

## *My First Plant Medicine Experience*

My first plant medicine experience took place during a traditional San Pedro ceremony in Zhuracpamba on Sunday, June 5, 2022. The ceremony was conducted by the shaman Taita Alejo. My wife Rossana was alongside me.

### **June 4, 2022**

#### *Intention for my first plant medicine experience*

Today, we'll be going to the shaman retreat in Susudel in just a few minutes. Therefore, I wanted to sit down and write my intention for what will be my very first psychedelic experience ever. I will be drinking San Pedro (mescaline). As I had mentioned in my previous entry, this was supposed to happen in May with my family. However, the shaman got sick and he could not conduct the ceremony on the scheduled day. Perhaps it was for the better because now I will be engaging in this experience with Rossana; I'm thrilled about having her as my guide.

Last night, Rossana and I sat around the fire to share our intentions with each other verbally. We also made a list on a piece of paper of the things we wanted to leave behind and burn on the altar. We then threw the paper into the fire to symbolize our commitment to leave those things in the past.

*My intention for this ceremony is to allow love to fully permeate my life.* I want to be more open to receiving love and to showing it freely to others, especially to the closest people in my life. I love Aubrey Marcus's quote: "*The ego is incapable of receiving love. It can only receive praise.*" I want to let love reign supreme and be the guiding force in all my decisions and endeavors. I especially want to show this love in my relationship with my wife Rossana. I want to leave the past behind—her past and mine, forget our mistakes, put fear and doubt aside, and be more loving towards one another in every sphere of our life together. I want to form a sacred union with my wife, one that withstands all adversity and is sustained by the power of love.

*I also want to become a more empathetic person.* In the past, I have shown a lack of empathy, even with my closest family members at times. I want to be more open to empathizing with other people. I want to understand others better before casting any judgment. I want to see others for their humanity first before making assumptions based on the few superficial characteristics available to me.

*I want to surrender my ego on the altar.* Ego plays a crucial role in life because it allows us to survive. However, it can be so fixated on pursuing its own desires that it can make us unhappy in the process. I want to let go of the ever-present need to be right, of imposing my views on others, of making decisions that are against my deepest desires because I want to be right or save face. *"The part that you're identified with, you must be willing to allow it to die."*

*Overall, I want to become a better person.* Through the crisis in my marriage, I was finally able to take off the masks I have worn all my life. I have always had this veneer of being a strong, overachieving man who doesn't show his emotions. When I separated from Rossana, I cried in front of another person for the first time since I was 13. This made me realize that I can be an even better, more complete person if I'm true to my deepest feelings. I can show my emotions and this doesn't make me weak. Quite the opposite, I'm stronger because I can show my full humanity to others and continue to make progress in every area of my life.

## **June 6, 2022**

### *The day after my first plant medicine experience*

Wow, the experience I had yesterday is hard to put into words. It's not hyperbole to say that until you live it, you won't know what it feels like, despite how accurately the experience is described. To summarize it, it was one of the most meaningful experiences I've had in my life.

Rossana and I prepared for the experience by abstaining from sex three days before and fasting starting at lunch the day before the ceremony. We arrived at the shaman retreat one day prior, on Saturday, January 4. We greeted Nico and Taita Alejo and shortly thereafter, we went down to the edge of the canyon at 2,000 m to watch the sunset and hopefully catch a condor in flight. Although we had an amazing view of the canyon, we

didn't see any condors. Rossana and I had a small argument there. Rossana slipped and fell on the ground and I said, "poor little Rossana, so afraid of so many things." Rossana took issue with this comment, and I fully understand why. I mention this little argument because it will help to put in perspective how caught up in our own heads we are until we're radically taken out of the ego mind.

After this short excursion, Rossana and I returned to the retreat grounds to try to get some sleep from approximately 6:30 PM until midnight. Obviously, neither of us was feeling particularly sleepy, so we did a meditation to relax and then got in bed. It was a few hours' fitful sleep for both of us.

At midnight, Nico came into the dorm room where we and another couple were staying and he woke us up for the ceremony. I felt excitement mixed with a little bit of fear in anticipation of the ceremony. Rossana and I got up quickly and went to the site of the ceremony which was at the entrance to the retreat. There is a beautiful, tall *huachuma* (San Pedro cactus) there right by the *temazcal* (sweat lodge). What a sight this was with a breathtaking starry sky in the background! The first part of the ceremony takes place here, around a fire pit surrounded by a circle of stones. We sat or stood outside this circle. There were ten people plus the shaman and Nico participating in the ceremony; besides us, there were three more couples.

At the beginning of the ceremony, the shaman briefly explained where we were to sit and what would happen if we got sick or in his words, if we needed to relieve ourselves in case we needed to purge ("*aliviarse*"). There was a small fire at the beginning of the ceremony, barely large enough to make some smoke. We started out by forming a circle around the stone formation.

The first part of the ritual was the *rapé*, ground tobacco blown into each nostril by the shaman. Wow, this was one of the most intense parts of the ceremony since I have never experienced something like this before. It felt like my brain was being scratched or jarred with something abrasive like sandpaper. Tobacco is absorbed very quickly through this route, so I almost immediately felt lightheaded and my bowel started moving. Both Rossana and I went to the bathroom to defecate right after the *rapé*.

Afterwards, in sequence, starting with the shaman and Nico, each of us played one of two instruments: a *sonaja* (a rattle with the pellets on the outside) or a drum. The person with the *sonaja* would sing and the person with the drum would accompany with the beat. This was my first experience of this kind. After hearing the shaman and Nico sing *ícaros*, I wasn't quite sure what I would do since I didn't know any, except the ones I had heard from Rossana but for which I didn't know the words by heart. When it was my turn, I sang something like "gracias huachumita, taita San Pedro, bendice." After I got done singing, I felt a little ashamed and told Rossana "well, this is awkward for those of us who don't know what we're doing." Rossana reassured me "none of us quite know what we're doing; don't worry." Rossana sang beautifully! She knows more *ícaros*, so she sang one she already knew.

Around this time, the first dose of San Pedro was passed around. Needless to say, this was an unnerving moment for me. However, I put my fear aside and drank the cup that was given to me; I would say there was approximately 100 mL of San Pedro in it. The drink is dark and bitter, the result of cooking the cactus for two to three days. The shaman reassured me that everything would be fine. Rossana had the same amount. The shaman told me that "in order for the medicine to work, I should focus intently on the fire." I did.

The ritual continued with more music and medicine being passed around. We had the fortune of having amongst us musicians—some of them indigenous—who delighted us with beautiful traditional songs from the Andes and *ícaros* played on the guitar, pan flute, and drums. Another medicine that was passed around was *osha*, *aguardiente* mixed with other medicinal herbs. It was strong but good. However, after drinking the *osha*, my stomach felt a little upset. Rossana asked me if everything was OK and I told her that I was feeling a little nauseous. When the sick feeling subsided slightly, a second dose of San Pedro was passed around. I told the shaman that this was my first time and whether I should have more. He said, "*no le tengas miedo*," "don't fear the medicine." I drank half a dose, about 50 mL.

Later, after everyone in the circle got done singing their initial *ícaro*, some people in the circle asked the shaman for permission to sing again. The shaman would gracefully assent to every request. After a couple of people sang and after drinking the medicines,

Rossana mustered enough courage to also ask the shaman to sing a song. "*Claro hermana,*" of course, sister, the shaman replied. We sat in front of the fire and with me playing the drum and Rossana the sonaja, she started singing some of the *ícaros* she knows. She did it beautifully, fully immersing into the experience.

I continued to feel a little sick, but it was starting to subside. At this time, another dose of San Pedro was making the rounds. Since it had been about an hour and a half since the last dose and I wasn't having any psychotropic effects, I decided to take one more full dose. A few minutes after the dose, I lay down with Rossana on the ground to watch the fire and stars. Three of the shaman's dogs joined us since our spot was probably the coziest there. I have to mention that one of the dogs, the shaman's favorite, made us laugh so much. It's a small, white chihuahua that I dubbed "baby Yoda" because of its resemblance to the Star Wars character. During the course of the ceremony, while the bonfire for the *temazcal* stones was being built, baby Yoda stepped into the circle and seemed to be directing the construction of the bonfire. She went from side to side, as though making sure everything was being carried out according to plan. We all laughed and the shaman said, "*ella es la shamanita. Se está asegurando que todo marche bien.*" "She's the little shaman. She's making sure everything is going according to plan." What a moment. Haha.

Rossana mentioned something about the fire and I answered quickly "yes, the fire is nice." She was talking about the large bonfire that had been built later in the night to heat up the stones for the *temazcal*. However, a few minutes later, I realized what Rossana was talking about. When the large bonfire was stoked and sparks went flying, the breakthrough moment happened for me: the sparks didn't just die down and fall on the ground. They became long, s-shaped figures that resembled colorful snakes! It was like fireworks or party streamers, only the best you ever saw. Some of these tiny snakes flew right into the sky and appeared to merge with the stars. Some made a circular motion before falling and eventually disappearing. The colors were bright and vivid and included yellow, orange, red, turquoise and teal. What a show this was! Rossana and I were in absolutely awe of the show we were witnessing. I asked Rossana "is this what fire is supposed to look like?!" I answered to myself: "only if you really tune into it." The advice of the shaman to look intently at the fire finally made sense to me.

After enjoying the fire show, it was time for the temazcal. The women got in first and Rossana was in fact the first one to do it. Inside the temazcal, there was a half-circle of men and a half-circle of women; all of us were around the fire pit at the center of the temazcal. The ceremony then began with Taita Alejo's blessing. What an experience this was! When the door of the temazcal was closed, it was pitch dark inside. The only source of light was the hot stones that were brought in from the bonfire. The stones, while they were still red hot, looked like translucent balls of fire with incredible energy within. Some of them looked like dragons or a scary figure that I reckoned was the guardian of the fire.

Inside the temazcal, Taita Alejo gave us his blessing. He would intermittently pour hot water mixed with herbs and plants on the hot stones to create steam. We prayed taking turns around the circle, so Rossana was the first to do it. After the prayer, each of us rubbed some sort of resin on the stone that was most recently brought in. When the resin burned on the stone, the glow was incredible! The color was turquoise and along with the sound that the singeing of the resin made, it was a magical experience. When it was my turn to pray, I thanked everything and everyone and I fully felt the gratefulness in my heart. I asked that this experience help us to form a sacred union with my wife Rossana and to appreciate and reconnect with the earth. After each prayer and blessing, all of us replied "*ajó*," amen.

We all sang in the temazcal. The acoustics inside were such that it was hard to pinpoint where exactly the sound was coming from. You simply felt the vibrations deep inside your soul. At some point, one of the girls sang *Cuñaq* and in that moment, Rossana quickly joined and so did everyone else. What a moment this was, the sound reverberating in the womb of the earth! "*Desde cuñac viene, agüita serpenteando, por las acequias y remolinos, hacia nuestras vidas.*"

The ceremony ended around 7 AM. With Taita Alejo's blessing, we exited the temazcal in the same order that we entered. To symbolize our emergence from the womb of the earth, we crawled out of the temazcal to remind us of our animal nature and our connection to the earth. Once outside, we hugged and thanked each other; I hugged Rossana feeling a supreme connection with her. I especially thanked Nico and Taita Alejo

for all the work they put into the ceremony. I could not have asked for a better first experience with plant medicine.

I should mention that one of the people in the ceremony was quite chatty and unfortunately for me, he decided to sit next to me the entire time. Haha. I said it was unfortunate because while we were having a magical experience, he would bring up topics such as work, physical ailments or trivial matters. Nevertheless, this interaction did not diminish the magnificence of the experience.

After the ceremony, Rossana and I changed and we went downhill from the retreat to the edge of the canyon once more. It was a beautiful day! Perfect temperature, around 19 C and sunny. Rossana and I—still with San Pedro in our system—just sat at the edge of the canyon in complete awe. I finally felt love viscerally within my soul. I realized that it's all about love; it is the force that creates everything. I heard once that "*bliss is every feeling fully felt.*" This felt real in that moment. I was finally beyond the Sam that rationally explains events, situations or emotions. I was feeling every feeling deep inside of me. I felt connected to everyone and everything, especially to my wife Rossana. As Ram Dass would put it, at that moment I stopped "*worshiping the gate and went into the inner temple.*"

The plants, swaying subtly with the wind, seemed to be bowing down or waving to us saying "welcome, we've been here all along; you're part of us!" We saw falcons gliding with the thermals, some swooping down on prey at incredible speed. At that moment, there was a hazy sun with a halo with rainbow colors around it. And then, the moment finally arrived when the majestic condors came out of their perches on the rock faces. What a moment! The king of the Andes commanding the entire canyon while a colorful halo crowned *Taita Inti*, the sun.

At some point, I lay down face down on a rock to watch the canyon. Rossana remembers this moment as one of the most authentic of the entire experience. She says I looked like a child completely immersed in the moment, amazed at everything. And I was. We saw beyond what the rational mind can grasp. For instance, when looking at the deep ravines on the hillsides in the canyon, Rossana said "look, it's just like the tendons in the back of our hands!" I was awestruck and said "yes, it does! We're part of it." Rossana and I

expressed our deep love for each other and the gratitude we felt for having partaken in such a magical experience together.

We then returned to the shaman retreat and we had some water and fruit that Taita Alejo and Nico had for us. We talked to them one final time, thanking them for the special moment. One of the couples that participated in the ceremony, David and Chandra, joined us on the ride back to the main road. On the drive, we listened to ícaros and other spiritual songs, including one that hit deeply, *Guacamayo* by Danit. We dropped off David and Chandra on the main road and made our way home.

In a way, the ritual continued after we got home. We were still in awe, fully immersing ourselves in each moment. We had some more fruit and continued to express our gratitude for everything that we have received from the earth. Later, Rossana prepared a special moment for us. She created a romantic ambience in the bedroom with *palo santo*, flowers, and music. She put on lingerie and an indigenous necklace I had bought for her. She was the most stunning I have ever seen her, her physical beautiful in full display. After a massage, we made love feeling our feminine and masculine energy fully merge.

We then got in the jacuzzi to watch the sunset, amazed at the colors and shapes we were seeing on the horizon over the mountains. We sat outside with Dina the dog until twilight, fully enthralled by nature's display. Rossana then cooked a delicious and healthy vegetarian meal that seemed to nourish every cell in my body. We were so tired that we went to bed around 9 PM. Once more, we expressed our gratitude to the universe for such a defining moment in our lives. We slept like babies for nine hours and woke up with a renewed sense of appreciation for life.

## **June 8, 2022**

### *Post-ceremony*

We're now in the integration phase. "*Psychedelics only show us the door; we have to walk through it.*" It's now up to us to do the work to apply the insights we gained from the experience to our daily lives. This process can take months or years; if we want lasting changes to take place, this is a critical step and perhaps the most important of the experience.



After this ceremony, I realize why different psychedelics have been used by almost every ancient culture as a powerful tool to heal and transform lives. For them, it was used in a ritualistic setting to give the experience the reverence it deserves. It's all about "set and setting." I understand now why the recreational use of these substances doesn't do justice to the potential contained therein.

As Jonathan Haidt puts it, *"Epiphanies can be life altering, but most fade in days or weeks. The rider can't just decide to change and then order the elephant to go along with the program. Lasting change can come only by retraining the elephant, and that's hard to do."* Integration is the retraining of the elephant. Rossana and I plan to use every tool available to us—therapy, meditation, prayer, journaling and affirmations, yoga and time in nature—to put the pieces together from our experience in a way that makes sense and can produce a permanent change in our lives.

I would recommend this type of experience to everyone. Really, to every person on earth. I think humanity as a whole could benefit from it. However, to fully reap the benefits, it must be approached with reverence. Crucial to this is setting an intention; engaging in it in a traditional, ritualistic setting; and having a clear plan for integration.

I'm glad to have experienced the power contained in plant medicine alongside my wife. Perhaps Rossana and I will be a position to help others heal and transform their lives in the future. We're open to what the universe may bring our ways. For now, as I stated in my intention, we're simply allowing love to flow freely in the present moment. *Ajó.*

