

Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy and the Sacred: Between Science and Spirit

Reuniting neuroscience with the spiritual wisdom that shaped plant medicine.

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Over the past decade, psychedelic-assisted therapy has moved from the fringes of alternative medicine into the center of global discussions about mental health. People who have struggled with depression, trauma, addiction, or a loss of meaning often describe psychedelic experiences as a breakthrough, a moment when their patterns become clear and real change feels possible.

Even though promising research had already begun in the 1960s and early 1970s, Nixon's War on Drugs and the Controlled Substances Act abruptly halted psychedelic studies for decades. Science is now reopening the case to uncover why these substances are so powerful. Meanwhile, ancestral traditions worldwide have worked with these plants for centuries, often guided by a remarkably similar understanding: that these substances are not simply pharmacological tools, but gateways to a deeper layer of reality where healing, meaning, and spirit converge.

Far from being isolated practices, these traditions form part of a global wisdom that has survived across continents and cultures, carried by generations who learned to navigate these realms with respect and discipline. As the modern world embraces this therapeutic approach, a deeper question arises: will science be willing to consider the knowledge preserved in ancestral traditions, and can both perspectives learn from one another to truly understand what these medicines reveal?

Iboga: an illustrative case

One of the substances drawing particular attention today is ibogaine. In June 2025, the State of Texas committed 50 million dollars to fund clinical research into its therapeutic potential, demonstrating an unprecedented collaboration among universities, hospitals, and scientists aiming to obtain FDA approval. Ibogaine is derived from the root bark of the African iboga shrub, and researchers have found that it has a remarkable capacity to interrupt addiction. Instead of simply reducing cravings, it appears to temporarily "switch off" the neural circuits that drive compulsive drug use, offering a rare pause in the cycle. Many people emerge with renewed clarity, motivation, and self-worth. Neuroscientists speak of enhanced communication between brain regions and increased neuroplasticity, but to those who live it, ibogaine feels like a profound reset.

When we look beyond ibogaine to plant medicines such as ayahuasca, psilocybin mushrooms, and san pedro, a deeper dimension of healing comes into view. These plants do not merely shift mental processes; they often open a mode of perception in which understanding becomes embodied rather than conceptual. Traditional therapy works through dialogue and reflection, while plant medicine

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works through sensations, emotions, symbolic imagery, and a lived rather than conceptual form of knowing. Many people describe confronting aspects of themselves long ignored or buried, or receiving insights that seem to come from a wiser form of intelligence.

Encounter with another world

One of the most intriguing features of these experiences is the presence of visions. Western science has long referred to them as “hallucinations,” a term that often carries an erroneous implication of pathology, while the more recent term “psychedelic” (meaning “mind-manifesting”), comes closer to describing what unfolds. Yet even this expression fails to fully capture the sacred, relational, and deeply transformative nature of these encounters. This raises one of humanity’s oldest questions: are these visions produced solely by the brain, or do they open a doorway into another dimension, another realm normally hidden from our perception yet accessible under certain states of consciousness?

Anthropology offers a striking insight here: nearly every culture throughout history has believed in a spiritual dimension. Civilizations with no contact between them speak of beings or forces that exist beyond the physical world. Many traditions describe benevolent presences (ancestors, spirits, angels) but also disruptive or malevolent forces often referred to as demons or dark entities. Across the globe, rituals emerged to communicate with these forces, seek guidance, or protect against them. Notably, altered states of consciousness, whether reached through drumming, fasting, prayer, or plants, were never approached casually. They were always held within ceremonial structures designed to safeguard the participant.

This traditional understanding offers an explanation for the rising incidence of psychotic episodes and cannabinoid psychosis in modern contexts. Without the protective framework of ritual and containment, the recreational and unguided use of psychoactive substances may leave individuals vulnerable to the intrusion of disruptive forces, which can invade and overwhelm the psyche. In this sense, the absence of ceremonial structure is not merely a cultural loss, but a potential psychological risk.

Modern clinical setting versus traditional indigenous context

In contemporary clinical settings, psychedelic-assisted therapy takes place in controlled and carefully monitored environments². Sessions begin with psychological interviews, intention-setting, and support from therapists throughout the experience. Heart rate, safety parameters, and psychological stability are closely watched. Soft lighting, comforting music, and a calm atmosphere are used to create a sense of security. Everything is structured to minimize risk and maximize therapeutic benefit within a scientific framework.

² Soliman, P. S., Curley, D. E., Capone, C., Eaton, E., & Haass-Koffler, C. L. (2024). In the new era of psychedelic assisted therapy: A systematic review of study methodology in randomized controlled trials. *Psychopharmacology*, 241(6), 1101–1110. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00213-024-06598-6>

We can observe that modern clinical research also differs from ancestral practice in the substances themselves. Increasingly, the medicines administered in trials are not whole-plant preparations but isolated molecules, often purified or synthetically reproduced versions of naturally occurring compounds. Psilocybin is given as a laboratory-produced crystalline powder rather than as mushrooms; ibogaine is extracted or synthesized rather than offered as the full iboga root; and many ayahuasca studies use synthetic DMT combined with isolated harmala alkaloids instead of the traditional brew containing hundreds of interacting plant constituents.

While standardized compounds ensure consistent dosage, reduce risk, and offer precision, reproducibility, and regulatory clarity, it also departs from the traditional understanding of these plants as living, interconnected beings whose healing properties arise from their complete molecular complexity rather than from a single “active ingredient.”

This shift from wholeness to reduction is another aspect in which modern practice diverges from the traditions that long safeguarded these medicines. Even with all this professionalism, the clinical setting frames the psychedelic experience primarily as a neurological or psychological event, a catalyst for insight rather than an encounter with a living spiritual reality.

Modern psychedelic-assisted therapy carried out in clinical environments tends to frame the experience almost exclusively through biological and mental lenses. Within this perspective, the encounter is understood as a brain-based process aimed at emotional healing. But when compared with the ancestral traditions from which many of these substances originate, it becomes clear that something fundamental is absent: the recognition of a greater reality, a spiritual dimension that many cultures consider inseparable from these states of consciousness. Of course, not everyone will interpret these experiences through a spiritual framework, and healthy skepticism has its place. The intention here is not to impose a belief system, but to acknowledge that many people, across cultures and increasingly in clinical contexts, report dimensions of experience that deserve to be explored with openness rather than dismissed outright. In other words, a purely psychological or neurological interpretation can overlook the dimension that many cultures would recognize as the Sacred.

Technology of the Sacred

In traditional contexts, the use of psychoactive plants is inseparable from ritual. Rituals are not decorative; they are technologies of protection and means of showing respect toward the spiritual world. Entering an altered state without ritual is often viewed as profanity, not because it offends social customs but because it disregards the power of the invisible realms being opened and the protocols required to create a healthy handshake between us and the spirits. According to these traditions, humans are no match for the forces that inhabit these realms, and approaching them without humility or guidance may be like walking into a wild landscape without understanding its rules.

The need for protection is not abstract. Many ancestral traditions teach that traumatic experiences create “openings” that can leave individuals spiritually or energetically vulnerable. Some believe

that certain self-destructive behaviors, compulsions, or patterns of despair may be reinforced, or even initiated by intrusive forces that attach themselves through emotional wounds. Modern psychology might describe this as trauma shaping subconscious dynamics, but the experiential reality can feel uncannily similar: something foreign, something that does not feel entirely like “me,” begins to influence thoughts or behavior.

This raises difficult questions: Could negative forces affect us? Could they intensify our self-destructive patterns? Can trauma create vulnerabilities through which these forces enter?

Whether interpreted symbolically or literally, countless testimonies across cultures, and increasingly from psychedelic participants, suggest that we should not dismiss this dimension of experience.

Just as cultures speak of harmful entities, they also speak of benevolent ones. Many traditions describe protective spirits, angels, or guiding presences that can be invoked for help. Rituals across the world include prayers, invocations, and sacred songs (such as icaros) intended to attract these forces. Far from superstition, these practices form part of a sophisticated spiritual methodology developed historically over a very long period of time.

Discernment: Wisdom in the Face of the Unknown

Another crucial element, often overlooked in modern days, is the question of discernment. In ancestral traditions, entering the spiritual realm requires the ability to distinguish between forces that are healing and those that are deceptive or harmful³. This ability, known as the discernment of spirits, is considered indispensable. Not every presence encountered in altered states is benevolent, and not every teaching or vision should be trusted. Traditional healers insist that without discernment, individuals may confuse guidance with illusion, or mistake intrusive entities for sources of wisdom. This capacity is not improvised; it is cultivated through years of discipline, humility, and rigorous training. Discernment is what allows a healer to navigate the spiritual world responsibly and to protect participants from influences they cannot yet recognize or understand. It is also what keeps the experience grounded in truth rather than seduction or spiritual naïveté.

In the Peruvian Amazon, at centers like Takiwasi, the role of the healer is indispensable. A legitimate healer will train for years to navigate the spiritual realm opened by plant medicine. Their work goes far beyond administering a brew. They cultivate the discernment of spirits, learning to recognize the nature of the forces that appear during ceremonies, to distinguish healing energies from harmful ones, and to intervene with specific protocols when participants encounter influences they cannot face alone. Through strict diets, long apprenticeships, initiations, and the guidance of elders, they develop the ability to act as navigators and protectors. Their songs, prayers, and ritual methodology are not merely symbolic gestures; they shape and secure the invisible landscape, ensuring that each participant is accompanied, protected, and grounded throughout the journey.

³ Luycx, T. (2024). *Le Discernement des esprits. Évolution et enjeux thérapeutiques*. Librinova,

The challenge of integration

William Richards, a pioneering researcher at Johns Hopkins, has documented profound mystical experiences in clinical trials. In *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences*, he argues that reducing these experiences to mere "hallucinations" disregards the testimony of those who undergo them. He calls for a science willing to seriously consider reports of encounters with "ultimate reality," spiritual presences, and dimensions beyond the personal unconscious.

As psychedelic-assisted therapy continues to expand into modern healthcare, we face a choice. We can continue treating these substances purely as psychological tools, or we can acknowledge the fuller reality they reveal. An integrated approach that respects both science and spirituality may deepen the healing potential and reduce the risks of confusion, emotional overwhelm, or spiritual vulnerability. This is what the Takiwasi Center has been trying to demonstrate for three decades in the case of drug abuse treatment⁴, expanding its experience to PTSD and mental trauma cases⁵.

Plant medicine teaches us that healing touches every dimension of our being: mind, body, and spirit. And like any journey into unknown territory, it demands humility, respect, and proper guidance. The path forward is not about choosing between tradition and modernity, but about honoring both, so that the doors these medicines open are entered with wisdom rather than naivety, and with reverence rather than haste.

⁴ Politi, M., Friso, F., Mabit, J. (2018). Plant based assisted therapy for the treatment of substance use disorders - part 1. The case of Takiwasi Center and other similar experiences. *Revista Cultura y Droga*, 23 (26), 99-126. DOI: 10.17151/culdr.2018.23.26.7

⁵ The Takiwasi Center in Peru offers retreats for veterans and first responders, combining Amazonian plant medicine (ayahuasca, purges, master plant diets) with clinical supervision to address PTSD, addiction, TBI, hypervigilance, emotional wounds, and other related conditions. More information: <https://www.takiwasi.com/en/veterans01.php>

