

# Ayahuasca and Cancer: A Postscript

AFTER THE PUBLICATION OF MY ARTICLE

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"Ayahuasca and Cancer: One Man's Experience,"  
in the *MAPS Bulletin* (VIII(3), 1998), I received

several letters, e-mails and telephone calls from interested persons, some

with cancer and others who are healthy but curious. The response took me by  
surprise, and pushed me to further thoughts about what I believe is happen-

ing with me, and the role of ayahuasca.

Before sharing these thoughts with *MAPS Bulletin* readers, I need to state

very clearly that I am not proposing ayahuasca as a miracle cure for cancer or  
anything else. I am simply relating my own story and my sense of what is

happening with me. At this point of our experience and knowledge, my story  
is best taken as another anecdote in the growing body of lore of the vine.

First off, let me say that I am still healthy and that the metastasized cancer

appears to be in complete remission. The original diagnosis was in September  
1996. As I approach my seventieth year, I can say that I have never felt better,

aside from a couple of aching joints here and there, reminders of my rough

and tumble days. People frequently comment on how healthy I look and ask

what I am doing to look that way.

To some of these people I explain that I have changed my diet (vegetar-

ian), exercise regularly, and have all but stopped drinking alcoholic and

caffeinated beverages, and that seems to satisfy them. To others who I think

can understand, I attribute my health to the vine. I presume that most readers

of *MAPS* fall into the second category, but probably would like an explana-

tion of how it works. Frankly, so would I. Lacking a concrete explanation, I

will try to provide my insights, as provided by the vine as well as discussions

I've had with fellow travelers here and there.

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Several who have written about ayahuasca (notably Mabit, Grove and Vega<sup>1</sup>) talk about the three domains in which the vine appears to work: psychological, spiritual and organic. My experience confirms this notion, although the distinction between psychological and spiritual is not as clearly defined for me as that between spiritual and organic. Perhaps that is because of my unique approach to the experience, initiated by me in the quest for a restoration of health. Nevertheless, the psychological and spiritual dimensions have played an important, albeit a more subtle role in my recovery.

I will briefly touch on each of these three areas as I experienced them during the past two years, but with primary focus on the organic domain. This is not to minimize the importance of the other two areas, which no doubt play important roles in my well-being.

#### Psychological changes

The most profound psychological change was noted during my first experience when I encountered death in the form of a soft, deep, dark void. The clear message was that death is always present, but nothing to be feared. It is there along with all the other forces and elements of nature, nothing exceptional. Death happens. Stating these obvious facts in words sounds trite. But when the vine reveals such things, the impact is far more profound. Going into my first session the thought of imminent death, as predicted by my physician and the data, was a major concern. The vine put that to rest straight away.

As for other psychological impacts, I would include the lesson on the relative importance of things in life. One vivid example came during my fourth or fifth session when I saw a gallery of assorted clocks and watches, dozens if not hundreds of them, moving as though in a shooting gallery, with the minute and hour hands going rapidly in a counter-clockwise direction. I interpreted this as a commentary on my preoccupation with time and the fear of running out of it before I have accomplished my goals.

The vine seemed to be saying, "OK, if that bothers you, let's make time run backwards." The revelation to me was that the notion of time is something that humans view as a commodity to be measured, valued, calculated, saved, wasted, sold, etc., while in ayahuasca reality none of those things matter. Like death, time is always present. Living each day fully means much more than achievement.

Others, including some drug addicts, have reported psychological impacts that have resulted from ingestion of

the vine, such as letting go of the ego while allowing light to illuminate the dark corners of the psyche and confronting the demon within. Some have reported this as a difficult experience. Although I have not had this type of psychic encounter, I think I understand the process. There is no place for ego or control when interacting with ayahuasca. There are no dark corners in which demons can hide from the probing of the vine.

#### The spiritual realm

The spiritual aspects of my experiences with ayahuasca are even more difficult to describe and define. Not having been a spiritual type since my adolescent disillusionment with Christianity, I did not have any expectations. My mission was the restoration of my physical health, which I naively believed to exist independently of the spiritual me. Ayahuasca persuaded me that I was wrong. How did this come to pass?

During ayahuasca-induced visions, I see and hear some astonishing things that have changed my perceptions and understanding of the forces at work in my universe. Plants morphed into animals, and vice-versa. Waves of varicolored lights separated into twisting, undulating ribbons of energy, at times resembling serpentine creatures, switching back and forth from plant to animal form, all the while emitting sounds that I can only describe as a rapid sequence of high-pitched chirps, a bit like the sounds made by dolphins but in a different tone. In the dim shadows of the forest at night, the surrounding plants became robustly alive, gently pulsating and moving toward me as though to join together. While there was nothing that suggested a singular deity, there was an unmistakable presence of a force that permeated the entire experience, linking my body with my inner self, and with the rest of my surroundings: others in the group, the plants, the air, the stars and beyond.

Once I tried to follow the upward spiraling ribbons of light to see how far they would lead me into the infinite darkness. I soared upward, as though riding a comet's tail, until the ribbons split off, forming arcs which veered off in a trajectory that would bring them back to begin the cycle again. I began to see this as the energy force that unites everything, the life force, or spirit, of the living and the dead, past, present and future.

It is on the organic level, however, that my experience has been easier to perceive and define for myself. Perhaps this is because I began my relationship with the plant for

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**The organic level**

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Quite clearly, small groups of my cells had all bunched up together, as though huddling for warmth.

or from fear. Why they had done this is described as a case of cellular disorientation, cells that had gotten out of line, not caused by some invasive external bacterium but something from within.

Equally unscientific is my view of what I needed to correct this cellular deformity and prevent its recurrence. I can only describe that need as a realignment of the cells and a correction of the electro-chemical communication system that links them together through the complex and poorly understood functions of DNA, the fundamental communication system of all living organisms.

I can't exactly explain how I have come to this conclusion. I have no background in science, and am only beginning to learn the fundamentals of the neurotransmitter systems, pre-basic chemistry and the entheogenic literature. My little learning could prove to be a dangerous thing, as Alexander Pope once said. Nonetheless, I have formulated rudimentary hypotheses which I will attempt to explain.

What ayahuasca does organically is to restore order and put everything into realignment. It polishes rough edges, illuminates dark corners, hones the senses, and, most importantly, ferrets out all physical (as well as psychic) detritus and purges it. One might compare it with fine-tuning an engine and changing the oil. That is basically how I see ayahuasca acting on me as it teaches my cells how not to get out of whack again.

**Plants as teachers**

The idea of a plant as teacher is as old as ayahuasca itself. Most westerners, and scientists in particular, find this concept preposterous because it suggests that the plant is intelligent, has a spirit, and can communicate. I believe that this concept needs to be taken seriously. If, as has been suggested by Narby<sup>2</sup> and others, the DNA is the communication system of cells, then it is not far fetched to suggest

that the DNA of the plant is talking to ours after it enters our electro-chemical system, teaching them about balance and alignment. In doing this, the plant serves to restore the symmetry that produces health and well being.

I do not believe that ayahuasca contains chemicals that destroy cancer cells like the chemotherapies do. That is not the way it works. Rather, ayahuasca serves to restore the normal, healthy alignment of cells while it seeks out and purges the aberrant ones that it finds while making its way throughout the body.

Let me describe the experiences that have led me to this conclusion.

**An ayahuasca session**

Beginning maybe ten or fifteen minutes after ingestion, I begin to feel a force flickering throughout my body, growing in intensity to a ripple. These sensations are coupled with points of light flashing intermittently as the energy force makes its rounds throughout my body. They remind me of the little points of light that one sees in the optometrist's office when taking the test for peripheral vision (Visual Field Analyzer). As the minutes pass, this rippling sensation gets stronger, feeling almost like I have developed an internal vibrator sending out waves of energy. It feels like the Northern Lights surging in successive waves through-

out my body.

In my case, this stage of the experience continues for one to two hours pretty much unchanged before I begin to have any visions, which is considered a very long onset period. What seems to be happening is that the vine is doing its organic work on me. It is exploring every nook and cranny of my entire system, racing around to ensure that everything is in order. Any disorder is corrected, and all of the garbage is swept up to be carried to my visceral dumpster for eventual purging. For me, perhaps because I am looking for organic cleansing, this phase lasts longer than for most other people. With someone like myself who has had metastatic cancer, there may be a lot of cleaning up to do.

When the visions finally begin, they seem to confirm my sensations. Among the first things I see are the curling, spiraling, intertwining, self-propelled ribbons of varicolored transparent light, alternately taking on features of serpents and plants. Sometimes they appear to be just ribbons of light. Inside each of them there is a black double-helix skeleton that seems to propel it. The resemblance to drawings I have seen of DNA is stunning. As the intensity and speed of the visions increase, the ribbons seem to be welling up from the deepest parts of my gut and the furthest reaches of my

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limbs, climbing, soaring and bursting into brilliant showers of light, like enormous skyrockets. From time to time I both feel and see a powerful upwelling of a brilliant gold mass of energy, coming from deep within me, climaxing in an orgasmic burst into infinity. With such surges of light I feel the internal cleansing, as though by some sort of cosmic Roto-Rooter.

I interpret these visions (among many others) as manifestations of what the plant is doing on the organic level. Once inside me, the plant begins doing its work, looking for dark corners to illuminate and malformations to correct, communicating from its cells to mine through the chemical chain provided by our respective DNA. In plain words, the DNA of the vine is talking to mine. The resemblance of these visionary forms to DNA is not from my imagination. I saw them long before I ever read Narby or made the connection with DNA, and was struck by their consistent reoccurrence during every ayahuasca experience. If one could see DNA in full action it would probably look much like what I have tried to describe.

**The importance of the purge**

Perhaps the most important aspect of the work on the organic level is the purge. As with most others, ayahuasca makes me vomit. Unlike others, however, I generally don't vomit until the visions have faded, maybe four or more hours after ingestion. Again, I interpret the late vomit similarly to the way I interpret the late onset of vision. The vine needs more time with me to do the cleanup work, gathering the detritus and bringing it to the trash bin. When the cleanup job is done, the vine presses the vomit button and the garbage gets dumped. On two occasions I have experienced slight diarrhea, the other type of purging that *ayahuasqueros* report.

I cannot overstate the importance of the purge. This is the vine's way of eliminating physical as well as psychic toxins that don't belong inside a healthy body or mind. The cleansing effect is manifest, both immediately and for subsequent days or even weeks. Although the act itself is not pleasant, the lingering effects make it all worth while. It strikes me as a rite of purification.

**But how does it work?**

To accept my interpretation of how ayahuasca works requires a suspension of all previously held beliefs about the differences between the plant and animal worlds. It requires acceptance of the idea that plants can communicate, not only among themselves but with humans as well.

We must accept the notion that, as our group leader once put it, "the plant knows what it is doing." These are not easy concepts for westerners to understand or accept. Yet, this is how I, a life-long skeptic and pragmatist, see the plant doing its work. And it has undeniably worked well for me.

Could this be pure fantasy on my part? Could it be that I have constructed from my imagination an account in an effort to explain my experiences? I don't think so. I have attempted to provide an accurate description of my experiences. And I am still convinced that my affair with the vine is largely responsible for my current state of good health.

My experience with ayahuasca and cancer is not unique. I keep learning of other such experiences among people from different parts of the world. Some of these have been reported in the literature, others by word of mouth. There are too many such reports to dismiss them as merely anecdotal. The *curanderos* of the Amazon have been using ayahuasca for healing purposes for centuries, during which they obviously saw concrete results, not necessarily for cancer but for a host of other diseases. As with other practitioners of folk medicine, they don't pursue modalities of treatment that don't work.

We come to the question: Does ayahuasca really work in treating disease as I and others have claimed? A considerable amount of anecdotal evidence suggests that it does. However, if we westerners (myself excluded), locked into our analytic mind-set, are to believe, we need to see controlled studies on humans with carefully measured data which could be studied and evaluated in a scientific protocol. Such a study should not be difficult to conduct if the obstacles of prohibition can be overcome. One way to do this is to conduct the study in a less repressive country. The other approach is to take on the DEA and defy them to prohibit scientific inquiry the world of entheogenic plants.

It is my fervent hope that such studies will move forward in the near future. There is much to be learned from plants if only we can learn how to tune in. •

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1 Takiwasi: The Use of Amazonian Shamanism to Rehabilitate Drug Addicts," Jaques Mabit, Rosa Grove and Joaquin Vega, in *Yearbook of Cross-Cultural Medicine and Psychotherapy*, (1995), ed. By Michael Winkelman and Walter Andritzky.

2 Narby, Jeremy (1998) *The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge*, New York, Penguin Putnam, Inc.