

Affected Lives

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The testimonies² of the patients and workers of Takiwasi, a center based in Tarapoto, Peru, where ayahuasca is combined with psychotherapy to treat substance addiction.

M. (Chile)

My reasons for seeking treatment is excessive consumption of alcohol, addiction to cocaine and other drugs. I have tried so far many ways of breaking these addictions, but ayahuasca in the ritual context of Takiwasi center was a breakthrough like none before.

There was a tradition of using plants for healing within my family, so I was open to this concept, I have tried mushrooms before or peyote in a ritual in Mexico, and although they had some positive impact, they did not result with the same changes as ayahuasca. I drank it first time here, and from the first experience it was magical encounter, full of spiritual meaning. I connected to my infancy, to my ancestors, to something very ancient about myself and nature. I felt that my problems had a lot to do with lack of roots, they were connected with story of migrations of my family. Drinking aya has shown me whom I really was. I believe that human being is nature – we are part of it. This is why the plants can reveal the truth about ourselves, this fundamental, primordial reality. Drugs I used before or pharmaceuticals were never able to do that, or actually they obscured it even more.

D. (Peru)

I am a mechanic, who abandoned his beginning career because I was not interested in anything but drugs, I became addict of pasta (very toxic and addictive by-product of cocaine production).

What ayahuasca, this spectacular, incredible experience did to me, as to teach to me to think and most of all feel, feel this sensation of sadness that was in me, those nasty things that were done to me, I was not trying to numb this anymore. Then I started to feel love again, to feel the joy of being alive, the need to be in the moment, and what is most important, that stays with me, these are not just temporary feelings in the time of use, but something permanent.

B. (Peru)

I am very young but already I was deep into troubles with drugs. What I saw in my ayahuasca visions was that If I continue this, I will end very badly, in prison or death. I decided then that I wanted to be free and to start to heal. I saw the drugs as a vision of countless snakes and spiders covering my heart. The ayahuasca cannot be considered as drug – they all left me weaker, despite temporary enchantment, I ended up worse after taking them, and I did not know who I was. With ayahuasca it is opposite. It heals very deep and I have great respect for it.

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² These testimonies have been collected by Swiatoslaw Wojtkowiak in June 2017 and published on his blog <http://blog.swiatoslaw.com/?cat=449> with the authorization of the people involved.

S. (Spain)

I have been a heavy user of many drugs, crack, cocaine, cannabis, whatever. I tried various modes of treatment before, including two long term stays in centers in Spain, full year, but without any success. Then I was able to experience ayahuasca for the first time in my home country, which brought certain effect, especially in affecting my conscience. I started hearing about this center operating in Peru, found out more and finally ended up here. In the whole context of ritualistic use in Takiwasi, in combination with icaros and whole healers work I was able to see ayahuasca as truly healing plant. I could not compare it to drugs I had used in the past, despite modifying consciousness it brings actual healing, there are also many physical sensations that there are not pleasant, it is used in certain context, and above all – with deliberately chosen intention.

A. (Peru)

I am a student of psychology, and a drug user since I was 14. I started with alcohol and cannabis, and later got into more serious stuff, like cocaine. I am now in my process of healing and ayahuasca helped me a lot. Thanks to it I could see the world in new way, a spiritual way, which means plants, for example, are not just only plants for me, but real beings. I cleaned a lot of bad energies that the drug use accumulated in me. They consume your energy, your psyche, body, they catch you in a trap. Ayahuasca teaches you to be a better person, on level both physical as well as energetic and spiritual. It shows you what is important.

A. (France)

I came here to solve my addiction to marijuana. All my life I felt bad in my body, in my head, and I guess marijuana was a way of numbing this pain. After ayahuasca session I was quickly able to solve my addiction problem, because I could see where it came from. I started to work on issues from my infancy, and ayahuasca made it very clear for me that the root is in the problems with my mother. So I focused on this in my following sessions. Slowly the improvements started to appear, I began to feel more at peace, more accepting. I don't think I will need to come back to smoke marijuana, now that I saw what was the real reason of my use. I am interested in the transformative potential of the plants, and when I leave Takiwasi, I am hoping to go to Iquitos, to do a diet with tobacco.

M. (Spain)

I have been working all my life in pharmaceutical industry, and at the same time I have been heavy cocaine addict myself. I was using huge amounts of cocaine, and frankly speaking, living in darkness. What ayahuasca gave me was access to light. I can see the changes are almost immediate, especially here in Takiwasi, where ceremonies are so powerful, in comparison to places in Spain where I drank a couple of times before coming to Peru. Here it is very hard work, but effective. I am becoming new person, receiving many revelations, opening my feelings. I can say that since I started to drink ayahuasca, I speak from my heart.

In contrast with drugs I took before in my life, I don't depend on ayahuasca. It helps, but I am not seeking it out, one does not do it because one feels like it, it is not pleasant. It is work and it is not

easy. You have to try it to understand. However, despite hard moments, it is full of love, and you can feel it.

J. (Spain)

Ayahuasca opened for me the door of spiritual world. I met my deceased grandmother and a friend, and this experience of their presence changed my life. Before that I could only suspect the existence of this world. Then I knew it is real.

In regards to my problems, it has been very powerful cleaning of bad energies, poisons that I could literally perceive as something that accumulated over years of abuse of drugs in my liver, in my brain, I was impregnated with bad energy. I could also see the actions I did in my life, events that were hidden in my unconscious, and that were blocking me. I knew before that all the drugs were doing me harm (I took alcohol, cocaine, lots of designer drugs) but had no idea how to leave them behind. When the real reasons of taking them were revealed by ayahuasca, I can say that it saved my life. I see it as a miraculous plant, with its own personality, that is communicating with you, sending messages, teaching. After spending over 8 months in Takiwasi I am ready to leave next week, and I can say I am leaving as a new person.

Father Cristian Alejandría, Catholic priest

By order of his bishop, he assumes a pastoral role of spiritual guidance to staff and patients of the Takiwasi Center. Participates actively in the psychotherapeutic evolution processes through plant sessions, and offers workshops to promote values. Takiwasi is a non-denominational NGO that however considers essential to extend the overcoming of psycho-emotional problems through the introduction to a spiritual dimension.

“Ayahuasca has been a discovery for my priest life. Years ago I have been asked by my bishop to take into my spiritual care patients of the Takiwasi center, drug addicts, people lost, who were also on spiritual quest. However, very quickly I realized, that having no knowledge of the plants they work with and the worlds these plants take them to, there was no possibility of communication between us and therefore no possibility of effective work. They lived in world unknown to me and alien to my religious concepts. How could I understand their difficulties, their obstacles on this path? There was a clear spiritual necessity for my immersion and I also felt these plants could help me in my problems, which were serious at this time. I was lost myself, and at the same time there was expectation of me to be shepherd to others. Dr Mabit saw that too, and he suggested the plants could be of help. I started first with plant purges, and as I slowly started to notice improvements, subtle changes in feelings, I decided I have to try the main tool used in Takiwasi – ayahuasca. I needed to go and ask permission of my bishop. If I am to do something spiritually for my patients, I said to him, I need to know their world. We were told in seminary that we should talk about God based on our own reality and experience. Bishop replied, that if it is for the work of winning souls, enabling them to find what they look for, then I should do what I feel is right.

So I drank. I saw that the potential of this medicine is enormous. It helped me for the first to truly enter inside spiritual reality I did not know before. I studied years in the seminary, worked afterwards as a priest in many parishes, but I was never able to enter in relation with this sacred, interior space. The plants have shown me that the blockage was in me, and after I took ayahuasca, I understood what changes were necessary to do in my life, how I should start the process of reconciliation with myself, with nature, with others, with God. This plant, ayahuasca, is effective aid for those of us, who seek answers in life. It makes us more sensitive, more human, weakens our rational part and so helps us to feel what we know from the teaching of the scriptures, to truly enter in the relationship we read about and so far only knew intellectually.

That experience was something definitively spiritual, because I could see my own devils, where they originate, why my life so far was not happy, why I could not live in peace, all the rage and darkness blocking me. I couldn't really know whom I was. This is how ayahuasca differs from drugs – many people live in this kind of confusion, and they resort to drugs to escape, but they bring only temporary relief. They belong to the darkness and offer no understanding.

I continue to work with ayahuasca and I can see until now how it affects me and motivates me in my religious life, in my duties as a priest, it helps me to appreciate more my church. The experience helps me in my daily life, to distinguish between good and bad with better clarity. There is this confusion within Catholic church regarding shamanism. Shaman is a term neutral ethically, he performs work he is hired to do, be it harm or healing. My work is with curanderos, healers whose intention to use plants is to heal exclusively. How can that be wrong in the eyes of God, creator of plants for the benefit of humanity?

It is interesting, that the term “curandero” in its core has a Spanish word for priest – “cura”. It is not a coincidence. We do the common work, we heal the souls. This is the work which flows from

God, from light, which all are truly looking for. There are many ways to reach souls, some need this way, way of the plants. Recently, during bishop's visit to Takiwasi, some baptisms of patients were performed. These are real lives, spiritual lives affected. Was it because of my work as a priest? No, it was thanks to the work of curanderos and the plants, so we are talking about real changes occurring. So it was in my case, a great change and a rescue from great mess I was in at that time. I love now more my vocation, I am more dedicated to my work, less weary. I hope that understanding of these things will increase gradually, that the experiences of people like me will be testimonies for others within church to follow."

Veronika Kavenská, PhD, psychologist in the therapeutic team

Veronika Kavenská is a Jungian therapist. She includes these approaches in clinical practice. Researcher in the field of traditional medicine in Peru and its possible applications in psychotherapy, she wrote a book and several articles on the subject. She currently works as a psychologist in Takiwasi, therapeutic center in Peru focused on issue of addiction.

"Before Takiwasi, I never really considered using ayahuasca, I treated it as simply another drug, and I was not interested in these. I was a student of the last year of psychology back then, and after having heard of the work being done here, I came to see it as part of my practice. I finally decided to experience the brew myself. It was a breakthrough and I quickly saw its enormous potential as a tool to understand oneself in a deeper way, to know oneself, one's history and ancestors, and from this knowledge to heal, to change things that block our progress in life. So I decided to dedicate my PhD work in clinical psychology to this subject, and at the same, to practice here as therapist.

I see this plant as a source of knowledge – both about myself, my personal issues – as well as for my professional life, for work with others as psychotherapist. It also performs well as a supervisor in my relations with patients – it shows me things about it I wouldn't be able to notice otherwise.

It is not a magical pill that changes the life itself, but thanks to the messages received, one can have enough information to make these changes himself. I have been working with ayahuasca for 10 years now and I feel like I am going deeper and deeper in my connection and understanding, so I have no doubts about its value. I am above all amazed how this plant works simultaneously on three levels, physical, spiritual, psychological. It is one of main reasons why the treatment here is so effective – because spiritual dimension is taken into account, unlike most of therapies in the West, where it is completely ignored. This may also be a problem in its wider introduction there, because it requires more than just knowledge of doses and psychology, rigorous training of years is needed, also to operate on this forgotten, spiritual level."

Fernando Mendive, PhD in molecular biology

Fernando Mendive is the head of Laboratorio Takiwasi, where the worlds of modern science and traditional plant medicine knowledge are combined in an effort to find effective ways of solving substance addiction and other psychosomatic illnesses. The Takiwasi Center operates for more than 25 years in Tarapoto, Peru and is an NGO officially recognized by government, a therapeutic institution where essential part of the work is use of ayahuasca brew as well as other healing plants.

“I don’t think ayahuasca is a magic medicine, but it is part of experience that helped to reevaluate my approach to health, and it is now far from the dominant model in the west. It is not only ayahuasca but whole traditional health model of interconnectedness, not working just on symptoms, but working on the roots of the disease. I started with another master plant of this region, Huachuma, done in Argentina, with healer trained in Peruvian tradition and this was my first learning experience. This process helped me to understand how just solving symptoms doesn’t go deep enough, with these medicines you uncover the core reasons and in the process of doing it enable effective changes and healing. To be truly effective, it has to be done in ceremonial and therapeutical context, by this I mean that although in improvised approach, done with respect, the intention of healing and love is very important and helps, it is not enough, and to guarantee success, this powerful medicine, ayahuasca, should be administered by someone with sufficient experience. So work with ayahuasca resulted the shift of my perspective, my paradigm, made me see Western medical model as limited but at the same time as a medical professional I would stress, you do not go to have a brain surgery with a recent graduate of medicine school, and the same would apply here.”