



AYAHUASCA

A NEAR-DEATH TRANSFORMATION

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A NEAR-DEATH TRANSFORMATION

Discovery Publisher

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An old Cherokee chief once told his grandson, “There is a war that rages inside us all. It is a war between two wolves. One represents all that is bad; he is anger, envy, guilt, sadness and ego. The other represents all that is good; he is joy, love, hope, truth and faith.”

The grandson asked, “Grandpa, which wolf wins?”

The chief replied, “The one you feed.”

*To my family, for their unconditional
support during my journeys.*

*To Aesha, Asil, Hernan, Ian, Rory, Scott and Yogesh,
for their beautiful friendship and invaluable advice.*

Dear Reader,

Before diving headlong into some of the adventures recounted in this book, make sure you are in excellent health, both in body and mind. Prior to participating in any shamanic activity, whether it involves ayahuasca, kambó, sananga, rapé or other shamanic practices, make sure the shamans and the organizers are aware of any medical conditions you may have.

Although the author has made every attempt to make the reader fully aware of the risks that can be encountered when participating in the activities and ceremonies described in these pages, neither the author nor the publisher takes any responsibility for any incident, accident or other adverse consequence which may result from the practice of ayahuasca and/or shamanism.

To protect the privacy of certain individuals, their names have been changed.

A Timely Coincidence

Beauty is the harmony of chance and kindness.

— Simone Weil

September 27, 2016, Dharamshala, India

I sat down next to Yogesh and closed the taxi door. Aesha was in the front, on the driver's side.

"What are you going to do next?" I asked Yogesh.

"Aesha and I are planning to go to the Amazon to take part in ayahuasca ceremonies," replied Yogesh.

"The Amazon... Ayahuasca!" I repeated involuntarily, very surprised.

My initial reaction was that this young couple did not fit my preconceived idea of ayahuasca consumers. Even though my knowledge of shamanism was very limited at that time, I had heard of this famous decoction, the fearsome "vine of the dead" also known as "the plant which opens the door to the spirit world".

We had just finished a silent yoga retreat in a Himalayan refuge two hours from Dharamshala, a small town in northern India. Apart from our first names and exchanging smiles during commu-

nal meals and the endless yoga and meditation sessions, we did not know much about each other. I am not very good at remembering names, I forget them easily. It is only once I have become close to someone that I can remember their name. However, I rarely forget a face, even if I have only seen it briefly. The same goes for first impressions. Yogesh and Aesha made a very good impression on me; they seemed a lovely couple.

I was already well into my gap year, and my time in India was coming to an end. With my tourist visa about to expire, I was keen to decide on my next destination. What my two friends had just told me opened my eyes to new possibilities. Straightening in my seat and looking at Yogesh and Aesha in turn, I said:

“Your plan is really interesting. In fact, I’ve been thinking about trying ayahuasca for some time, but I’ve never had the opportunity or it’s never the *right* time. Your plans seem... Hmm... Tell me...”

I paused. I was worried that I was going to receive a negative answer to my burning question, but I quickly continued:

“Can I join you?”

Surprised by my sudden excitement for their plans, but having promptly received agreement from Aesha, who gave a timid smile and a small nod, Yogesh threw his hands up in the air and, laughing, said:

“Sure, why not!”

During the rest of the journey to McLeod Ganj, a suburb of Dharamshala known as “the Little Lhasa” because of its large population of Tibetans and the fact that the Dalai Lama has his main

residence there, I noted down as many details as possible about the shamanic festival. Yogesh promised to let me have the personal email address of the organizer once he had access to the Internet.

In the evening, my two friends and I, along with other members of our group, dined at a charming Italian restaurant in Dharamkot, a little hill above McLeod Ganj. During the meal, we exchanged our thoughts on the yoga and meditation course that we had just finished and our discussions naturally turned to spiritual matters. It was then that Jeff, an American who had also taken part in the course, stopped suddenly mid-sentence, straightened in his chair, stared at me and, in an almost solemn voice, asked:

“Adriano, have you ever tried ayahuasca?”

This took me by surprise. We had been talking about yoga, Vedanta and other related subjects on spirituality in India. There were no indications that this topic was going to be brought up.

“No Jeff, but it’s very strange that you should mention ayahuasca... Well, a very interesting coincidence at least. Yogesh, Aesha and I were just talking about it in the taxi on the way back,” I replied, turning to look at Yogesh.

“You must know that there are no coincidences when it comes to ayahuasca!” Jeff exclaimed turning to Yogesh, who, with a knowing smile, nodded in agreement.

Once the meal was finished, I said my goodbyes to the group and went to speak to Yogesh and Aesha.

“Don’t forget to send me the email address of the festival organizer, okay?” I said.

Aesha assured me she would do so that same night and I promised I would see them a few weeks later on the frontier of the Amazon.

During the weeks that followed, I questioned myself numerous times whether I was doing the right thing. However, when I was just about to renounce the idea of attending ayahuasca ceremonies, I would come across a similar coincidence as while in India. The more it happened, the more I felt that I should not ignore them, that I should 'follow the signs'.

I did not know then that the spirits of the forest and that of ayahuasca were going to take me on the most intense, most terrifying, and yet, the most transformational experience of my life.

Spirituality and Ayahuasca

*Spirituality is the least of our worries
before it becomes our biggest regret.*

— André Frossard

After leaving India, I carried out some research into shamanism and ayahuasca. One significant thing I learned was that shamanism is neither a religion nor a philosophy, but an ancient practice which involves a first-hand experience with the universal consciousness. Through it, we renew our awareness that we are an integral part of the universe. To a large extent, the vast majority of people, particularly those living in industrialized and economically developed countries, lost this ability a long time ago.

In the lingua franca of Quechua, a Native American language spoken in Peru and Bolivia, ‘ayahuasca’ (pronounced ‘ay-ee-u-aska’ with a very soft ‘ee’) means ‘vine of the soul’ or ‘vine of the dead’. However, the term ‘ayahuasca’ has come to mean both the caapi¹ plant, a species of tropical vine found in the Amazon, and an aqueous preparation, of which it is the sole or main ingredient. Today, when we talk about ayahuasca, we generally mean the

1. Banisteriopsis caapi: this vine is found in the tropical regions of Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Venezuela and Panama and on the pacific coastline of Colombia and Ecuador.

concoction consumed during shamanic ceremonies of the same name. The most widely known of these concoctions is a normally highly concentrated preparation obtained via a one- or two-step slow-cooking process taking six to eight hours in total and starting with a mixture of pre-washed and crushed lengths of caapi vine, chacruna¹ leaves and water.

According to specialized works on shamanism, the use of ayahuasca predates the modern era by several thousands of years. However, nobody has been able to confirm this fact with certainty. All that we can say is that this practice was already widespread amongst many indigenous tribes of the Amazon basin by the time Western anthropologists discovered it in the middle of the 19th century².

In the Amazon, shamanism and ayahuasca are currently the chosen keepers of spiritual and therapeutic practices. From a medical standpoint, there are numerous reports that certain serious physical and mental illnesses, which have often been deemed incurable, have been cured through ayahuasca ceremonies. More generally, it is noted that one's vital forces are rejuvenated and the person is freed from emotional blockages. On a spiritual level, biographical accounts often relate an awakening of one's intuition, spiritual abilities and the discovery of the hidden meaning of one's inner-

1. *Psychotria viridis*: a perennial plant of the Rubiaceae family.

2. The first reports of the psychoactive effects of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* plant in Western scientific publications date back to 1851, from Peru. By the middle of the 1850s, numerous reports about its uses had been published in the Occident. In 1922–1923, a film showing an ayahuasca ceremony was screened at the annual conference for the American Pharmaceutical Association. By the end of the 20th century, ayahuasca shamanic ceremonies had become so popular that they gave rise to 'ayahuasca tourism'.

most self. As a matter of fact, once blockages have been removed, one becomes again in harmony with the higher self—the soul—as well as the universe.

The ayahuasca preparation contains DMT¹, a powerful psychotropic substance which, when consumed, can profoundly alter one's consciousness. Scientists have been fascinated by DMT for many years. Through their research, they have discovered that this molecule is present everywhere in nature; in plants, in animals, and even in the human body. In humans, DMT is naturally produced by the pineal gland, a tiny pine cone-shaped organ located between the two hemispheres of the brain. The precise function of this gland is not yet fully understood. Scientists have observed that it has an impact on sleep cycles, regulates sexual development, and is extremely sensitive to waves. Yet, Descartes had already defined it as 'the seat of the soul' and many cultures throughout history have called this gland the 'third eye'. According to Hindu, Tibetan, Egyptian and many other beliefs, it facilitates a connection with the afterlife, with the world of the spirits and the dead. In his writings, the famous Aldous Huxley states that DMT is 'the key which opens the door to the spirit world'. Certain studies carried out today go so far as to connect the experience of imminent death to the production of DMT by the pineal gland.

Huxley likened the brain to a receptor. When functioning normally, it allows us to deal with and operate in what we would call 'the real world'². Any alteration to this receptor risks changing the perception of reality and consciousness. The consumption of a psy-

1. Dimethyltryptamine (N,N-Dimethyltryptamine) or DMT.

2. Or 'Physical Matter Reality—PMR' as called by Robert Monroe.

choactive substance, or the advanced practice of disciplines such as meditation, expands the field of perception, allowing interaction with other realities, or dimensions. In shamanism, these interactions are called ‘shamanic journeys’. Some people report journeys into the collective unconsciousness, others describe this process as a means of communicating with spirits or subtler worlds. These interactions, or journeys, are different for everyone; some have visual experiences, others feel energies around them and yet others obtain direct knowledge. Huxley also states that the power—or increase—of perception grows with experience.

Even though ayahuasca is mainly prepared with two plants, the caapi vine and chacruna leaves, only the chacruna leaves contain DMT. However, when the leaves are consumed on their own, they have a somewhat negligible psychedelic effect¹. It is the caapi vine that allows the psychedelic substance to be fully absorbed by the brain.

Given that there are more than 80,000² plants in the Amazonian forest, of which about 10,000 are vines, and that caapi and chacruna have morphologically absolutely nothing in common, how did the indigenous Amazonian people discover this specific ayahuasca formula? Anthropologists and scientists believe that it was discovered by trial and error. Statistically, however, the probability of this is about one in several billion. When shamans are asked this question, their response is invariably the same: “The spirits of the forest guided our ancestors.”

1. The absorption of DMT is impeded by the enzyme monoamine oxidase. The caapi vine contains monoamine oxidase inhibitors which are indispensable for the total absorption of the psychedelic substance by our brains.

2. Between 40,000 and 110,000 depending on the source.



I am not a religious person per se. Despite the utmost respect for the life and works of those who established major philosophies and religions, I believe that nowadays, most of the organized religions only retain vestiges of their true meaning. The latter has been lost, or grossly distorted at best. That said, I am not an atheist either. Even though I do not have any proof, I believe that there is a divine intelligence which governs our universe, controlling each stage of our evolution. As can be seen by the innumerable works on this topic that fill our bookstores and libraries, I am not the only one to hold such convictions.

To assert that evolution happens exclusively via natural selection, as per the British naturalist Charles Darwin¹, or that it is simply the result of sheer coincidence seems absurd to me. The British astrophysicist, Fred Hoyle², declared that “The chance that higher life forms might have emerged in this way is comparable to the chance that a tornado sweeping through a junkyard might assemble a Boeing 747 from the materials therein”³. Anyone who has even briefly studied the human anatomy cannot help but be filled with awe by its countless mysteries. Two questions naturally arise: what is the intelligence responsible for this extraordinary creation? and,

1. Charles Darwin (1809—1882) and his famous work, *The Origin of Species* (or more completely, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*).

2. Sir Fred Hoyle FRS was a British astronomer who formulated the theory of stellar nucleosynthesis.

3. According to Fred Hoyle’s analysis, the probability of cellular life’s arising from non-living matter (abiogenesis) was about one-in-10^{40,000}.

where did it come from? Even without delving into realms such as human thought and the human soul but confining my questioning strictly to the existence of the physical body, I find myself in a dilemma. Logically, if we are not the source of its creation, an intelligence superior to our own must therefore be. If we are the creator, as Darwin's theory indirectly asserts, shouldn't we possess total and complete control over our each muscle, organ and cell as well as our evolution? As we are incapable of this to a very large extent, is it not logical to come to the same conclusion that there is a superior intelligence behind our creation which steers our evolution? The answer seems obvious to me.

If we look at the human race throughout history, it is indisputable that it is constantly evolving. Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev¹, a modern-day Indian sage, declared that one of the intrinsic characteristics of our species is its fundamental need to expand. "Man constantly wants to become more than he is," says the Indian guru. When Man expresses this essential need by frantically pursuing material possessions or by satisfying his physical senses, however, he quietly slips into a deep sleep whereby he forgets who he really is, which is above all a being endowed with a vast consciousness and capable of exploits that we today call 'myths'. Should he stubbornly hold on to his egotistical goals, the relentless machinery that orchestrates his evolution reminds him that it has other plans in store for him. If he continues to be obstinate, the light coming from his eyes loses its intensity, he become embittered, faces chronic depression, frequently falls ill and deteriorates until death frees him from his

1. Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev (1957—) commonly known as Sadhguru, is a guru and Indian mystic, founder of the Isha Foundation, a not-for-profit yoga and spirituality organization.

agony and gives him the freedom that his soul clamors for with repressed sobs. This phenomenon is described far more captivantly by Bernard Enginger¹ in *Sri Aurobindo or the Adventure of Consciousness* and his subsequent works.

True happiness seems to occur and last when it is nurtured by spiritual exploration. In other words, true happiness is only achievable through self-realization, that is, when we are in tune with who we really are, with our soul. Conversely, as mentioned above, suffering seems to be proportional to how far we find ourselves from this quest.

Looking at the countless creations and accomplishments that humans have left behind them over the centuries, it is clear that the path to creativity, realization, or self-realization, is not the same for everyone. It seems that there is no one formula, and everyone must find their own way. Some people only need a few years of yoga practice, meditation, recital of mantras, praying or regularly attending a temple to change their conscience for self-realization to occur. For many though, the task is more challenging, even laborious in some cases.

The late great Swami Vivekananda² believed that there are four different temperaments, and that each one has its own path to self-realization. According to the swami, someone who is eager to take action should follow the path of action³, that is, Karma Yoga.

1. Bernard Enginger (1923–2007) also known as Satprem, a name given to him by his mentor, the Indian sage Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950).

2. Swami Vivekananda (1863 – 1902) was an Indian Hindu monk, a chief disciple of the 19th-century Indian mystic Ramakrishna.

3. Also called the path of abnegation in certain texts.

The person who is filled with unconditional love for everyone and everything should follow the path of devotion, Bhakti Yoga. An intellectual person should follow the path of knowledge, Jnana Yoga. And finally, a meditative or contemplative person should follow the path of conquering one's inner self—or inner energies, Raja Yoga¹. Here, the word 'yoga' is used in the sense of union—the union between the individual consciousness and the universal consciousness—and not in the manner that we incorrectly use it today in the West, thereby limiting it exclusively to the physical exercises of this age-old practice.

Personally, not having obtained satisfying enough results from disciplines such as physical yoga exercises, meditation, martial arts, praying or selfless actions—which are more and more difficult to achieve in our materialistic societies, it seems that my path is that of knowledge. In fact, I have always been passionate about anything to do with history, nature and the evolution of humankind and his place in the universe. I have spent countless hours understanding and contemplating the connections between certain aspects of plants, animals, humans and the stars. However, even if it is a very valuable too, intellectual analysis has its limit in unravelling the innumerable mysteries of life. I have many questions but few answers. What is consciousness? What is life? What is their real purpose? Who created us? As a collective soul, have we unconsciously created this seemingly merciless world or have we been coerced into it by unscrupulous demons? Why does the spiritual path often only reveal itself in times of suffering? Why is surrendering to pleasures so natural when the spiritual path is often lined with thorns? Why

1. Also known as Kriya Yoga.

do we, for the most part, feel abandoned and disconnected? Why is there such a stubborn silence from our Creator?

I admire great people such as Sri Ramakrishna¹, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo², Paramahansa Yogananda³ and many other sages who, through love, willpower and self-denial, were able to reach the heights of intuition. These beautiful souls were not ravaged by the gangrene that is all-powerful reason, which is today widespread in our schools and universities, as well as in our most sacred institutions. How can we escape the paralyzing, ruthless and cold grip that the intellect has on us and let the soul express itself? How can we, only for a moment, reach out to the part of us that is charitable, noble and immortal? Does the practice of shamanism with ayahuasca not deserve its place in this process?



Up to this point of my life, I had never consumed any psychedelic substance. On the one hand, having strong analytical skills and being able to develop and express my thoughts clearly were

1. Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836 – 1886) was an Indian mystic and yogi during the 19th century.

2. Sri Aurobindo (1872 – 1950) was an Indian philosopher, yogi, guru, poet, and nationalist. He joined the Indian movement for independence from British rule, for a while was one of its influential leaders and then became a spiritual reformer, introducing his visions on human progress and spiritual evolution.

3. Paramahansa Yogananda (1893 – 1952) was an Indian yogi and guru who introduced millions of Indians and westerners to the teachings of meditation and Kriya Yoga through his organization Yogoda Satsanga Society of India and Self-Realization Fellowship. His book, *Autobiography of a Yogi* remains a spiritual masterpiece and was included in the 100 best spiritual books of the 20th century.

the only tools I believed would allow me to progress in life. On the other hand, I was conscious of the legal ramifications of such practice in most countries. However, I had been feeling differently about ayahuasca and DMT for some time. The works¹ that I had read on the topic had taught me that similar substances were used by ancient societies in order to obtain very high levels of human consciousness.

While the idea of trying DMT in the near future had been in my thoughts for some time, I nevertheless had been waiting for the right moment. It seemed to me that such practice needed to be done with the sole intention to go beyond the boundaries of the intellect. Indulging in it for recreational purposes was out of the question. Ideally, I would have liked to be under the supervision of doctors or academics as part of a scientific or university study as described by Rick Strassman in his book *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, but this seemed very unlikely.

Being able to take part in ayahuasca ceremonies in the Amazon jungle with Yogesh and Aesha under the direction and protection of shamans seemed too good an opportunity to miss.

1. Particularly the excellent book by Rick Strassman (1952—) *DMT, The Spirit Molecule*, as well as the book by Graham Hancock (1950—) *Supernatural: Meeting with the Ancient Teachers of Mankind*, and inevitably, the essential work of Aldous Huxley (1894—1963) *The Doors of Perception*.

On the Amazon River

*We can have in life but one great experience at best,
and the secret of life is to reproduce
that experience as often as possible.*

—Oscar Wilde

November 3, 2016, Brasília, Brazil

At the counter of one the small shops at Brasília Airport, in the capital of Brazil, I felt someone put their hand on my shoulder.

“Hi, Adriano!”

That voice was familiar. I turned my head, it was Yogesh. He greeted me with a friendly hug and a broad smile, looking joyful. Very surprised to see him earlier than I had planned, I exclaimed:

“Yogesh! You, here! I can’t believe that we are taking the same plane!”

“I know, it’s incredible!”

“I’m very happy to see you here. Is Aesha with you?”

“Yes, she’s sitting over there, with the suitcases.”

I had not seen Yogesh or Aesha since the conversation in the little Italian restaurant in Dharamkot, a few weeks earlier. They had ex-

tended their stay at the intensive yoga retreat by three weeks, during which they were not allowed to access the Internet or their mobile phones. It was a great surprise to meet at this airport, waiting for the same plane to Rio Branco. This coincidence was going to be a source of cheerfulness between us during hard times to come.

I liked this couple a lot. Yogesh is from New Delhi, but he grew up in Goa, a small coastal town in Western India. Son of the owner of a very beautiful hotel and restaurant on the seaside, between his yoga and meditation retreats, Yogesh spends most of his time there working as the manager and excellent pizzaiolo. He is artistic, enjoys playing the guitar and, along with Aesha, often sings Hindu songs. He is always happy, even in difficult times. Our upcoming discussions will often be a source of joy and enthusiasm. Aesha was born in Kolkata, the largest city in East India and capital of West Bengal. She teaches mathematics at an elementary school in the center of the city. She travels to Goa and stay with Yogesh during school holidays. Like Yogesh, she always smiles. She is a calm and intuitive person. Her advice and attention will be very comforting to me during tough times in the jungle. Yogesh and Aesha found themselves perfectly. They show great kindness and inexhaustible patience.

Once we arrived in Rio Branco, the capital of the state of Acre, in North West Brazil, we met the other participants. In total, we were thirty-four people taking part in the shamanic festival. Veronica, an eighteen-year-old British girl, was the youngest of the group. William, a fifty-two-year-old, long-haired, Chinese-born New Yorker who looked like a Mexican gangster, was the oldest. I felt very comfortable amongst this eclectic and international group.

When some of them who took part in the festival the previous years saw each other, they hugged for a long time with a big grin on their face and cries of delight.

This was the third consecutive festival since its creation. Diego, a Brazilian man from Tarauacá, a small town in the state of Acre, was the creator. People related that a few years prior, after attending an ayahuasca ceremony in the village we were going to stay in, he had been so overwhelmed that he decided shortly thereafter to leave the comfort of Rio de Janeiro, where he owned a small guesthouse, to live part-time in the Amazon jungle. There, he created the first ayahuasca festival and has since taken it upon himself to promote it around the world. He then married the village chief shaman's beautiful daughter. When I met the charming couple for the first time, in Rio Branco, they had just had a very beautiful daughter.

In the evening, we congregated in a room next to the restaurant to introduce ourselves. When my turn came, I shared the fact that I had no experience in shamanism, and even less with ayahuasca. The fits of laughter as well as the comments from the other participants told me very clearly that I was either insane or unaware of the risks of starting my shamanic learning with such intense ceremonies, especially in the depths of the Amazon jungle. Perhaps they were right, but that did not stop me from taking part in their good spirits.

Early the next morning, we took the bus to Tarauacá, the final step before boarding on the Amazon River. The long road on the endless and battered dirt track was strenuous. After an eleven-hour journey, we finally reached our destination. We spent the night in a two-story hotel with two or three people per room.



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preview. We sincerely hope you
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A NEAR-DEATH TRANSFORMATION

Yogesh and Aesha, two friends that I met in a meditation silent retreat in India, have planned to go to the Amazon jungle to partake in ayahuasca ceremonies.

Although my knowledge of shamanism is still rudimentary, I have heard of ayahuasca, the famous “vine of the dead,” a plant-based concoction that radically alters the state of consciousness, also known as “the plant which opens the door to the spirit world.”

Seeking spiritual growth, I decide to accompany my friends. I am not aware, however, that the spirits of the forest and that of ayahuasca were going to take me on the most intense, most terrifying, and yet, the most transformational experience of my life.

This is the story of a journey to self-discovery with shamanism and ayahuasca, a journey to the Heart.



never been before • never seen before

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