or desiring to get out of it... but also be open to it being more or possibly looking different than you might have thought going in. This is good work, and while I don't want to program that it might be hard or intense work... I can say that... you get out of it what you put into it.

Put every effort into accepting more and more of the things that happen within the work as ok in your world. Someone's style might be different than yours-- allow that this is so. And keep working.

Invite the medicine in deeper. Affirm you are safe, and receiving all you need. Remember to ask for what you need.

My utmost, utmost, highest, bestest tip: BREATHE. Breathe into your heart. Breathe yourself open. Breathe yourself into, and through. Allow God/Spirit/the Universe to breathe you. Release, open, allow, accept. Say yes. But just breathe from your heart and you will be ok. Peace.

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A bit on me and how I came to this work

I mentioned at the beginning of this piece that I would write something of where I come from in setting out to write it. It is a weird world, with a lot of people working their stuff out on others. And so it comes to mind that someone might want to know what Kool-Aid I am drinking, or what agenda I might have, in order to factor that into whatever has been written above. And so here it is.

I had what people call a perfect moment, on a swingset when I was 8 or 10. I was just rocking and I disappeared. Everything became a glow or hum or vibration. All I know is-- it was amazing, it was *Home*. I was in it for however long and then I was back. And I really wanted to stay back there, but I was back here.

A lot of things happened in my life after that which were as far from that as can be. But I never lost that memory, no matter how small that spark, in the deepest recess of my mind, might have been reduced to. That is what was perfect for me. It defined me. Because I had to start looking at-- *hey, I was way over there, and now I am way over here... and how to bridge the two?* And so my course was set.

I was from a Lutheran German dad and a Jewish mom, both relatively non-practicing, both pretty much due to being on the receiving end of disappointment from their parents at having hooked up with someone from the wrong team. As a kid I experienced church and temple with my grandparents. My sisters and I got made to go to Sunday School at a kind of neutral Protestant church. A lot of those kids were click-y and we weren't in the click. Our next door neighbor was a principal at a Catholic church and his kids were kind of the worst in the neighborhood. I was in a Boy Scout troop based out of a Catholic church in our suburb, and so I could go to mass with them or not.

I began TM (transcendental meditation) at about 14 or 15. I learned about Native American things. Mostly I just lived outdoors and would climb trees and stay up in them for hours. I saw I was getting experience with all kinds of traditions. I witnessed the ideals attainable within any given tradition, as well as many of the ways in which adherents of a given belief system exhibit pretty much the opposite on a regular basis.

Due to the invocation of the name of God, by so many, in pursuance of so much intolerance and malevolence, I completely resisted that term for many years. Their understanding of what that is must have been completely different than that which I had experienced directly on the swingset. Surely they were not living in a manner that spoke to ever having been in that place-- a place of honoring, calm, acceptance, joy, safety, etc.

We had German neighbors and I loved their accents and their different furniture and everything. They had exchange students come and we would become friends, and then penpals afterward. Something about the diversity of people interested me.

I was always in recognition that I was the *good ear* for people around me-- that they would tell me things. That was the beginning of 35 or 40 of accumulation of a number of certifications, etc. of different healing modalities, and I began taking on clients, and have done so for 30+ years.

Due to certain things being out of control in my environment, I became all about personal control. You become "it"-- whatever was in your environment-- or its opposite. I didn't smoke, drink, drug or anything. But I knew deep inside that sometime I was going to have to shake off all of that control, and shake my mind loose, or I would be in trouble.

I entered into a 20-some year phase of waiting for that to present itself. In readings-- some in which I didn't ask the question-- I got told I shouldn't do something mind-blowing, because I would take it too far. Something in me heard that, and knew to wait and not force it. Finally I got the ok. Even then I looked for the experience that would be right. I wanted it to be sacred, I wanted to be taken through it by someone I could trust. Not recreational or *just an experience*, Etc.

In one week I got three unrelated links/referrals/introductions to the Santo Daime. I couldn't deny that this was possibly, probably the thing.

A few years prior to this I was in a workshop, sleeping on the floor of the classroom up in the Bay Area, and something *came through me-- the One World Flag-- an international symbol of diversity* (www.oneworldflag.org). That became the culmination and synthesis of so much all of these prior-listed things: diversity, appreciation of all the ways any of us try to become conscious humans and all of it.

Coming out of my first two-day Santo Daime work-- outside, on sacred Chumash land in Malibu, overlooking the ocean... I was in tears of joy at these smiling, diverse faces... that I seemed to remember from eternity.

Santo Daime, ayahuasca, became a tool for me. Yes, part of my spiritual practice. But also not in a way in which I am ruled by it. Since I had had the swingset incident as a kid, and since I had attained this state for moments or minutes via meditation, natural highs, and other means, I know it can be gotten to in all kinds of ways, by all of us.

And so, through my creative work, through my sacred and healing and service work, through all that my wife, Joan, and I attempt to work in this world, I come at this through direct experience of Oneness and all of us as a part of that. I feel I can speak in whatever languaging a person resonates with, using whatever terms one feels most comfortable-- for this Consciousness, for this web, this life force which connects us. I work to bring a deep understanding of the perfection of the path each person is on, and how permission-- from Spirit, from the person him or herself-- enters into any interaction with another. And so that is the *slant* of this piece. I have no at-stake-ness in someone doing ayahuasca, doing it by way of the Santo Daime or with the curandero I studied with. I am not here to convince anyone of anything. I have zero agenda. I am here to work on myself, to live it

without having to regurgitate my beliefs... and then, to show up in service as called upon, and to let my actions speak for me. As said-- I hope and know you will find what you want and need in this life. And-- as is worded so nicely in another favorite prayer of mine-- I wish that all beings achieve their most intimate aspirations.

Alegria y Firmeza (joy and firmness),

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