

Buddhahuasca: A Personal Narrative



David Ledebor
DLedebor@yahoo.com

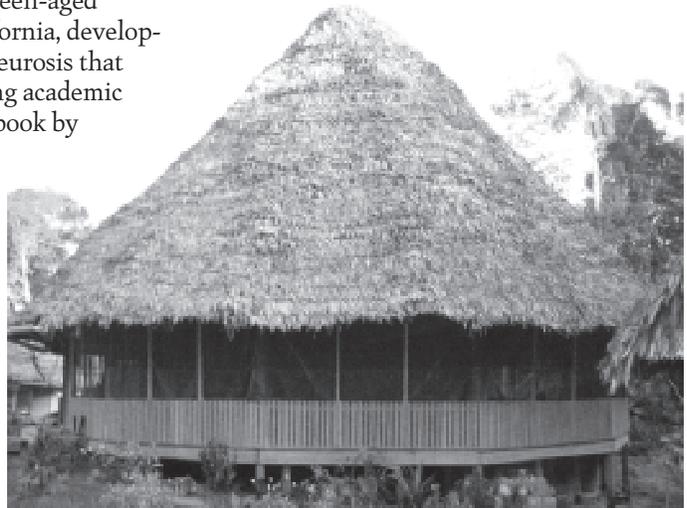
I'M SITTING in a round *maloca* ceremonial building at dusk in the jungle near Iquitos, Peru. I look up and see the interwoven tree limbs that hold the steeply angled roof. And I see the palm leaves woven tightly to the rafters, shielding us from the rain that comes so often here. It's dusk and it's a ceremony night. We'll be drinking the visionary medicine of the upper Amazon, *ayahuasca*. Also known as *la purga* ("the purge"), for the concrete way it removes illness, obstacles or blockages from the participants. Up and out; or down and out, or both up and down and out. And then it fills them with good energies and healing.

I'M HERE EARLY in the maloca to get ready and the best way I know is to meditate. So I sit and expel the stale breath, first from one nostril and then the other and then both. And I firm up the cushion underneath me and straighten my back. I recall the reason I'm practicing—to cast my net wide and include the benefit of all beings in the why and wherefore. I include the birds whose evensong I hear, the trees and plants in the forest that surrounds us, and the 20 or so people in the camp washing up and resting in hammocks and going about their business as the darkness grows from shadows under logs to take over the sky.

Such a strange and wonderful business, this modern life. There I was, minding my own tangled teen-aged business in suburban California, developing a beautiful bundle of neurosis that would lead to some winding academic career, when I read a thin book by Alan Watts. And he opened a whole world of *buddhadharma* to me. Suffering and the cause of suffering all laid out. A path to follow. Something to do and practice rather than a faith to believe or an existential absurdity to envelope with cigarette smoke and pain. So I

signed up and there followed 20 plus years of retreat and study, prostrations and chanting in Asian languages. American name, Korean name, Tibetan name—short hair, no hair, long hair. And in a steady ebb and flow an increase in clarity and compassion and gradually less pain and suffering. Even some insight.

But all that time something was gnawing at my heart, some ghost at the banquet rattling his bones. Deep depression. I started to doubt inside. Either I wasn't doing the practice correctly or deeply enough or the dharma wasn't meant to address this kind of thing. A friend used the metaphor of a broken bone with me. If I broke my leg would I meditate or go to a doctor and have it set? In



the West, we have therapy, but somehow I was never a believer in the talking cure. I tried other things: bio-energetic therapy, hypnosis, acupuncture, holotropic breathwork. The last led me to someone who practiced LSD psychotherapy, which went deeper, but that black dog kept following me.

A friend told me about the healing plants of the Amazon, and sat for me one night as I took an extract of one. It was dark and powerful and the mother of death came to me shaking her rattle. Then I went to a ceremony led by a group of healers from the Amazon. And my body told me this is good medicine for me. And my heart says, "yes." There followed ten years where ayahuasca ceremonies have alternated with meditation retreats and daily practice. Dharma chants met the *icaros* (ayahuasca healing songs) and *hinos* (hymns) of Amazonia. And the spirit of the plants became a teacher both like and unlike my Zen Master and Vajra Master had been. Alike in the pointing out of the Truth and my path to follow; unlike in that I drink her and she comes to teach and be inside of me.

Over the years I have experienced a coming together, like two rivers flowing together. The shamanic path has healed me deep in my heart reconstituted and reseeded my soul in a way that allows me to rest far deeper in the essence of awareness both on the cushion and off. And the dharma helps me to sit in ceremony with more awareness and openness and perception. The teachings on *shunyata* (emptiness) also help me to see the visions that are central to experiences with plant teachers in both their relative and absolute aspects. On the one hand, powerful healing messages from the world of spirit, and, on the other, *nyam*, a meditative experience.

One evening the spirit of ayahuasca came to me, and just like my dharma teachers have done so many times, she gave me a job. I should connect my Buddhist path and *sangha* (Buddhist community) with the shamanic path and its community. Not just haphazardly but formally and not just for myself but for others as well. It's not really a message I wanted to hear. For years I've been studiously underachieving and it had

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Interwoven tree limbs hold the steeply angled roof of the maloca, where ayahuasca ceremonies take place near Iquitos, Peru.

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There will be a workshop
to explore this topic called
Meeting at the River
next Feb 12–20 at the
Blue Morpho Shamanic Center
near Iquitos, Peru.
For more information see
[www.tworiverssangha.org/
workshop.html](http://www.tworiverssangha.org/workshop.html)

become a comfortable little nest. But she was quite insistent as I sat there in the dark and so I agreed. I could see her point. Despite their different origins and energies these two currents support and complement each other beautifully, in my experience. So here I am meditating and doing yoga in the maloca getting ready to drink ayahuasca tonight.

I finish my session, dedicate the merit and lie down on the wide wooden planks of the floor, looking up and contemplating the view from here.

I'm at the Blue Morpho Shamanic Center in the Peruvian Amazon. I've come here to apprentice with two maestros, Alberto Torres Davila and Hamilton Souther. I'll be here for two months of training and then head home for a month and a half before coming back to the jungle and beginning the cycle again. While I'm up north I'll be attending retreat with one of my Tibetan Buddhist teachers and my yoga teacher, weaving this cross-cultural tapestry on the loom of my own experience. I don't know for sure what the results of all this effort will be but I do know the benefits of the cross-fertilizations that I've experienced so far on this path.

I know that the deep emotional healing I've received in ayahuasca ceremonies has allowed me to deepen my dharma practice and has helped me to apply Buddhist meditative practice in my daily life in a way that has led to greater happiness and effectiveness. The medicine spirits have given my body powerful energetic cleansings in my channels and chakras and even released Reichian-style body armoring in my chest and abdomen. Ayahuasca has manifested my ordinary deluded mind for me, showing clearly how it creates my own personal Samsara with all the attendant sufferings. Visionary experiences as other people, beings, or even animals have opened me to more empathy and compassion for others. And often at the end of a ceremony, after the healing and purging have resolved themselves I've entered into deep states of still, limpid, luminescent awareness. Just clear, open panoramic space.

And I also know that the dharma practice, with its wide, clear awareness, has helped me navigate shamanic space

more easily. Using the witness consciousness I've been more available for whatever type of healing or spiritual experience arises in ceremony, even when they've been difficult or painful. My yoga and chi-gung practices have helped my energy body be ready to receive the sometimes overwhelming amounts of energy that ayahuasca can bring. And of course both the meditative and yogic practices help to unpack and tease out the threads of what is a very compact burst of healing and insight that arrives in one night of ayahuasca. They bring it from the realm of "I had this amazing experience" to a living part of my daily life. Countless times I've called on my teachers and lineage, my heart *Bodhisattavas* and *Yidam*, to aid and guide me when the medicine is working strongly. The rivers of love that have sometimes flowed through me in the night have been well met by a heart that has cultivated *metta* ("loving kindness") and *tonglen* ("give and take") practice, however incompletely. And the Dharma teachings on cause and effect, the Bodhisattva way and the essence of mind, have been first and last the best container I could want from which to drink the healing gift of the forest.

A famous scholar once said that the great cultural work of our time would be the meeting of Buddhism from the East and Christianity from the West. Not being a Christian, I don't really have much of a part in that work. For me, as a person born in the Americas, the work is much more about the meeting of the dharma with the "native way" of these lands. I feel that only through a humble and sincere apprenticeship with the first people can we evolve a truly native practice of Buddha's teachings. They have a lot of healing and a lot to teach. And we as dharma practitioners don't come empty handed. There is much we too have to share as we sit in circle together. The times are certainly calling us to find new ways to heal ourselves and wake up. Not just for ourselves, but for our societies and for earth herself. Perhaps we all need each other. Besides, trading medicine should be fun. And it will be quite an adventure to see just what comes of it all.

As my Zen Master used to say,
"Why not?" •