

Giving up the Green Bitch: Reflections on Cannabis, Ayahuasca and the mystery of plant teachers

By Graham Hancock

I have some personal stuff to share here and I intend to do so with complete openness in the hope that my experiences will prove helpful to some, thought-provoking to others, and might stir up discussion around issues of consciousness and cognitive liberty that are often neglected in our society.

I'll soon be on my way to Brazil for what has become pretty much an annual pilgrimage to drink the visionary brew known as Ayahuasca, the "Vine of Souls", sacred amongst shamanistic cultures of the Amazon for thousands of years.

I'm not doing this for fun, or for recreation. Drinking Ayahuasca is an ordeal. It is, for a start, amongst the most horrible tastes and smells on the planet – a mixture of foot-rot, raw sewage, battery acid, sulfur and just a hint of chocolate. Within about 45 minutes of drinking it you frequently begin to suffer bouts of severe nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. It is not for nothing that it is also known as "the purge" in the Amazon! And then, alongside the light and joy and valuable life lessons that are often part of Ayahuasca journeys, there are the sometimes terrifying psychic challenges including visionary encounters with seemingly malevolent entities in convincingly freestanding parallel realms that can be distressing to say the least.

So... I'm bracing myself. But I don't feel too much fear because of the deep understanding that has gradually settled on me during the ten years I've worked with Ayahuasca that a being of pure and boundless love, who may even be that being recognized by some ancient cultures as the mother goddess of our planet, has harnessed the brew, in the context of time-honoured ceremony, to gain access to human consciousness and to teach us to do the best we can with the precious gift of our life on this earth.

I know how strange this may sound to those who have never drunk the Amazonian brew and never encountered "Mother Ayahuasca" in one of her many forms. Moreover – let me be clear – I am not making any empirical claims about the reality-status of the sorts of experiences I'm talking about here. Perhaps they ARE all "within the brain" as skeptics say. Perhaps they ARE all imaginary (although if so we must explain the transpersonal character of these imaginings). Perhaps they ARE "just hallucinations". Or perhaps what is going on here is that our brains are transceivers rather than generators of consciousness, in which case could it be that Ayahuasca temporarily "retunes the receiver wavelength of the brain", giving us fleeting access to other levels or dimensions of reality not normally accessible to our senses? This is a serious question, and one that is taken seriously by increasing numbers of scientists working at the cutting edge of consciousness studies.

But setting aside the unsolved problem of whether Mother Ayahuasca is real or not, what is interesting is that at the level of phenomenology many, many people have undergone encounters with her during Ayahuasca sessions and have had their behavior and their outlook profoundly changed as a result. Those changes are real even if materialist science would like to reduce the entity who inspires them to a mere epiphenomenon of disturbed brain activity.

Very often this entity (who, I repeat, may or may not be real but is experienced as real) gives us profound moral lessons in the depths of the Ayahuasca journey. We may be shown episodes from our lives in which we have behaved unkindly or unjustly to others, or been mean-spirited and unloving, or have failed to live up to our own potential, and we will be shown these things with absolute clarity and transparency, with all illusions and excuses stripped away, so we are confronted with nothing more nor less than the cold, hard truth about ourselves. Such revelations can be very painful. Frequently people cry during Ayahuasca sessions because of them. But they bring insight and give us the chance to change our behavior in the future, to be more nurturing and less toxic, to be more considerate of others and to be more aware than we were before of the incredible privilege the universe has given us by allowing us to be born in a human body – an opportunity for growth and improvement of the soul that we absolutely must not waste.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Ayahuasca has been so very successful in getting people off addictions to harmful hard drugs. For example, Dr Jacques Mabit has for many years been offering heroin and cocaine addicts incredibly effective treatments with Ayahuasca at his Takiwasi clinic in Tarapoto, Peru, where they might typically undergo 12 sessions with Ayahuasca in the space of a month. See here: http://www.takiwasi.com/docs/arti_ing/ayahuasca_in_treatment_addictions.pdf

A very high proportion of participants have such powerful revelations about the roots of their own problems and behavior during the sessions that they leave Takiwasi completely free of addiction, often without withdrawal symptoms, and never resume their habit. The success rate is far better than any of the conventional Western treatments for drug addiction.

Likewise in Canada Dr Gabor Mate was offering phenomenally successful Ayahuasca healing sessions to his drug-addicted patients before the Canadian government stepped in and stopped his work on the grounds that Ayahuasca itself is an illegal drug – see here: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health-and-fitness/bc-doctor-agrees-to-stop-using-amazonian-plant-to-treat-addictions/article4250579/>.

Yes, indeed, Ayahuasca IS an illegal drug, in the narrow Western definition of the term that allows big pharmaceutical companies to make billions out of marketing consciousness-altering substances like Prozac or Ritalin but will send us to prison for exploring our own consciousness with time-honoured sacred plants such as those that go into the Ayahuasca brew.

The plants concerned, which are simply cooked together with water, are the Ayahuasca vine, *Banisteriopsis caapi*, and a shrub from the coffee family, *Psychotria viridis*, called *chacrúnain* the Amazon. (A very few other plants are also known to produce an effective brew, but *B. caapi* and *P. viridis* are probably the most widely used).

The illegal element, contained in the leaves of *P. viridis*, is dimethyltryptamine (DMT), arguably the most powerful hallucinogen known to man. Normally in the West when we encounter DMT it must be smoked – producing a rapid, overwhelming, but short-lived (12-15 mins) alteration of consciousness, with which there is no negotiation. The smoking route has to be taken because there is an enzyme in our gut called monoamine oxidase that switches off DMT on contact. The ancient shamanistic societies of the Amazon, however, have found a workaround for this problem in the form of *B.caapi*, the vine itself, the other ingredient of the Ayahuasca brew which, it turns out, contains a monamine oxidase inhibitor that switches off that enzyme in our gut and allows the DMT in the *chacrúnain* leaves to be absorbed orally. The result is a long, reflective (up to four hour) visionary journey with which a great deal of negotiation is possible and that is very different qualitatively from the intense but brief experience of smoked DMT.

How, thousands of years ago, did shamans manage to select these two plants out of the estimated 150,000 different species found in the Amazon and learn to marry them together with water to produce the extraordinary potion that we know as Ayahuasca? It is a bit of mystery but shamans today claim it was not done by trial and error. Their ancestors, they say, were taught the secret by spirit beings as a gift to mankind.

Certainly those who have experienced the profound healing of harmful addictions that Ayahuasca can bring would agree that the brew is a very special gift. And in this matter I speak not only from my knowledge of the research but also from personal experience.

In my case the addiction was not to heroin or cocaine but took the form of a 24-year cannabis habit that I began in 1987 at the age of 37 and that I stopped abruptly at the age of 61 after five traumatic – but ultimately positive and life-changing – Ayahuasca sessions in Brazil in October 2011.

In what I have to say next I want to make a number of things extremely clear.

1. I am not putting down or disparaging cannabis or those who choose to use it. The “Green Bitch” in the title of this article is not cannabis itself but the abusive, self-indulgent relationship, entirely my own responsibility, that I had developed with the herb.
2. I recognize that cannabis can be an immensely helpful plant ally and that it has uniquely beneficial medicinal applications.
3. Quite apart from these medicinal properties, I recognize that the sensual qualities of cannabis can also be of great value – enhanced appreciation of food, music, the joys of love-making, the wonders of nature, and so on and so forth
4. I believe absolutely and unconditionally that it is the right of adults – an inalienable and fundamental human right – to make sovereign decisions over their own consciousness, including the right to enjoy the effects of cannabis, and to benefit from its medicinal properties, should they choose to do.
5. I remain as strongly opposed as I have ever been to that wicked and evil enterprise called “the war on drugs” which only serves to empower criminal gangs on the one hand and the worst and most controlling elements of government on the other. My views on this matter have not changed a jot since I wrote this article, “[The War on Consciousness](#)”, in 2009.
6. Last but not least, I fully recognize that I myself benefitted greatly from some aspects of my long relationship with cannabis. It lightened me up a lot in all sorts of ways and encouraged me to explore unusual connections between things that I would not normally have connected. I was a current affairs journalist when I was 37 (that was in 1987 -- I was born in 1950) and I had written some non-fiction books on travel and current affairs issues, but I don't believe I would ever have moved on to writing about ancient mysteries (still non-fiction, although many of my critics would disagree!) if it hadn't been for the new way of thinking that cannabis drew me into.

My first investigation of an ancient mystery was “[The Sign and The Seal: A Quest for the Lost Ark of the Covenant](#)”, which I began to research seriously in 1987, shortly after getting into cannabis. “The Sign and The Seal” was published in 1992. During the writing of that book it was my habit to smoke cannabis only in the evenings for an hour or two before going to bed, but things changed from 1992 onwards when I began to work on my next non-fiction historical mystery “[Fingerprints of the Gods](#)”. This was when I began to smoke cannabis all day long and to experiment with writing while I was stoned. I liked the result and it soon became my practice to light up my first joint (or pipe if it was hash) the moment I sat down at my desk in the morning and then just to carry on smoking all day long until I went to bed – often in the small hours of the morning. This remained my

habit thereafter – smoking continuously from morning to night, whether writing or not, and gradually seeking out stronger and stronger strains of the herb.

In 2006 or 2007 I switched from combustion products to a Volcano vaporiser and at the same time began to buy from a grower who has amazing green fingers and produces incredibly powerful varieties of bud, most usually a variety called "Cheese" – I guess because of the smell – but way stronger than anybody else's product of that name that I have sampled.

Cannabis had always exaggerated paranoid tendencies that I probably have already, but these began to come more and more to the fore from 2007 onwards with very negative effects on my behaviour. The worst was that with absolutely no real-world justification at all I began to become increasingly jealous and suspicious of my beloved partner Santha, who is the most honest and true person I could ever hope to know. We would have increasingly frequent shouting matches, always initiated by me, as I accused her of all sorts of things that she had not done and would never do. And while part of me knew I was behaving in a more and more crazy way I couldn't stop the behaviour or the feelings that were causing it. We still had happy times but the jealousy and suspicion kept tightening their grip on me and I can honestly say that I made Santha's life a misery between 2007 and 2011. It is a miracle and a tribute to her goodness of heart, care and love for me that she didn't simply walk out and leave me, but instead patiently and tolerantly persisted with me and tried to get me to see sense.

So what was it those five sessions of Ayahuasca showed me in October 2011 that led me abruptly, overnight, to end my cannabis habit? After all I had already been smoking cannabis for 16 years when I first began to drink Ayahuasca in 2003, initially as part of the research for my last non-fiction book "[Supernatural](#)" but later as a form of regular spiritual work. I drank Ayahuasca at least three times a year every year after that so what changed, what was so different, about those sessions in 2011?

When I look back on the whole process now, I can see that right from the very first session Ayahuasca was giving me messages about the need to moderate my cannabis habit, and showing me how my obsessional relationship with the herb was feeding and empowering negative aspects of my character. What's more I received those messages loud and clear! But by then I was already so involved with cannabis, so convinced that I could not live my life without its help, and so sure that all my creativity would dry up and wither if I did not continue to smoke it, that I simply ignored and blanked out what Ayahuasca was trying to tell me. Perhaps if I hadn't done that and had listened carefully instead, I could have got my relationship with cannabis into some sort of constructive balance and stayed within the boundaries of responsible use rather than self-indulgent abuse, and perhaps then I would never have needed to reject the herb completely as Ayahuasca finally compelled me to do in 2011.

The process began on 30 September 2011 just before Santha and I flew down to Brazil. We were in the United States, at a location I won't disclose, where I smoked a pipe of pure DMT.

I had smoked DMT before. My first two experiences, in England in 2004, were terrifying (for those who are interested I describe them in my book "[Supernatural](#)"). Then in 2009 I had three pipes in one night in the same US location I found myself in in 2011 and had amazing healing experiences. Rotating lights moving all over my body, a sense that I was being scanned and that something was being fixed, some (slightly scary) computer-like circuitry that seemed to be sentient, an encounter with a sorcerer/magician figure who opened a rip in the earth for me and showed me an ancient buried city, etc, etc. It was all great fun and rather exciting. Same thing happened in 2010 – two pipes that time, separated by about an hour – and more beautiful, healing experiences.

So when I found myself back at the same location in the US in 2011 I felt relaxed and welcomed what I expected would be another pleasant healing excursion to the DMT realms. I certainly had no expectation that anything particularly disturbing or terrifying would happen to me.

Turned out I was wrong.

As soon as I took my first long draw I had the unsettling feeling that something intelligent and not necessarily friendly had leapt into my head from the spherical glass pipe. I held in the smoke as long as I could, then took another long draw. By now there was a crackling buzzing sound in my ears and I felt utterly overwhelmed and had to lie back at once (I always lie back; no way can I stay sitting up!). Immediately things were very different (though with some similarities) from all my previous smoked DMT experiences. The first thing I saw was something like a mandala with an ivory background and intricate brick-red geometric lines –like tracks – inside it. Between the lines, or tracks, imposed on the ivory background, were a large number of clock faces with weird hands. I've seen something like this before, not under smoked DMT, but under a very strong dose of Ayahuasca. It terrified me then, don't know why, and it proceeded to terrify me again. Then I realised that the mandala (only an approximation; there was something very like computer circuitry about it as well, or even like one of those toy race-car tracks where little electric cars whizz round and round) was sentient and focussed on me. I got a hint of eyes or feelers. There was something very menacing about the whole scene, and I began to feel uncomfortable and restless in my body and had enough of my everyday consciousness left at that point to wish profoundly that I hadn't smoked the pipe, and felt myself struggling – uselessly of course – against the effect. Then I heard an ominous voice, filled with a sort of malicious glee, that said very clearly "YOU'RE OURS NOW". And I thought, shit, yes, I am yours now, not much I can do about it, but it's only for about ten more minutes and then I'm out of here.

Since it was pointless to struggle I resigned myself to the situation and thought, OK then, get on with it, and immediately the mandala/intelligence and lots of its little helpers (who I felt but cannot describe) were all over me. I had the sense that my body was a huge, fat, bloated cocoon and that these beings were tearing it apart, tearing off lumps of matter and throwing them aside, getting access to the real, hidden me. I was aware that this was a place of absolute truth, like the Hall of Maat in the ancient Egyptian tradition, and that everything about me was known here, every thought, every action, good and bad, throughout my whole life – and the sense that the real hidden me within the cocoon was utterly transparent to these beings and that they were finding me wanting. About as far from being "justified in the judgement" – as the Egyptian texts put it – as it is possible to be, and that therefore I might face annihilation here. And I heard something like a trumpet blast and a loud voice that announced, as though this were a proclamation at court: "NOW THE GREAT UNFOLDING WILL BEGIN". Or possibly: "NOW THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION WILL BEGIN."

That was the point where I lost consciousness of the material realm completely, and indeed of everything else. Feeling utterly helpless, utterly in the power of whatever process I was going through and of the intelligence that was running it, I fell into a darkness that seemed to last forever. I have no conscious recollection of what happened to me in there, only the conviction that it was something massive. When I began to come out of it there were some moments – though this felt much longer than moments – when I was deeply confused and disoriented and had absolutely no idea where I was or why I was there. I could see the room around me but didn't recognise it, didn't even know it was a room at first, or even what a room is, and it kept melting back into that other terrifying reality out of which I was emerging. This has never happened to me with DMT before – I've always known, even in the depths of the experience, that I was having that experience because I had smoked a pipe of DMT and my body was in a specific place,

which I did not forget, at a specific time. This was completely different and very, very scary.

Gradually my eyes began to focus, I remembered I had smoked DMT, and I looked around and saw Santha sitting on the edge of the bed, very calm, and incredibly strong. I was immersed in a wild melting storm of colours and the only clear sure thing in the whole place for me was Santha with her amazing strength and beauty, and lines of light emerging from her body and rising up out of her and surrounding her. I remember falling to my knees on the floor in front of her and telling her "I found you again" or something such (the sense was that I had known her in a past life and had found her again in this one) and also telling her that she is a goddess. I felt shaken, but basically happy to be back on planet normal and was able to witness the sessions of several other participants without actually falling apart or melting down.

Over the next two days as we left the US and made the journey to Brazil I thought quite a lot about what had happened to me and began to feel very apprehensive. If I had been "theirs" for 10 minutes and it had been so overwhelming, what was it going to be like for me being "theirs" for four hours at a time in the upcoming Ayahuasca sessions (since DMT is, of course, the primary active ingredient of Ayahuasca)???

Accordingly on the night of the first session in Brazil (Monday 3 Oct) I chickened out and had a (for me) small cup of just 80 millilitres. Nothing much happened that night. Just restlessness and annoyance at myself for not taking a bigger dose.

So on the night of the second session – Wednesday 5 Oct – I increased the dose to 140 millilitres. The first two hours passed uneventfully and I was thinking, with some relief, that nothing was going to happen when I became aware of a great serpent looking at me. Just the eye filled with wisdom and compassion. I got the message – I can work with you but you have to surrender to me. So I did surrender and in fact said out loud "I surrender". Immediately she was inside me – a huge, very warm, almost hot presence inside my chest. I was immobilised, literally pressed down onto the mattress and felt a tremendous vibrating sensation inside my chest and along my arms, and I thought – Wow! This is weird. But I could no longer resist or do anything about it, and the presence (whom I construe as Mother Ayahuasca) worked her way down into my abdomen and then down to my groin, and then back up again all the way up my trunk, up inside my chest, into my neck and finally into my head where she spent a very long time. I felt I was in the hands of a great power that was doing stuff with me whether I liked it or not. I have always trusted Mother Aya so I didn't feel fear and stayed calm while this was being done to me.

Then suddenly the presence left, and I could move again, and I thought – what an amazing blessing Mother Aya has just given me, to work with me for so long, and I felt sure that I had been healed. But just when I was feeling that, I was suddenly back into the same DMT space again that I had got lost in in the US and the feeling of calm and healing gave way to terror. I was aware once again of an entity (one this time; not many) all over my body, dancing around me, filled with malice, and I spent the next half hour or so in utter terror, and also feeling in some way betrayed by Mother Aya – that she had left me in the hands of this, that she had let me be "theirs" again.

The third session I took a low dose and pretty much escaped under the radar.

The fourth session I increased the dose, and Santha also took a larger dose, and we went through an extraordinary series of traumas together. Santha had the sense of some terrible dark being pulling out her heart and saying to her "I'm going to take you to teach Graham a lesson". She communicated this to me – and I at this point had the DMT trickster all over me again – and I totally freaked out. I had a massive realisation of all

the pain I had caused Santha in recent years, and how this was a black mark on my soul and how I had absolutely got to do something about it and stop living selfishly for me and start being a nurturing, loving, giving and above all trusting presence in her life – otherwise I would be doomed, and I would doom her too. I was filled with grief and terror that she would die right there on the mattress beside me. Both of us were sobbing and crying. Santha grabbed hold of me and said "don't let them take me" and our shaman came over to help and began singing just an amazingly poignant and beautiful song which in due course helped to ground both of us.

The next morning in the sharing (a common feature of Ayahuasca sessions worldwide) I expressed my intent to change my behaviour and be a better partner to Santha in the future, and I said I was determined to change my relationship with cannabis. I didn't think it was realistic, after 24 years, to give it up completely but I resolved to go back to my pre-1992 pattern of only smoking at night and never again all day as well.

On the fifth session, after the traumas of the fourth, I took a very small cup of Ayahuasca – less than 50 millilitres; still I didn't quite get under the radar. I was approached by entities offering me food and drink but I remembered the rule expressed in many ancient cultures that one should never eat food in the Underworld (witness, for example, the story of Demeter and Persephone) so I refused and opened my eyes to stop the vision.

At the final sharing I once more expressed my intent to rid my life of all jealousy and suspicion towards my wonderful Santha, and to get my relationship with cannabis under tight control, smoking only at night, not all day.

We flew home on 14 October arriving 15 October. Very tiring and uncomfortable journey with no legroom and the fasten-seat-belts sign on almost all night. I naturally wanted to comfort myself with a little cannabis when we got back so I fired up my vaporiser and filled a nice fat bag. But as soon as I started to smoke it I began to feel really awful – as though I had a poisonous fog inside my head. Immediate massive paranoia set in and I felt I was on the edge of going completely insane. I persevered and took a few more puffs but the feeling of madness just got worse and worse. Panic and total self-revulsion seized me. Something I have never felt before with the herb. The upshot was that I squeezed out the rest of the vapor in the bag to get rid of it without smoking it and put the vaporiser away. As I walked upstairs from my office, shuddering with paranoia, convinced I was going crazy, and disgusted at myself, I suddenly realised that my stated intention in Brazil "to change my relationship with cannabis and use less of it" just wasn't enough. It wasn't good enough just to use it less. It hit me with the force of a revelation. I could never smoke cannabis again or I would be doomed. I had become a complete slave to my abusive, seductive relationship with the herb, it had exacerbated the worst aspects of my personality, and my only hope was to give it up completely. Sure, I reasoned, it might be difficult for me to write without it (since for so long it had been inextricably interlinked with my writing life) but I was just going to have to deal with that.

So I have not smoked any more, well over a year has passed, and I remain resolutely determined never to smoke again. I feel free now. Liberated. As though a whole new chapter of my life has opened up in front of me. I find myself enjoying little things I didn't enjoy before, appreciating every moment that I am not stoned and that my head is clear. It feels GREAT to have a clear head! My concerns about the effect on my writing have also turned out to be completely groundless. I had feared I would lose my inspiration without the herb as my muse but quite the opposite has turned out to be the case. I am buzzing with new ideas and creativity. Also I'm MUCH more efficient – writing between three and five times as many words a day as I did before.

Last but not least my crazy jealousy and suspicion of Santha have evaporated like a bad dream. I simply don't have those feelings any more, or the toxic behaviour that used to go with them. We're having lots of fun together and have rediscovered the positive and beautiful basis for our love.

As to my soul, I think I've been given another chance – a chance not to be found wanting in the judgement when death finally comes. I am grabbing that chance with both hands.

Graham Hancock, January 2013

The experiences described in this article were also the subject of TEDx conference in London. Please see the video below :

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0c5nIvJH7w>

<http://www.grahamhancock.com/forum/HancockG3.php>