

AYAHUASCA! NOW WHAT?



**The Ayahuasca Wonder
Wheel**

Introduction and foreword about this content:

Welcome to the Ayahuasca Wonder Wheel! This version of the content is an abridged extract from the upcoming book *Ayahuasca! Now What? A user's guide and integration manual*.

The book will cover all aspects of drinking ayahuasca from the moment the idea hits you, right through to integrating the experience during the weeks and sometimes years afterwards. Medicine work is evolving rapidly, and discussions need to be had to catch up with this global explosion of ayahuasca usage in order to keep the practice at the least, as safe as possible, and at the most, beneficial for those who seek it. My aim is not to judge or condemn any particular way of drinking as superior or inferior, I firmly believe that different contexts will be better suited to certain people and their aims than others. I am also keenly aware that ayahuasca is being drunk all over the world in more ways than I can probably imagine, and so I hope to help people understand more about the topic so that they can make informed choices, instead of adding to the hot debate about who's way is the so called 'right' way.

I hope you enjoy this piece, find it informative, and that it helps you make the right decision about whether drinking Ayahuasca is right for you and to help you choose the best context for your needs. Part of my work is dedicated to help people enhance their experiences with ayahuasca and to be able to do so safely. I am also dedicated to aiding people prepare properly for their experience and grow from it through proper integration practices and to help this process through further healing. For further information about the work I do, please visit www.awakenedpotential.co.uk

I wish you blessings on your journey.
In love and service,

Sophia Vasiliou

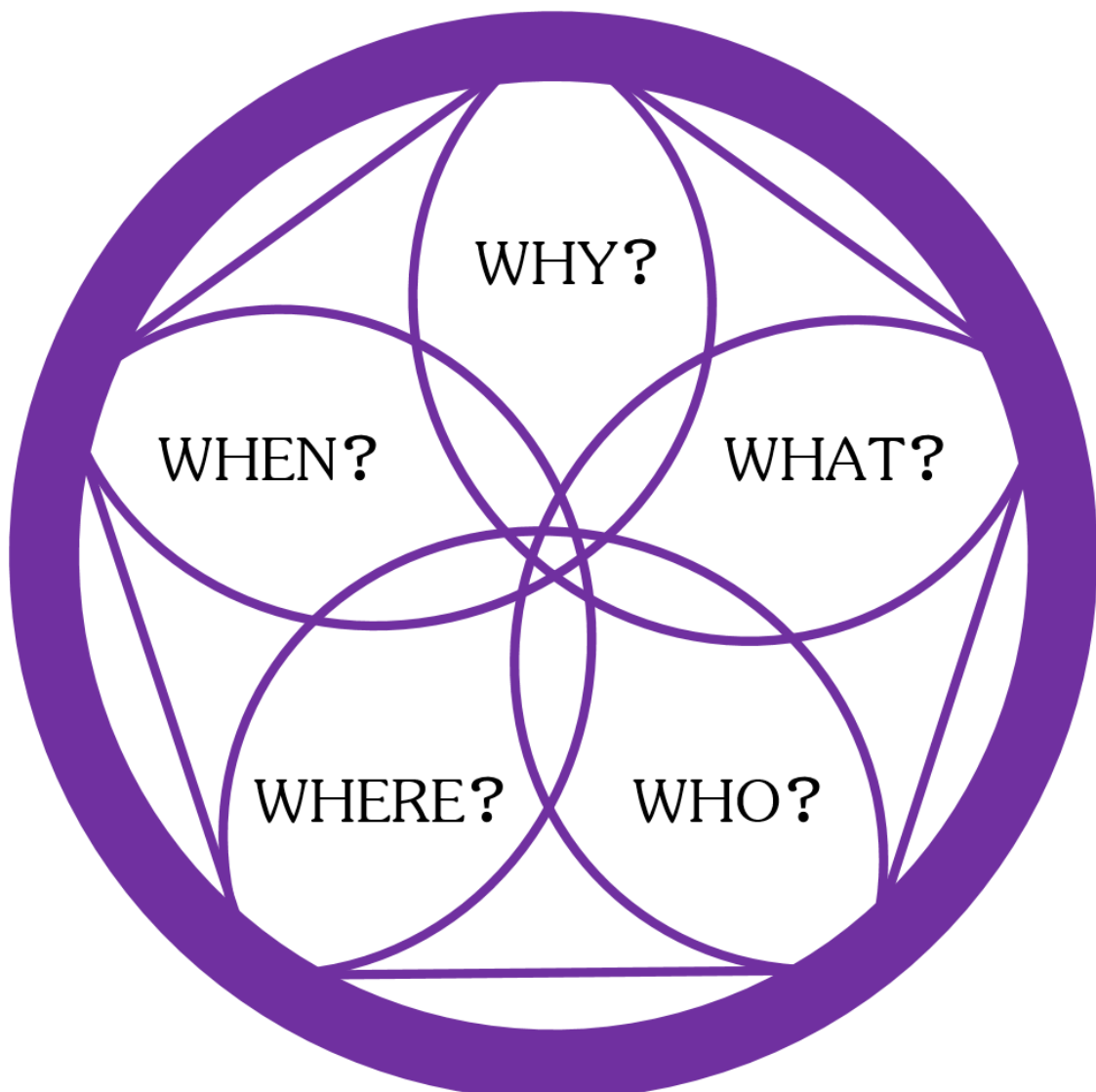
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The Ayahuasca Wonder Wheel

In this section of the book we will cover the necessary information that one needs to gather when making various decisions regarding ayahuasca. It is said that the quality of your life is determined by the quality of the questions that you ask, both internally and externally, yet it is difficult to ask the right questions if the topic being probed is alien to you. The order of the questions is also important in this case as most answers will create choice points, which will guide you towards some scenarios and away from others.

I created this Wonder Wheel as a guide to help you make the most important choices in your drinking process. Having the right guide, teacher, set and setting will be a pivotal part of your experience, so it is important to consider these things. You may be thinking that this all sounds very clinical, but as you will see, some of the questions ask you not to do research, but to go within to find the answers.

So, let's get started! There are five key questions that need to be asked during your discovery process, and each is as important as the other. At the end of this you will be much more confident that the conditions in which you are going to imbibe this potent brew will be more aligned with your needs than they would be if you did not find out the answers to these questions.



The first question is the possibly the most self-reflective, and yet once you have really figured this out, you will have a better chance of getting the most out of your experiences later. The question is WHY? Why do you want to drink Ayahuasca? What do you hope to get from the experience? This may sound like an obvious question, but it is very common for people not to have a particularly definite purpose. And as with most things related to Ayahuasca, how we are in ceremony is a conveniently small microcosm which allows us to look at how we are in our lives as a whole.

How often do you really think about what you want in life? We are very used to negating, as in knowing what we don't want, but what about being specific and detailed about what we do want? My use of the word specific here is important. Often we can be vague or general about an outcome that we are seeking, but many of us have been taught from a young age that to have a sure sense of aim was either dangerous (in that dreams don't come true and so you will get hurt if you want too much) or that wanting or asking for something or to dream big was plain wrong.

Below I will outline some of the most common reasons for drinking ayahuasca that I came across during my time in the Amazon, some vague, some specific:

'I started to hear the word Ayahuasca, and I kept hearing it, so I looked it up, researched everything so could and just found my way here to Peru, it's like I was called.'

This in itself is fine, and a very beautiful thing. When we are called to action by a force outside ourselves it can be very compelling, and, going into an experience with an open mind and heart, allowing it to unfold with no expectations is key. However, there is a major balancing act to be done here, as having a clear purpose or intention will define the other choices that you make. It also raises a theme that will come up in throughout this book, and also in life in general and that is about finding the correct balance between being guided and being in control of doing the guiding. As you will find, Ayahuasca is a vehicle for a dialogue between yourself and various dimensions of the spirit realms or aspects of your higher selves¹. In order for a conversation to occur, there must be at least two parties involved. And, going back to the original statement in this chapter, the quality of the questions asked, tends to affect the quality of the conversation. Many people lightly take the decision to drink, or go to a retreat with no clear purpose, other than something vague like 'tell me what I need to know' or 'heal me' or even 'do what you need to do' and in doing so, both abdicate all responsibility for the outcome, and also wonder why they don't find what they are really looking for and thus go home disenchanting or disappointed.

¹ I do not wish to enter a debate about what the visions or worlds of ayahuasca pertain to here. It is my belief that there is a dialogue with extra dimensional, intelligent entities during the ayahuasca experience and that it is also a place in which dialogue with some of the deepest most intelligent aspects of self can occur. Some may perceive this as one and the same thing and that the entities are self-generated to provoke dialogue and revelation. I do not condemn this view, we will never really know. I will be using the word spirit or spirits throughout this text as a simple way of denoting the sense of communication with 'other' that is a common occurrence during ayahuasca sessions.

I will also use the word ceremony throughout in honour of the original traditions which always imbibed the brew in a ceremonial setting, again this is not a judgement on those not sitting in a traditional context, just a simple way of referring to sitting with ayahuasca and having an experience with her.

Imagine, you get into a taxi and say, "You know this town, take me where I need to go". The driver may humour you and take you on a long, expensive ride, but you may end up in a very random place and no better off for it aside from seeing some things that may or may not have appealed to you. Likewise, I'm guessing you wouldn't use a satnav without first programming in a destination. Once you have done this, you can then trust it to then make certain decisions for you (often based on your type of road and traffic preferences that you have also pre-selected) and to lead you confidently through your journey. But you still have to drive the car and listen to the instructions and make adjustments to your driving according to traffic and road conditions that you encounter on the day. This is why *the why* is so important! It allows you to clarify your definite purpose and helps the experience to be more focused giving you and the plants coordinates from which to navigate. The ceremony is, like life, a co-creative experience, and we need to take responsibility for our part of the creating. I will be coming back to this notion in the chapters about preparation and navigation.

Why might you drink Ayahuasca? There are many reasons, and yours will be unique, but as I said, the answer to this will determine all your subsequent decisions about the process and so it is vital that you sit with yourself and think about this for a while.

Are you looking for physical healing for an illness or condition? If so, may be best suited to drinking in a traditional jungle centre with an experienced shaman will diagnose² your condition during the ceremony and then, in most cases prescribe a series of other medicines to take, which, depending on the condition may involve purgatives, saunas, baths, topical potions, decoctions or other plant extracts to drink. There are people who have said that Ayahuasca will cure anything, but this is simply not true, and in some cases will cause more harm than. In those cases, it is still possible to attend ceremonies, but only the shaman will drink, in order to do his diagnostics and healing work and again, this is likely to be followed up with a prescribed treatment regime. I do not rule out the possibility of the 'one ceremony completely healed me and changed my life' miracle stories that have been heard, but these so tend to be the exception rather than the rule and can build up false expectations about the process, which usually boils down to the simple formula of the effort put into the process is equal to the result that the process yields.

Ayahuasca is contraindicated to some conditions such as bad liver, kidney and heart conditions, epilepsy and diabetes, late stages of cancer or cases where tumours may rupture due to heavy purging and especially psychosis.³ Anyone who has a history of psychosis, personally or in their family, is strongly advised not to drink. If you have serious mobility issues or conditions that will be contrary to the harsh Amazonian environment and slow access to emergency medical facilities, you may want to consider looking for a shaman who is 'on tour' or a centre that isn't too remote and is linked to a medical facility. It is very important to do your research about your specific conditions, medications, retreat locations and if the people holding the ceremony have experience dealing with medical emergencies or similar conditions to yours.

² by diagnose, I mean, look at your energy and discover the root cause of the physical issue, which could have emotional, spiritual or psychological origins

³ This is not an exhaustive list and should not replace any medical advice from a qualified physician. Every personal case is unique and caution and proper research into the possible effects should be carried out.

Another two major reasons that turn people to ayahuasca and other forms of psychedelic therapy are addiction and depression. There are some centres that specialise in these treatments hoard have amazing support staff who can really help with the process so these may be a good place to start, although there are other drinking scenarios with non-indigenous space holders who are familiar both with ayahuasca and psychotherapy that could be a good fit.

Why else may you want to drink Ayahuasca? Some people get called for a deeper kind of healing, on emotional or spiritual levels. Some are seeking enlightenment, some are curious about this technology to access specific plant spirits and worlds, and some who see it purely as a means to get into altered states. Many people drink as a last resort, the feeling of stuckness is so overwhelming that they can't think of any other way to drastically shift their lives than to try something radically different. And often-times it works, as long as the person is ready to look at their 'stuff' and do their end of the work. The idea of drinking to be 'fixed' is a dangerous ideal to have. This is something that I will come back to a lot when discussing integration. Sometimes even when rapid changes occur in ceremonies, there is a tendency to slip back into old patterns, habits, thoughts and even illnesses if work to sustain the change carried out. This is possibly the most important part of the ayahuasca process and as such is the motivation behind writing this book.

So that covers a large range of 'Whys', and now the answers may begin to shape your research and decision-making process, but it by no means an exhaustive list.

The next big question is WHAT? What are you willing to drink? You may be slightly confused by this question, thinking isn't all ayahuasca the same, and the answer is a resounding NO. It varies tremendously throughout even the Amazon, let alone the analogues and other ayahuasca mimicking substances that people now brew. Here I will write briefly about some of the differences that may occur between brews and how these may affect your drinking experience.⁴

Traditional ayahuasca, as used by the Shipibo, indigenous group who are generally considered to be the masters of ayahuasca, is a mixture of only two plants, *banisteriopsis cappi* (the ayahuasca vine) and *Psychotria viridis* (chacrana, a wild coffee species) The chacruna leaves contain the dimethyltryptamine (DMT) and the vine, contains a monoamine oxidase inhibitor, M.A.O.I which stops the breakdown of DMT in the stomach, thus allowing the oral ingestion of the ayahuasca brew to result in visionary journeys and altered states which last around 4-6 hours. In this paradigm, the vine is seen as the wisdom and the force, and the chacruna, as the painter, which pharmacologically is correct, as there would be no visions without the DMT, but this wouldn't reach the brain if there was no ayahuasca vine to allow it to enter the bloodstream without being metabolised.⁵

⁴ These are only guidelines and are by no means meant to serve as absolutes. The decoction brewed on any given day will be unique in potency and effect for thousands of different reasons, however, I think it is good to get some guidelines in place at least so you know at least the ball park in which you are standing!

⁵ There are also some indigenous groups who only brew the vine alone, lending further credence to the statement that the ayahuasca vine is the force behind the experience.

It is because ayahuasca is an M.A.O.I. that anyone taking other M.A.O.I.s is strongly contraindicated to taking it, unless they have gone through a lengthy weaning off process first and the drugs are completely washed out of their system. For anyone on medication it is vital that you do your own research first into known contraindications with M.A.O.I.s on a medical database as well as searching for known contraindications with ayahuasca.

Other regions in the Amazon use slightly different plants, usually the vine plus things like huambisa (*Diplopterys cabrerana*) which is common even in Iquitos as chacruna does not easily grow there and the demand for medicine is extremely high. These are simply DMT substitutes. However, if you are concerned about the spiritual aspect of the medicine work, as in which spirits you want to be working with directly it is important to ask before you drink what plants are in the brew.

Many people put mapacho, the Amazonian wild tobacco species, *Nicotiana rustica* into the pot. Now, mapacho is a wonderful plant ally, and is considered by some to be the first master plant that taught the curanderos about the other plants in the forest. Yet it contains around 18 times more nicotine than tobacco cultivated for commercial use in cigarettes and the effect of that much nicotine on the heart, whilst in a wildly altered state, can greatly increase the risk of heart attack during a ceremony.

Toé, a member of the datura family, *Brugmansia suaveolens*, a potent hallucinogen that contains scopolamine, is also at times combined with the other ingredients. This is often done for tourists who have heard so much about the vision side of taking ayahuasca, that they centres are under pressure to ensure a vivid ceremony, sometimes with fateful consequences for the participants.

Mestizo⁶ curanderos have been reported to use up to 15 different plants in their brews, which for some people is fine and work, but for others is more of an issue and very confusing as there are now 15 instead of two main voices or spirits guiding the ceremony. For each new plant added into the mixture, the risk of contraindications goes up exponentially, so it is vital to stick to any specific rules that centres may give you about diet restrictions and medications in the run up to a ceremony.

Next, we come to ayahuasca analogues, also known as anahuasca. These are combinations of other plants that chemically resemble ayahuasca, but do not contain the vine. One of the best known is the combination of Syrian rue and a member of the acacia family. Many non-Amazonian centres and people serve this for their ceremony participants but still call it ayahuasca. They may do this for a few reasons. For one thing, these ingredients are more readily available and more potent than the traditional plants and so less is required to get a high yield, making it cheaper to produce. Some also argue that it is required to ensure that the ayahuasca 'boom' remains sustainable and doesn't deplete the rainforest stocks. It should be noted however that Syrian rue is a stronger M.A.O.I. than *caapi* and so the contraindications with medication and even foods containing certain amino acids such as Tyramine become more important to

⁶ In this case I am referring to people of mixed indigenous and Spanish ancestry in the Amazon basin.

consider before and after the ceremony. These include among other things fermented foods and overripe fruits such as bananas and avocados. It has also been shown that it can be much harder on the liver and is contraindicated where liver issues are present. Again, this is not meant to be a substitute for medical advice, I include this information so that you can go and do your own research on what you are prepared to drink and make your own choices about what is right for you.

Acacias are generally powerful, thorny trees and have a different feel to them than chacruna, although Mimosa, also in the acacia family, is a DMT rich plant which was perceived to be full of light and medicine when one of my teachers Don Enrique Lopez Fasanando looked at a sample of it in ceremony.

So, what are you willing to drink? An analogue, a mestizo admixture, 'pure' ayahuasca? Does it make a difference to you? This is where your why can start to inform the answer to your what. Does it matter to you which plants or spirits are in your medicine or are you simply looking for the effect? It is always important to ask the people you plan to drink with or buy your medicine from what exactly is in the brew, especially if you suffer from health conditions. The general rule of thumb is that the more plants, the more complicated it is to know the side effects or potential contraindications because of the way the alkaloids can interact with one another.

The next key question in your process is WHO? Who do you want to drink with? (if anyone!) This is both on a level of who will be holding the circle or space, but also who else will be in the ceremony? Are you going to do it alone with a sitter? Do you have the right knowledge and tools to be able to do that safely and is the person you have in mind to sit with you discerning enough to know the difference between when you are really in trouble as opposed to just going through a rough section of your process?

If you are drinking with others, although you can't actually choose the other ceremony participants per se, group size could be an important factor. Asking the ceremony leaders / retreat centre how many per group and how many space holders and facilitators per person could be an important aspect for you. Some spaces have 50-60 people drinking together, others may offer private ceremonies or do more intimate sittings of just a few people. What are your needs? If you are inexperienced or want to work with a deep trauma or wound, a smaller setting with less people may be better. Likewise, if you think you will be distracted by the noise or energy of lots of people around you in a chaotic space, I would also suggest that maybe less people could be better.

The larger the group, the more difficult it is to maintain the container and the more experienced the shaman or space holder needs to be. It is common for people to be loud, vomiting, sobbing giggling or even screaming in the room and it depends on the house rules how these things are handled (if at all) and what is or is not acceptable. Your proximity to other people in the space is also an interesting factor. With ayahuasca, all of your senses become amplified, including your potential for empathy, so if you are already sensitive to others, the medicine can increase that and in a crowded space, this could be overwhelming.

There is the possibly bigger question of indigenous or not? There are shamans that have had western apprentices for many years, who sing in native languages and can hold excellent ceremonies, whilst other non-indigenous space holders sing western style medicine songs or play music that honours the spirits and asks for healing, more like a church service than the deeper work that some of the indigenous songs invoke with their co-creative icaros that both narrate what is occurring in the ceremony and order the spirits and allies to perform certain tasks to heal and clean the patients as in the Shipibo tradition. Many Brazilian traditions are much more celebratory in their nature with lots of singing and dancing by all of the participants, whereas Shipibo ceremonies tend to be strict and simple, sitting in the dark with the voice of one or more shamans creating a vehicle that takes all of the participants into another universe with the specific intention of healing.

Watch videos or read about different traditions to see what draws you. Go back to your why. Deep physical healing may direct you to indigenous circles. Trauma or addiction work may lead you to westerners with backgrounds in psychology or to a centre where they at least have western facilitators who can counsel you through the unpacking of your process. Again, with your why and what in place, your decision about who will become a more simple one.

At which point we wander over to WHERE? Where are you going to drink? In your country? The Amazon? Another location which seems significant to you such as the Sacred Valley or somewhere in Central America? A retreat which offers multiple master plant ceremonies along side ayahuasca? In your home? There are a number of indigenous shamans travelling abroad these days. One of my teachers is currently in Thailand as I write this and has also been to Poland. This is happening more and more all over the world. Can you handle the climate, unfamiliarity and the potential discomfort of a rustic retreat centre in the Amazon or could that be too much for you and inhibit your process with the medicine? Do you need to give yourself time out to go on a retreat away from home and embark on the hero's journey by stepping out of your normal and into another world entirely? Are you trying to achieve deeper self-awareness in your day to day life and anchor these experiences in your normal environment to help them integrate more readily? ⁷

Ayahuasca and its analogues can be viewed as amplifiers of your senses. They tweak your normal settings from a controlled, highly filtered state of consciousness and open up your sensory gates to allow more data in. Do you want to drink in the city or a rural area or is the jungle the only place for you? Does any of this matter to you? There is not much to add to this line of questioning, as the answers to these questions will narrow your field of research to a much more manageable size.

Now we come to the final spoke of the wheel which is of course WHEN? When will you drink? Just as with the question of why, I suggest that you take some time for introspection to allow you to sense or feel when the time is right. When it is 'meant' to be, things often seem to fall into place and the right experience comes to you.

⁷ If you plan to do it at home or without guides, the space you create for the session is very important and something which I will discuss further later in the book in the section on navigation.

There are some specific times when ayahuasca should not be drunk. During pregnancy and just after giving birth, having an abortion or miscarriage are not advisable for a number of months until the recovery is complete. After surgeries or as mentioned earlier in late stages of cancer where there is a chance of rupturing wounds or tumours when purging. If you need to wean off medications, sufficient time needs to be given for this and it should be done under medical supervision, for some medicines this can take many weeks, so make sure you are informed and plan well ahead.

Some indigenous maestros will not serve ayahuasca to menstruating females, while others are fine with it, so it is important to ask what the guidelines are in advance in order to avoid potential disappointment, especially if you have an erratic or unpredictable cycle and are going on a short retreat.

For some people, drinking ayahuasca in the midst of a turbulent time in life will be overwhelming, and too much to handle, yet for others it will be the perfect 'pattern interrupt' that will help to break a negative cycle. As with the why, the when is intensely personal, you may try and wait for the so-called perfect time, only for it never to arrive because the lesson was to learn how to create space in your life to do things that are important to you. Or, you may hear the call one day and be in the amazon a few weeks later a bit confused and leave not knowing why you went. As with the wheel as the whole, the answers to the other questions will greatly influence your answer here either due to practical matters such as weaning off medications, raising the funds or creating enough time to go on a retreat to when you feel like you are in the right place or state in your life to go and have the experience that you are looking for.

One mysterious thing about working with ayahuasca that I have seen time and time again, is that the decision to drink often creates a cascade of change in your life. It is as if the intention causes the quantum field to create the correct ripples in your life and the world around you to bring you into alignment with the experience, if and when it will be right for you, although that could take years. Be patient!

In summary, take your time to consider all aspects of the Wheel and ask as many questions of yourself and of others as you need to so that you have as much clarity and wisdom around your decision to drink or not to drink. The clearer your purpose, the more likely you are to get a meaningful experience from drinking ayahuasca. This will also stand you in good stead on your return journey in the days, weeks and months that follow as it will help you to understand what happened in the context of your purpose for drinking in the first place. Integration is such a critical aspect of the process as it is where you bring the lessons and the healing experiences and new ways of being back from the other world, into your daily life in order to enact positive change. Without a goal in the first place, it is much harder to know what you want to bring back and therefore you may miss or overlook some key information and aspects of your ceremonies.
