

Santo Daime Journal

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Santo Daime

Ayahuasca is an herbal beverage made from plants native to the Amazon region, one of which contains the psychoactive chemical DMT (dimethyltryptamine). DMT belongs to the big family of hallucinogenic drugs that includes LSD and psilocybin.

Amazonian shamans have used Ayahuasca in traditional rituals that go back into the mists of time. Ayahuasca is legal in Peru where shamanism is a respected institution. It's illegal pretty much everywhere else in the world, as is DMT itself in any form.

There's a problem with blanket prohibition, however. If shamanism is a religious practice, shouldn't the use of Ayahuasca be protected by laws that guarantee the freedom of religion? That's the argument used by the plaintiffs in *Church of the Holy Light of the Queen v. Mukasey*, the 2009 trial that pitted the U.S. federal government against a small religious group based in Ashland, Oregon.

The Oregon church is a branch of Santo Daime, a new religious movement that started in Brazil in the 1930s. It's an eclectic religion that combines elements of Roman Catholic Christianity, African tradition, and Amazonian shamanism. The Portuguese word Daime ("give me") is the name of the sacrament used in church ceremonies—the herbal beverage known elsewhere as Ayahuasca.

The government claimed that its prohibition of Daime protected the health of church members and prevented it from being used for recreation outside the church. The judge disagreed. As of this writing, members of the Church of the Holy Light of the Queen in Ashland are free to consume their sacrament.

Westward, ho!

To make a long story short, my search for a shaman in Peru led me to members of the Santo Daime church in Oregon, the group mentioned in the previous post. They welcome visitors, although there's a fairly rigorous screening process.

I received a newcomer packet via email with information about the church and the Daime tea (aka Ayahuasca). One section contained a long list of foods, beverages, and medications to avoid before participating in a Daime ceremony.

It's extremely important to avoid drinking the Daime tea if you're also taking antidepressants such as Zoloft or Paxil. They can interact with one of the chemical ingredients in the tea—monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI)—with potentially

serious results. The list of foods includes things like chocolate, red wine, and fermented foods such as sauerkraut, all of which interact with MAOI.

I filled out the application form, which included an extensive medical history, and mailed it in. The next step was a personal interview. Usually, the interview is face to face, but since the church is on the west coast and I'm in Wisconsin, we did it by phone. The interviewer was very friendly and helpful.

I had a number of questions about the ritual. All Santo Daime services involve the consumption of the sacramental tea. There's an extensive liturgy of hymns and prayers in Portuguese, the language spoken by the founder of the church, Mestre Irineu. Some services emphasize quiet meditation while others involve ritual dancing that can go on for ten or more hours.

There's a dress code. I drove to the Boston Store and purchased a pure white cotton shirt and matching pants. My interviewer suggested that I also bring a blanket, a pillow, some fruit or other light snacks, and a water bottle. It sounds a bit like a slumber party.

My flight for Ashland, Oregon, leaves this afternoon. Wish me luck.

### Oregon and beyond

My wife Sarah and I arrived in Oregon during the rainy season. As our taxi drove into Ashland, we passed restaurants, motels, and shops named for Puck, Oberon, Stratford, and the Bard. There's an All's Well Herb and Vitamin Shop. The annual Shakespeare festival begins next month.

We're staying at Anne Hathaway's B&B in a room that blends Victorian comfort with funky charm. Tomorrow morning, a representative of the local Santo Daime group will drive me to their church, which is about twenty minutes outside town.

I admit I'm nervous. Part of it is typical social anxiety that anybody might get from being the newcomer among strangers. On top of that, I'll be participating in an unfamiliar religious ritual that involves consuming one of the most powerful psychoactive substances on earth.

I've taken psychedelic drugs before and survived and even enjoyed it. That was 40 years ago, however. The decades have drained my stamina and weighed me down with the choices of a lifetime. Plus, Ayahuasca has a rep for causing nausea and vomiting. To members of the Santo Daime faith, this purging is part of the process of spiritual cleansing. To me, it's one more unknown in a big day of them.

I have prepared as best I can. I have my blanket and pillow, my yoga mat and snacks of fruit and nuts. I am bringing as few expectations as possible. I will post again when I return from the journey.

## Taste

Perhaps we should discuss the taste up front. The Daime tea is strong, tangy, and earthy. I drank my cup in four long sips. The first sip was a surprise, the second familiar. It reminded me of a gift I received many years ago—a bottle of savory European liqueur, the kind made with herbs and vegetables.

The tea has a very intense flavor, but it wasn't unpleasant to me. I didn't have any problem drinking it. There was no discomfort or other physical reaction. Apparently, some people like to chew a mint or cough drop after drinking the tea to clear the palate. I brought a roll of mints for that purpose, but I didn't feel the need for one. The aftertaste was gone after five minutes.

## Sound

I drank the Daime tea in four big sips and took my seat on the men's side of the yurt. The young man seated next to asked me if I felt anything and I replied "Maybe a little." We waited. The members, dressed in white and seated in concentric circles, sang hymns in Portuguese.

The music ended and I noticed the sound of rain falling on the roof of the yurt. I closed my eyes and heard each raindrop falling through the sky and splashing over my head in a vast canopy of sound.

"Heightened perception," I thought. Little noises darted around me—people exhaling in a whoosh, glass and metal clinking, soft laughter. I could pick out a sound and follow its trajectory through three-dimensional space until it vanished in the distance. The yurt disappeared. There were no boundaries.

I'm an amateur musician with poor eyesight who has been focused on sound and music since childhood. I've spent a lot of time sitting and listening to natural and recorded sound. My time in the Santo Daime service, seated at the center of an infinite acoustic sphere, was perhaps the most beautiful experience of my life.

## The first gift

Like a lot of Americans, I'm preoccupied with schedules and appointments. I look at the clock every few minutes and calculate how much time I have for my current task and when the next deadline will arrive. It's been like that for so long that I hardly think about it.

There are no clocks in the Church of the Holy Light of the Queen. I wasn't wearing a watch. My cell phone was within reach but turned off.

After a few hymns and a period of silence, I looked up at the sun coming through the opening in the roof of the yurt. My mind went where it does at such moments and I wondered how much longer the service would last.

Then I thought, "Who cares what time it is?" It felt nice to stare at the daylight with no anxiety for what might come next.

Suddenly, a huge weight fell off my body. It felt like chains breaking and falling away. As the Daimé tea expanded my perspective from the small ego to a much larger place, I looked down and saw the burden I'd been carrying my whole life.

The compulsion for time shrank down into a small blob. As I watched it recede, I understood what I'd done—I let clocks and schedules fill up my life and take over. I surrendered to them as they whipped me onward faster and faster.

I looked up at the sun coming through the roof of the yurt, the only timekeeper I needed. I felt light and clear.

That happened ten days ago. I'm back in the world of schedules and deadlines, but I don't feel driven anymore. I feel less hurried, more patient. When the obsessive need to check the clock returns, as it has a couple of times, I recognize it and I know how to put it back in its place.

I'm very grateful.

## Dissolving boundaries

The Santo Daimé service that I attended lasted about seven hours. We sang traditional hymns, sat in silent meditation, and listened to prayers, stories, and lessons from the leaders of the church, Jonathan Goldman and Jane Seligson.

There were two servings of the Daimé tea, one at the beginning and another perhaps three hours later. (As I noted in a previous post, I wasn't thinking in hours and minutes by then.) The tea was served in a smaller building outside the big yurt. I

waited in line and approached the table where Jonathan was holding a glass and a flask of the brown liquid.

The spiritual leader of the Church of the Holy Light of the Queen is a tall man with a strong presence. He spoke often during the service and I held on to his words as best as I could, but the beautiful sound of the rain drew me away and the tea dissolved everything in a bath of light.

He held up the flask and poured out a small amount.

“This will help you go much deeper into the experience,” he said as he handed the glass to me.

I drank it and thanked him. Then I walked out onto the wooden pavilion by the big yurt. I listened to the rain falling on the canopy overhead and watched the mist gather over the Cascade Mountains.

Freedom

After drinking the second serving of the Daime tea, I walked back into the yurt and took my place. I was sitting on the floor propped up against a back jack with my grandfather’s old World War I Army blanket folded into a pillow under my legs.

The second part of the service was devoted to healing. As I understand it, many people come to Santo Daime for help with addiction, chronic depression, and other serious conditions. We sang a hymn to Mãe Oxum (Mother Oshun), the divine spirit of love.

Oh take me home  
Oh take me home  
Oh Mãe Oxum  
I ask you for my healing

The words of the hymn—Oh take me home... I’m here to love... I want to live—rose and fell within me like waves.

Jonathan Goldman—the Padrinho or spiritual leader of the group—spoke about healing and freedom. He said that real freedom comes through forgiveness and the acceptance of the love of God. He said, “If you run away, you’re just making it worse.”

That’s when the system crashed.

It looked like a hammer smashing a plate glass window. It happened again right away, this time as the claws of a huge animal ripping through a thick barrier. Then a cloud of black smoke dissolving in the wind.

My inner monologue stopped. The barrage of words that had been chattering out of my brain on and on for sixty years came to a dead halt.

I looked down at the wreckage of my world, the remains of a towering wall I'd built to keep myself separate and alone. I saw the fragments of fear, anger, delusion, and every one of those endless words. It was all a trick and I was the trickster, the devil lying to myself.

Jonathan said, "The Daime creates a space, an empty, neutral space where things can happen."

So it does. I prayed to God to fill the space with divine love. So it is.

The default mode network

I come from a family of chemists. My mother and father were chemists as were my grandfather and great-grandfather. I'm not a scientist myself, but I was brought up with that worldview and I still see things that way.

So there I was, sitting on the floor an hour or so after drinking the second serving of the Daime tea, looking down at the wreckage of my ego and marveling at how quickly it all fell apart. When rational thought eventually returned, my first question was:

"Did the concentration of the chemical in my bloodstream cross a threshold level?"

That explanation made sense because, whatever happened, it felt like somebody flipped a switch. One moment I was my familiar, cranky self, and then... BLAM! The walls came tumbling down and I was suspended in an empty space, surprised by total peace and freedom.

The only similar experience I can recall is from the early days of my meditation practice. Indeed, there are research studies that show similarities in the way that meditation and psychedelic drugs act on the nervous system. Both reduce activity in the default mode network, the parts of the brain that kick into gear when we're not focused on external tasks.

I'm way out of my depth with this issue, and experts disagree, but it appears that the default mode network is the engine that creates our inner life, our sense of identity in relation to other humans and the world around us.

The default network may generate models of reality and drive the inner monologue. It may also create illusions and habits and other traps that keep us locked in our

egos. Whatever it does, for good or ill, requires a ton of mental processing. Psychedelics and meditation pull the plug.

In my case, the shutdown was a big relief. It felt like a huge burden falling off my shoulders. All the accumulated noise of a lifetime fell away, leaving a sense of clarity and liberation. It happened in a flash, just like you'd expect if a chemical in your bloodstream reached a threshold level and shut down one of the major systems in your brain.

Of course, it also felt like a gift of God's loving grace. Perhaps those are just two ways of describing the same experience.

## Safety

There were thirty or so people at the Santo Daime service I attended, all of us in pure white. At the beginning, after everyone had consumed the tea, we filed into the circular room and took our places on the floor and settled in for the journey. The church founder, Jonathan Goldman, spoke and said something that I carried with me like a talisman on my voyage.

He said, "You are safe here. This is a well-kept space."

That promise made me comfortable from the beginning because I knew it was true. For one thing, I liked and trusted the people in the room with me.

What's more, every Santo Daime service has "guardians," church members who don't drink the tea. They're trained to handle unexpected situations and offer help if someone has a difficult time. There were four guardians at the service I attended—two men and two women.

The bottom line for safety, however, is that we were acting legally. If you try something similar on your own or with friends, you're risking a visit from the cops. That might not happen, but the possibility would always be there, and that's not the sort of thing you want floating around in your mind after you take a psychedelic.

With a safe platform, I was able to get down to business. Occasionally, during the periods of silent meditation, I closed my eyes and drifted off into the beckoning fractal vistas. That's nice, but it's a sideshow, and there was always a hymn or a prayer to bring me back and remind me that I had work to do.

The tea, the music, and the communion of sincere people form a single experience. A Santo Daime service is a finely tuned engine for propelling you towards a goal. Some people come for healing, others with unresolved life issues, others for spiritual growth. You choose the purpose and set the trajectory, then you drink the tea and set sail.

The work continues

It's been three weeks since my visit to the Santo Daime church in Ashland. I've learned a few things.

From my single experience, the Daime tea is very powerful but fairly gentle. I never had the sensation of being blasted out of a cannon that I've had with certain other psychoactive substances I might name. That may have something to do with the context.

Although the tea contains well-known chemical ingredients, it's difficult to compare it to other substances. The tea is one of many parts in a complex whole. The results you get depend on all the elements in a unique ceremony shared with fellow voyagers.

The ritual context gives the Daime tea its unique power, but it may also limit its appeal. Some people who might benefit from the experience won't be interested because of the religious elements. We need secular alternatives for those folks.

The day may come when you can take a psychedelic in a supportive environment under the care of a doctor or therapist. There's a lot of scientific and legal work that has to be done before that day comes. Full speed ahead.

I started this journey with a question: why are psychedelics helpful for people who suffer from serious conditions like addiction and depression? My time in Oregon gave me the start of an answer.

When people ask me about the Daime tea, I tell them that it's like pressing the reset button on a computer. Everything shuts down and starts over with a clean slate. In my case, two cups of the tea broke through a wall of mental noise and swept away decades of useless anger and resentments.

I hadn't paid much attention to all that junk until it was gone, but afterwards I saw what a mess I'd created for myself. Those thought patterns kept looping over and over until they hardened into the bars of a prison. The Daime tea helped me break free.

People who suffer from addiction and depression have their own feelings of mental and emotional imprisonment. Some of them might welcome the sense of liberation that came to me in Oregon. Everyone's different, of course, and it's important to be cautious as we embark for new territory. Still, I think there's hope.

In the weeks since I hit my inner reset button, it's been interesting to watch my mental and emotional systems come back online. Some of the old dysfunctional patterns have returned, but they stick out like a sore thumb now. I see them for what they are and I dismiss them.



Whatever happened to me seems like it's going to last. That's another reason for hope.