

A Primer on Shamanism in northwest Amazonia in 2006

This article is a long hand version of a talk I gave at the 2nd Shamanism Conference in Iquitos in July, 2006. I wanted to discuss several important, but often overlooked aspects of shamanic healing, particularly as it relates to ayahuasca healing, but also as it relates, at least in one instance, to San Pedro healing. There is also an important aspect of healing given by Bertha Grove, a Southern Ute elder from Durango, Colorado, which will help those involved in healing to deal with the disease-factor with which they are working. With that in mind, this is more a primer on several little discussed aspects of Shamanism, as practiced primarily in northwest Amazonia today, but which might hold substance for plant medicine or shamanism elsewhere as well. I'm going to begin with a supposition: that all matter has a life force. By that I mean that all matter—and probably anti-matter too for argument's sake—is sentient, and has will, personality and the ability to make choices. Now I'm going to add a second supposition: That all matter—and anti-matter for argument's sake—dates from the first moment of time. That you and I can trace our lineage back to that moment, even if we were just cosmic dust balls billions of years from becoming slime creatures and millions of years further away from coming out of the primordial soup and clambering up onto land. The same would hold true for a mountain, a rock, a flower. Everything we know and millions of things we don't know trace back to that first moment when matter exists. If we were to look at a mountain, for instance, and apply my first supposition, imagine what that mountain has gone through since the dawn of time, imagine what it has experienced, and now imagine what it would be like to be able to communicate with that mountain about those experiences. It's my belief that that's doable; it's my failure that I don't know how to communicate with that being, its will, its personality. But that doesn't mean it's not doable, just that I fail at it. Imagine the same for an ocean, for a fish that's just been bitten by a predator, for a plant. Plants, like everything else, are our co-dwellers in the universe. But man has a special relationship with plants. They provide, and have since the beginning of time, the bulk of our food, our clothing, our shelter. Some provide us with the loveliest scents; some with extraordinary color. They're the source of our medicines, their roots work with soil and stone to keep the surface of the earth intact. They go so far as to take the poisonous carbon dioxide that humans exhale and turn it back into human-life-giving oxygen. That's some relationship. Of course it may be that plants only invented us to distribute their seeds, so I'm not suggesting they live to cater to us. But they do provide us with much of what we need to exist on this planet. Among the flora of the world as we know it, several plants are not just allies, they are considered Master Plant Teachers. You might extend that to read: Master Plant Teachers of Man. These plants might be considered gate keepers. These plants are the plants that allow us, we humans, to slow down enough to communicate with the mountains; to speed up enough to communicate with a hummingbird, to visit the other realms past and present and simultaneous that are here but that we don't ordinarily see or hear within the band widths of our senses. When I say other realms that are already here, what I mean are other realities that co-exist with ours. Imagine a dog whistle. You blow it, you hear nothing. Your cat hears nothing. Birds hear nothing. But blow it close enough to a dog and the dog will yelp in pain at the sound. Now the dog hears it but you can't. But it was still there. Your hearing just didn't have a broad enough band. Now what I'm suggesting the Master Plant Teachers do is broaden the bands of your senses so that we see, hear, feel, touch, taste and sense things we can't under ordinary circumstances. Now the Master Plant Teachers include—and they are frequently called the 7 Master Plant Teachers—include Datura, Iboga, San Pedro cactus, Peyote, Ayahuasca, Amanita Muscaria…and I always forget the seventh, though I believe it's Oloquui, used by the Mazatecs and other indigenous groups in Mexico. There are undoubtedly others whose existence man has either not yet discovered or whose existence is being closely guarded by the peoples who use them. There are a number of minor Plant Teachers as well, among them cannabis, Salvia divinorum, a number of species of mushrooms, coca, opium poppies and so forth. All of these are vital and can help alter the perspective of man but what separates them from the Master Plant Teachers is the depth of their teachings, the power or knowledge they are capable of imparting to man. These teachers all have, I believe, the will and have made the choice to be teachers to mankind. They all, also, have built in mechanisms that ensure that mankind has to want to ingest them, has to want the knowledge they can impart or realize once they have opened the gates they guard for us. Most of them prevent frivolous or accidental use simply by being physically difficult to ingest. One might pick a peyote button and eat it with little difficulty, but to eat the 30-or-50 or 500 one would need to have the spirit of Peyote convinced that you want to learn what he has to teach is a very difficult thing. Similarly, the vile taste of datura or ayahuasca, coupled with the intense purging—often from both ends—that accompany the drinking of these teas, makes frivolous or accidental use almost impossible. So while the rose suggests we come to her to bathe in her glorious scent, the Master Plant Teachers warn us away from them. You pretty much have to want what they have to offer, and be willing to prove it with physical discomfort, before they will share. But once they do, well, when those gates are once opened they will never quite close all the way again. Your broadened band of senses will never quite be able to forget seeing or interacting with the spirits you encountered, the spirits that are sharing your/our space. In other words, the spirits never leave once you've made their acquaintance. A clear example of that occurred several years ago. I was at my friend and teacher Don Julio Jerena's home up the river from Iquitos in Peru. I had my wife and two sons with me—they were all born in Amazonia and loved going to Julio's. My younger son, Marco, was maybe 11 or 12. He'd been around ayahuasca several times: the first time Julio put a drop on his forehead; the next time a drop on his tongue. The third time he was permitted to wipe his finger around the cup after I drank, and so forth. But he'd never done ayahuasca in the sense of actually drinking. But on this occasion I had some guests with me and on the day we were going to drink we all went out with Julio very early in the morning to collect the Banisteriopsis caapi vine and Psychotria viridis leaves he was going to use to make the ayahuasca. He also collected small pieces of bark from the Lupuna Negra, Catawa and Chiri caspi trees that he was going to use as admixtures. I insist on people wanting to drink taking that walk: If a 90-year old curandero can do it, and is doing it for us, the least we can do is keep him company. Marco joined us. When we returned to Julio's he began to cook the ayahuasca while we had breakfast—our only meal of

the day—and then I sent everyone out for a long hike in the jungle. I did and do that for several reasons: I want them physically tired before doing ayahuasca. I want them tired enough that they are not concerned with whether they left enough cat food out at home, 3,000 miles away. I want them empty and clear so that the spirits, who often whisper, can be heard. I also want them full of the sights and sounds of the jungle—from which ayahuasca comes and with which its spirit has grown up. And then I also want people to have an empty stomach before drinking, so that when they purge they can purge the bile of their lives, rather than undigested eggs. I’ll get more into that in a moment. When people come back from the hike they are generally too tired to remember their own names, full of the things they’ve seen and been shown by my crew in the jungle, and their stomachs are empty. And not long after that it’s time to drink. Now some people choose not to drink, and for them there is always a feast of food waiting. And at Julio’s, in his platform hut, the kitchen is maybe 10 feet away from the living area we drink in, so that food is close and can be awfully tempting. On the night in question my son, Marco came back from the hike and headed straight to the kitchen to eat. But then he stopped, came back to me, and said he thought he wouldn’t eat, but that he’d drink ayahuasca instead, if Julio and I would allow it. We did. An hour or two later, probably twenty minutes after he drank, Marco called me to his side, saying he was frightened. I held him and let him lay his head and shoulders on my lap as I sat on the floor. At times it seemed that if I let him go he’d fly away. But Julio and ayahuasca are gentle and in two hours it had passed and Marco went to sleep shortly after that. In the morning I was surprised when one of my guests came to me in the kitchen and sort of angrily demanded to know how on earth I could have let an 11 or 12 year old drink ayahuasca. I said it never occurred to me that he shouldn’t drink as he’d done everything asked of everyone else and then wanted to drink. Plus, he’d been born into a world where ayahuasca’s use was traditional. “But what on earth could Marco have possibly learned at his age?” I was asked. “I don’t know,” I answered. “Let’s ask him if he learned anything.” We did, and Marco responded. “Well, before last night I was always afraid of the dark because I thought that’s when ghosts came and I was afraid of ghosts. But last night I realized they’re always here, right here with us. Only it takes ayahuasca to be able to see them and hear them and talk with them. So now that I know they’re everywhere all the time, and now that I talked with them and see they’re not all just trying to kill me, like I thought, I don’t think I’ll be afraid of the dark anymore.” And he wasn’t. Of course, once Marco was able to see the ghosts with ayahuasca, he didn’t stop seeing them either. And now, even at 18, he often calls me into his room at night to ask me to tell one or two of them to stop talking so loudly as he’s trying to sleep. Or to speak more clearly if they want Marco’s help with something. So that’s Master Plant Teacher work. It’s often very simple, just like it was with Marco. Of course, if you don’t want to learn that ghosts or spirits are everywhere, if you don’t want to learn what a flower is “thinking” or how badly a tree feels when you prune its branches, you may not want to deal with the Master Plant Teachers, who seem to always give you what you need, and rarely give you what you want. In my own case, some of the teachings have taken years and dozens of sessions to learn; others have been very simple but no less profound. Once, years ago, I was in an ayahuasca dream and asked the spirits what I could do to make a better living as a writer. Without hesitation a spirit said: “Drink less. Write more.” That was it. The whole answer. So I drank less, wrote more and pretty soon was able to support my family on investigative journalism—no mean feat in a world which does not highly reward those who spend their time exposing hypocrisy and corruption in government quarters. Or acknowledging them in my own. Realizing that inviting the spirit of a master plant teacher like Ayahuasca into your life has lasting repercussions is just one of the frequently overlooked but important aspects of these plants. There are several others I’d like to discuss as well. Healing is a vital element of all of the Master Plant Teachers. With ayahuasca, with which we are concerning ourselves, that healing occurs on physical, emotional and spiritual levels, sometimes all in the same session. In northwestern Amazonia, home of ayahuasca, illness is almost always seen as a symptom of a disorder or disturbance on another plane. Accessing that plane and identifying that disorder will frequently eliminate the symptom. Ayahuasca is one of the methods curanderos—healers—use to access those other planes. One other thing to remember is that in that same region, things like Mal Ojo, the Evil Eye; Selo, jealousy, and other forms of negative energy, whether produced by a person or by a brujo—sorcerer—paid by a person, are considered to produce very real results. That’s because of a belief, or awareness, that intentions, like everything else, have a life force. And the life force of negativity, just like the life force of positive thinking, effects what it touches. That said, at its most basic level, a person living on a river might go to a curandero and say that he’s got a problem. His problem is that his chickens keep dying and he doesn’t understand why. He asks the curandero to drink ayahuasca to see what’s causing it. The curandero drinks, contacts his spirit allies and asks them the cause of the problem. They in turn might show him that a neighbor who is angry with the chicken farmer is adding a touch of poison to the chicken’s feed at night. But the work doesn’t end there. A good curandero would look further, to see what might have caused such anger, and see that the chicken farmer, at some earlier time, had caused a problem for the neighbor. When the curandero comes out of his dream he has good news and bad news for the chicken farmer. The good news is he’s identified the problem. The bad news is that until the chicken farmer acknowledges the initial wrong he did to his neighbor, the poisonings will continue and the chickens will keep dying. Many of the healings are quite simple in retrospect: a man keeps hurting himself shortly after he sells his bananas and suspects someone of giving him the evil eye, so he goes to the curandero and asks him to drink ayahuasca to see who it is. The curandero does, contacts the spirits, and sees that it’s not the evil eye, but that the man, every time he sells his crops and has a little money, gets drunk and hurts himself. The solution is to stop celebrating when the crops are sold. On one occasion in Iquitos I was present when a man came to a curandero named Juan. The man was beside himself. He was certain that his wife was cheating on him and about to leave him for another man and he couldn’t bear the thought. He wanted to know whether it was true and who the man was. On this occasion, Juan, the man and I all drank. And all of us saw the same thing: we saw the woman—I only presumed it was the wife in question as I didn’t know her—speaking with a man on a busy square. When the

dream was over the man was even more distraught. "I knew it! I knew it! She's no good and she's leaving me!!!" he sobbed. Juan asked the man to try to revisit the scene in the ayahuasca dream. He asked the man if he could identify the place. The man did: It was the Plaza 28, not far from the center of town. Juan then asked the man to try to calm down enough to see the man in the vision clearly. This time when the man grew even more distraught: "She's cheating with a Priest! A priest!" Juan laughed. "No. She's not cheating. Did you hear what they were talking about?" The man said he hadn't. "She was telling him that you are so jealous that you always think she's cheating. And then you hit her. And now, even though she still loves you, she cannot take your jealousy and the beatings anymore. So she was talking with the priest about getting a divorce." The man started to deny it, then began to sob and admitted that what Juan said was true. He kept beating her because he thought she was so beautiful that everyone wanted her and he didn't want her to leave him. Those healings are quite typical of the work a curandero does with the people he treats. But ayahuasca healing is not limited to those sorts of things. In sessions with my friend Don Julio, I've had guests clear up physical ailments that ranged from Irritable Bowel Syndrome to imaginary pain from the loss of a limb. I had one guest nearly three years ago come to the jungle to die. She was in end-stage cancer and wanted to disappear in the Amazon. She arrived taking a mountain of pills, from painkillers to anti-depressants. She cut out the anti-depressants prior to the trip—they would have had a bad-to-lethal effect in combination with ayahuasca—then drank twice with Julio and once with Don Francisco at Sachamama. She hated the trip. She hated me. She hated the jungle. Nearly three years later she wrote me recently from southern Italy, where she's touring on a motorbike, still cheating death. And still wondering why she is alive. The answer is that Julio, while under the influence of ayahuasca, saw some plants she needed to take to eliminate her cancer. The day after the second ceremony he had one of his sons collect them and made the woman a tea from them. She drank them religiously for a week—after that she was no longer with me so I can't be certain she drank them at all. But they seem to have bought her a couple of good years at least. One type of healing that is common with ayahuasca is soul-loss, a condition most Westerners have never even heard of, and if they have, not something they would believe is real. Soul-loss is a condition in which a person's soul, life force, flees the body, generally during a traumatic experience, leaving the body nearly lifeless. If not treated, if the life force is not reunited with the body quickly, the person will frequently die, and if they don't die, will be little more than vegetable. Not long ago, an old indigenous Matsigenka woman who lived not far from Julio, was washing clothes in her canoe on the river. She looked into the water and saw her recently deceased husband. He was calling to her to join him. Then she saw her own grave next to his. This we learned later. What those who were there saw was the woman suddenly lurch forward and fall from the canoe, screaming. She climbed onto the riverbank and began racing headlong through tall grass toward the village she lived in. In her panic she stumbled on a fallen tree trunk hidden in the grass and fell, hitting her head. Her nephews brought her to Julio. They had to carry her from the canoe. Her breathing was very shallow, her eyes were rolled back in her head. She did not respond to touch. Julio had her laid down on a hut floor and began to treat her. He chanted, cleansed her with smoke and Florida Water (the ubiquitous holy water of northwest Amazonia), then went into a trance that lasted perhaps an hour. During the trance he was as lifeless as she, except for moments of agitation when his fists would clench, his shoulders shudder and he would speak unintelligibly. He began to sweat profusely. When he came out of the trance his clothes were soaked through and he told the Matsigenka men to bring her back the next day at the same time. She left as lifelessly as she'd arrived, and she arrived the next day as lifelessly as she'd left. The second day's treatment was much like the first, except that Julio forced a little bit of a plant decoction he'd had his son make into the woman's mouth. And this time, when Julio was in his trance and would tense up, the woman began to tense up as well. She was still unconscious, but moaned perceptibly, and gritted her jaw. When he was finished he told her nephews to bring her back to finish her treatments the next day at the same time. When she was gone Julio related that he'd seen the woman see her husband in the river calling to her. Then she'd seen her grave. It was such a shock that her soul fled, leaving her to fall from the canoe then race mindlessly until he'd fallen. During the third treatment, while Julio began to chant, the woman began to move. She moaned, clenched her jaw and folded her hands into fists. She began to move her torso. Within an hour she opened her eyes and there was recognition in them. Julio chanted and cleansed and the woman was given a little more of the plant medicine—this time she tried to object to it—and her movements began to take on a solidity. An hour later and she was asking what Julio was doing and why she was there. Another hour and she could be helped to her feet and, with assistance, walked back to the canoe. She'd gotten her soul back. The next day she returned, still weak, and Julio asked what had happened to cause her soul to flee: She told the same story Julio had told two days earlier.

Ayahuasca is frequently called La Purga, the purge, because users tend to physically purge themselves. Generally, within 20-40 minutes of drinking ayahuasca, a person will be overcome with an impossible-to-resist urge to vomit that's sometimes accompanied by a similarly uncontrollable urge to excrete. The ayahuasca dream generally sets in shortly after the purge. Many people don't understand the purge, but it is one of the most effective healing elements of ayahuasca—touching on the physical, emotional and spiritual levels at the same time. In northwest Amazonia, among the most typical illnesses are gastro-intestinal problems. The reasons for this are many: in some places fish are sun-dried, but get wet in sudden showers, then dried again before being eaten. Parasites thrive on that setting. Likewise, meats from wild animals often carry parasites that, if not cooked well enough, will transmit to humans. Meat and fish headed to the markets in Iquitos will often be salted but otherwise uncooked and might be unsold in tropical heat and humidity for weeks. Ayahuasca cleans out those parasites better than any other medicine available in the region. But for those suffering emotional and spiritual issues, la purga is equally effective. Normally, it's recommended that a person drinking ayahuasca fast for at least several hours and often for a full day before drinking. That ensures an empty stomach. But it won't diminish the purging effects. The difference in the purge on an empty stomach though is that instead of vomiting lunch, the participant will have a chance to vomit some of the bile of their lives. Things they carry around which clutter up their mental and spiritual arenas uselessly. Most of us don't even

realize what we are carrying: None of us can remember the first time we were scolded by what was, until then, the loving voices of our mother or father, but it certainly left a scar to realize that we were no longer simply loveable. Few of us remember all of the hearts we broke, or the lies we told breaking them. Many of us remember those who broke our hearts and every little lie that was told in doing it. That's emotional junk that we're better off tossing. Guilt for something we cannot fix? Get rid of it. La Purga encourages you do just that. Its spirit reaches down into the depths of your soul and roots around for those things, then brings them to the surface—in the frightening moments of ego-dissolution (which is why I gave ayahuasca the name Vine of the Little Death years ago)—in a wretched reliving, and then allows you to eliminate them. It's not like vomiting at all: It's as if great chunks of physical matter are explosively hurled from the bottom of your bowels—the vomiting often sounds like a waterfall in reverse, the water rushing up the rocks and violently cascading from your mouth. My guests swear they vomited heaps; in truth they rarely vomit more than the few ounces of ayahuasca they drank as they have nothing physical in their stomachs to eliminate. That purge is often the most vital element in ayahuasca healing. One client who had a difficult time with the purging—it lasted all night—but had little in the way of visions, wrote six months later to say "How can I quantify the ayahuasca experience? Let's just say that before the trip to Peru every day I woke up and wondered if today was the right day to put a pistol in my mouth and end it all. And now, every day, I wake and think: What a great day to be alive." That's healing on an extraordinarily deep level. Another client once drank with his wife. She spent the time under ayahuasca's influence in a dream state, hardly moving after a short purge. He, on the other hand, vomited and shit himself for three hours, rolling around on the hut floor begging for mercy from whatever god he believed in. The next morning, both of them wanted to talk with Julio. I interpreted. The wife had had a series of extraordinary visions that Julio skillfully interpreted; the husband demanded to know why his wife had visions of her future and things she needed to do to get a business off the ground while he had done nothing but puke and shit uncontrollably all night. I asked the question of Julio, who laughed. "Tell him I was going to paint him with the colors of ayahuasca, but that when I looked inside him I realized that he was like a living room that was full of broken furniture, garbage on the ground, peeling walls. Who could paint a room like that? No one. So I had to spend the night cleaning it all out to get it ready for painting. Tell him I'll paint him next time." The fellow was skeptical, but the next time he drank he purged lightly and then spent the night enraptured in visions. Another element of healing that's frequently overlooked must be touched on. Curanderos in both the Amazon and elsewhere often have to suck illnesses—physical, emotional, spiritual—from their patients. But illnesses, like all other matter, are sentient and have the same will to live as other things. The person who explained that to me originally was Bertha Grove, a curandera from the Southern Ute tribe outside of Durango, Colorado. She was an elderly woman, a perfect image of a grandmother, but very very powerful and mystical. I had attended several all night peyote ceremonies with the Utes, during which Bertha was always present and one of her grown sons was always the Roadman, or ceremony leader. It had taken probably a year to get permission to attend the first. After several I asked permission to bring my sister, a designer (she designed the MTV logo among other things) who had become an acupuncturist. Bertha said okay and Pat joined me. The ceremony that evening was being held for a youngster who was quite ill. At one point during the ceremony Bertha stood, took the boy and began to suck the top of his head. In a few minutes a sort of squishy sound started and it felt as though something spongy and wet were leaving his crown and entering her mouth. She briefly stepped outside the tee-pee. In the morning Bertha called my sister and I to her side outside the tee-pee. "You both saw what I did in there, didn't you?" she asked. We said we had. "I sucked that boy's sickness out. But I don't know if you understand that that sickness wants to live. It's just as willful as you or me. And now if I suck that sickness out and spit it out it's going to be lying on the ground just waiting for someone to step on it and then that person is going to get sick. They might not get the same sickness the boy had because sickness can change its shape and affect different people different ways, but it will always be sickness or something bad. So when we Indians suck out a sickness we don't swallow it. We spit it out and always wrap it up in something—not that you can see, something like invisible gauze—and send it off somewhere to a place where it will never be allowed to land on someone else and make them sick. It's a far off planet that's cold. That's where I send mine. Other healers send theirs to their own places. Now the reason I'm telling you this," she said to my sister, "is that last night I saw you. I saw that you are an excellent healer. But you have a problem. You're taking sickness out of people and you don't know to get rid of it so it's just staying on you. You're covered in a lot of sicknesses and you've got to stop because even though you're strong you are going to get real sick, real soon if you don't get rid of all that." Six months later my sister did get sick: she got a host of illnesses that were apparently unrelated but which have left her crippled and in pain for the past 20 years. In my own experience, I once went through an experience that lasted numerous sessions with ayahuasca over a two or three year period. My wife and I were living in Iquitos, Peru with our children and we were breaking up. Or she was breaking up with me, and it was tearing me apart. We had a bar at the time, The Cold Beer Blues Bar, and every time I had clients to take out to the jungle they were getting cured and I began to get jealous. One day I told a customer over the bar that "All my clients are getting healed, but I'm the one that needs healing." It was said as a joke but must have had truth to it because the next time I drank ayahuasca with Julio, as I slipped into my dream I heard the rustling of grass that grew louder and louder as it grew closer and then suddenly found myself surrounded by little beings. I couldn't really see what they looked like but was aware they were beings. "We heard you," one of them said. "Heard me?" "Yes. We heard you and it's your time to get worked on, to get healed. The only thing we'll have to do is tear you apart, get rid of the bad stuff and then put you back together." The thought of that was terrifying. "I was only kidding!" I fairly shouted as they began to climb on me and pull me to pieces. "No you weren't. You're just afraid you're going to die. We're here to heal you." The next several hours were brutal, feeling myself torn apart, terrified, unable to move. And when they were done, they said they had more work to do and that I should not fight them so hard next time, that

it wouldn't hurt so much if I just let them work. The next time and the next eight or 10 times I drank they always returned and it never got easier. I would hear the rustle of that grass and go into sheer panic. They worked on me despite my protests, trying to get the pain and anger I was carrying around out of me. One night, while drinking with Don Francisco at Sachamama, I heard the rustling and nearly screamed. I was beyond fear at that point, and thought that drinking away from Julio would leave the doctors behind. It didn't. But that night when they came they only worked for a little while, then began to show me things: The showed me a light stone and told me it would heal things. They sang me songs to repair myself, and then they took me to a place that was sort of a huge cavern dimly lit in red. All throughout the cavern were huge piles and mounds and hills and even mountains of rotten, fetid garbage. The smell alone made me vomit horribly. It was an unbearable place. And the sounds! Every few seconds there would be a crashing sound somewhere in the cavern that was as loud as an airplane exploding, a thunderous roar that seemed to shake the whole cavern and me with it. For some reason I couldn't or didn't leave. I began to grow accustomed to the light and when I did I saw movement on the heaps and piles. I looked more closely and realized that there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of the beings I called the doctors there. They were scooping up the rotten material and doing something with it so that it was transformed into something good. I don't believe they explained that to me but it was as clear as if they did. And then I realized that this was one of the places where all the evil, all the rotten things in the world go. What was crashing in to the place were the bad things done and thought by people and the stink was the stink of greed and jealousy, avarice and willful infliction of pain. That's what made it so horrid. And at the same time I thought that I thought of Bertha Grove and her far off planet and knew that should the need arise, this red room would be a place to put illness and evil so that the doctors could transform it the way they'd been trying to transform me by trying to eliminate my anger at my ruined marriage. The lessons were not for naught. That same evening, when the ceremony was over and people were ready to go to sleep, one of my guests was still in the middle of a very difficult ayahuasca dream. She asked Francisco and another curandero who had run the ceremony with him not to leave but they did, leaving just myself and a youngster whose mother was one of my guests, to take care of the sick guest. Sick is not the right word: She was certain she was being attacked psychically and thought she would die. I don't know if she would have but she believed it and her fear might have caused it if nothing else, so she had to be treated as if what she said was true. I didn't know what to do so started singing. I only had one or two very little ayahuasca songs, so I sang blues songs that I thought would calm her down. And after perhaps an hour, when things didn't seem to be getting better, the doctors suddenly began to talk to me. They told me to look at her and see if there were any black holes in her. If there were they told me to retrieve the light stone and run it through them. I felt silly but did: the holes closed. And the more holes I found the easier it was to spot them. They told me to blow wind on her. Not breath, but wind, and taught me how to do it so that when the air came from me it really came from way behind me and by the time it came from my mouth it had tremendous force, like a storm wind that came roaring from a far off place. And they told me to keep singing and told me to take any bad things I found on her and just open a door anywhere—it would be the door to the red room—and put the bad things in there. I did as told. Perhaps three or four hours went by before my guest began to come back to her body and I knew she'd be alright. Interestingly, when Francisco and the other curandero returned at about dawn to look in on her I challenged them on why they'd left, knowing she was in such a bad state. Francisco simply said, "It was your turn to heal her tonight. You knew what to do." Or something like that. It took me off guard. I'd never been put in that position before. I rarely am asked to heal anyone. But on occasion it does happen, and one recent event cemented Bertha Grove's warning about sicknesses as good advise. It was this past summer, in July of 2006. Because of his age, Julio's children encouraged him to move from the jungle to Iquitos last year. They were no longer living with him full time, and were afraid that if he fell no one might see him to help him for a day or more until one of them—living there only part time—would find him. But there exists several layers of shamanism in Peru—and undoubtedly elsewhere—that most of us non-locals don't see. One is the belief that the spirit allies Julio has made during his lifetime, as with any other curandero, will be passed to whomever is at his side when he dies. In that world, those sentient beings take years to acquire as genuine allies, and the chance to simply "get" more by being near a curandero when he dies is a temptation that has caused more than one curandero to kill another. I don't understand why the spirits would work with someone who has killed their friend—perhaps they don't—but still, the race and battle to acquire the allies of a powerful curandero like Julio is very real. And Julio's appearance in Iquitos was an indication to many of them that he is growing weak and will die soon. To that end, at least one but perhaps more than one, curandero began to try to weaken him further by "shooting" him with virotes—invisible darts that can do physical damage. Their use is generally reserved for brujos, curanderos who have fallen off the spiritual path of curing and onto the selfish path of power acquisition. Many curanderos go through a stage in their lives when they behave as brujos because of the allure of power—which brings with it money and goods and women and so forth. In my experience most grow out of that stage and return to a positive path, but not all of them do. Those that don't are the people available for hire to send out the evil eye, tempt women to cheat on their husbands, cause accidents and so forth. Virotes, can best be described as thorns that are sent by intention that enter the body invisibly, though they then begin to take a physical toll. In Julio's case the virotes had left him listless and weak to the point where he couldn't feed himself. One of his sons-in-law came to my room in Iquitos and told me to hurry to Julio's, that he thought Julio would die. I'd been with Julio in the jungle just two weeks earlier and so was taken completely by surprise at the news. On the way over—accompanied by a young healer friend named Aaron—Juan, Julio's son-in-law, explained that Julio had been recently attacked and hit with several virotes. I'd been called on to locate and remove them before they killed Julio. That was way over my head. Still, I had to try. When we arrived at Julio's he was lying in bed, his breathing shallow. I had him brought to the front room and began to clean him with tobacco smoke and Florida Water. He sat in a chair, hands on his knees, his face looking old and lifeless. I began to chant. Aaron lit some sandalwood and began to clean Julio with that, and took over the chanting whenever I

stopped. I tried to “see“ Julio; not look at him so much but see where the virotes were lodged. I couldn“t. We worked for an hour, after which Julio began to move his hands and said that he was tired. We left him for the day. The next day we returned and continued to chant and cleanse; after two-and-a-half hours he was perceptibly better and Aaron and I were exhausted. The third and last day was different. This time I could clearly see what looked to be bad things in Julio: In his stomach, his legs, even his neck. While Aaron chanted, I began to suck them out: each one that came loose entered my mouth like a ball of thick phlegm. I quickly spit them out, opened a door to the Red room and asked the doctors to take them from me and turn them into something good. There were probably five or six things that had to go. The one in his neck, however, came out so suddenly that it slipped down my throat: Instantly I convulsed and began to vomit violently. The vomiting was followed by choking and I thought I got rid of it—or most of it, at least. But I could feel something rotten deep inside me, something awful. I decided to work at eliminating it in my room later that day and turned my attention back to Julio. In two hours or so he was beginning to clean himself, smoking a mapacho and taking over the chanting for Aaron and I. He was strong and he was angry. He began to shout to whomever had done this to him that they would never have his genio“s, his spirits, for allies. Aaron and I were again exhausted, but Julio was better and that was what counted. But that evening and for the next two days I would periodically vomit violently. I got a fever and was sweating through several shirts a night. During the day Aaron worked on getting the “thing“ out of me, and on the third day, it came loose and I was able to get it into the Red Room. But it was a reminder that what Bertha had said was true: The sickness has a will to live. That I would be so instantly sick surprised me, but it also reinforced the idea that there are many many things I, at least, have no real understanding of. Another point I think needs making, as it frequently comes up in conversations related to the use of ayahuasca, San Pedro, Peyote—and probably with all of the Master Plant Teachers—is the question of the value of a curandero. The question that arises is whether or not a curandero—in the case of ayahuasca or San Pedro—or a Roadman—in the case of peyote—is necessary. The answer, I think, is that they“re not necessary—the plants will teach you what they want to teach you whether there is a curandero or not. But I think that the extraordinary work a good curandero can do can add whole dimensions to the experience. On a physical level, the curandero is the master preparer of the ayahuasca. He must be compared to a chef, rather than a cook. More than that, however, his interactions with the spirits of the plants he“s working with are what“s of great value. The plants must give up their chemicals to whoever puts them in a pot and boils them. That“s the chemistry of it. But the curandero, through his relationship with the sentient side of the plant, can encourage those plants to give up more than their chemical components, to give up their life-force, their essence. This is not to be underrated. Two bottles of ayahuasca may look alike, may have been cooked in identical pots with identical ingredients for an identical length of time but they are rarely the same. Imagine a battery of chefs lined up at identical stoves using identical ingredients in an identical recipe with each doing exactly the same things at the same time. You might imagine that each of the dishes will be identical, but you“d be wrong. Each will be quite different depending on the relationship each chef has to the spirits of the ingredients he or she is using. On a spiritual level, the value of a curandero or roadman is even more pronounced. He or she has generally spent years becoming intimate with the spirits of the plants. Moreover, the curandero might have several plant allies and depending on the needs of those drinking on a given day might have a variety of admixture plants they can add to the basic ayahuasca vine and leaf recipe. Julio likes to add a bit of bark from both the perpetually light and dark sides of the Lupuna Negro tree to provide easier access to the realms of light and darkness; he likes to add Catawa sometimes to burn out something negative; he might add Chiric sanango when he knows he needs to work very very deeply with someone or someone needs to visit the world of the dead. And each of those plants, and several others he might utilize, bring their individual spirits and personalities to the ceremony. Too, the curandero, with the help of his spirit allies, can keep other, curious but uninvited spirits from joining the ceremony—spirits who might not mean harm but whose presence will nonetheless interfere with the ceremony the curandero wishes to run. And running the ceremony is really what a curandero does. It might look to an outsider as if Julio is just sitting on a stool, chanting and shaking a chacapa, a leaf rattle, but he is doing much more than that. He is seeing what each person is dreaming. His icaros, songs, are sending some further out into their dreams and pulling others back down to earth at the same time. He“s healing everyone simultaneously as well, even those who don“t know they need it. He is asking his plant spirit allies to work with everyone and his allies respond. Until you“ve experienced it, that is a difficult thing to believe. One former guest of mine who has become a great friend, had this experience. It was the first time he“d had ayahuasca. I think I had six guests, four of them women. My friend Lynn was not having much of a reaction to the medicine and at one point in the ceremony, he told me the next morning, he mentally called out to Julio to show him something, give him a hint whether there was really anything going on or whether he“d taken a very expensive trip for nothing. “I had my eyes open while I was thinking that,“ he said. “And as soon as I did, Julio suddenly stood and grew to 14-foot tall and his chacras began spinning with the most fantastic lights, shooting colors all over the space and me. And then he very clearly said. “Now can I get back to the work I was doing on the women?“ “In that moment I understood something fantastic happens out in that realm—a realm that I wasn“t certain even existed until that point in time.“ Another guest who discovered the unusual ways in which a curandero works was a fellow named Lee. Lee and his wife had come to Peru seeking to learn something of Peru“s alternative healing possibilities, as his wife had a terrible illness she was keeping at bay with alternative medicines and she wanted to stay ahead of the curve. They had asked for a private tour and had asked me to assemble the best curanderos from around Peru in Iquitos. One of them was a San Pedro healer, Victor Estrada, an extraordinary man who“s been a teacher of mine for years. Victor“s own teacher was in Iquitos and he didn“t mind the trip from the mountain city of Cuzco at all. We“d arranged for a San Pedro ceremony the day after Victor arrived, with just Lee, his wife, Victor and a daughter he“d brought, and I as the participants. We all drank several cups of the still-warm, thick green San Pedro, and then Victor began to work. Unlike Julio, Victor is very hands-on his patients, and he worked on Lee“s wife for several minutes—pulling and pushing her energy,

which was visible to all with our broadened bands of vision, then turned his attention to Lee. He had Lee lie down, then selected a stone from a bag he carried. He began to run the stone over Lee's body. But it wasn't a stone any longer: It was a scalpel, and each time he moved it blood would come from the incision. It was plain to see, and something I'd heard about but never witnessed before, a psychic surgery. Victor cut Lee open, took out a mass of his insides, washed them, cut out pieces Lee no longer needed then did the same with Lee's nasal passages. Pieces of rotten flesh made a pile on the ground. Blood soaked Lee's clothes and the ground on which he lay. And then Victor replaced the good parts of what he'd removed and sewed Lee up. Lee was exhausted and stayed on the ground for hours. Victor continued to chant, but was obviously exhausted as well. The ceremony ended not long after dawn, and in the early light there was no blood on the ground, no pile of rotten meat. I asked Victor about what I'd seen and he laughed. "I wanted you to see that," he said. "It's the work the way we do it with San Pedro. We just do it on one of your other bodies, so the blood is real, but real in another reality. Here only the effects are real. Your friend was quite sick." It was only months later that Lee brought up the fact that he'd suffered from some uncomfortable or debilitating condition all of his life, but that the condition was cured that night. Now nearly 10 years later, it's never returned. A few days later, I took Lee and his wife to Julio. I refused to bring him into the city and Lee, while not thrilled, grudgingly went along on the 17 hour riverboat to get to his pueblo. Julio was glad to see me and we arranged for a ceremony the following night. It was a beautiful ceremony, and in the morning Lee came to me. "Peter, something happened last night that I don't understand and maybe you can help. You know how much work Victor did on me the other night?" I told him yes. "Well, the purpose of this trip is to find new alternatives to help keep my wife's disease in remission and so last night I determined that the ceremony would be for her, not me. So I drank, then lay down and just looked at the sky. And then I looked at Julio. And he was talking with someone sitting next to him, and they were speaking in English. And Julio suddenly says "You know, I can't work on him if he keeps his legs crossed like that." And instantly, my legs, which I hadn't realized were crossed, uncrossed themselves without me doing it. And for the rest of the ceremony I couldn't cross them again. How did that happen?" "I don't really know," I said. "I do know that there was no one physically sitting next to Julio last night, and I do know that Julio can't speak a word of English. Not on this physical plane, anyway. But on those other levels, all sorts of things happen. And uncrossing your legs with his intention would be the least of what he can do." Those sorts of healings and experiences I don't believe occur without the presence of a curandero. There are many many other elements to ayahuasca and ayahuasca healing but these, I think, are some of the most important basics.

About the Author

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