

**The Sacred Voyage: a holotropic perspective on mental health**

Research into the effects of ayahuasca on mental and physical well-being. The experiences of seventy participants of therapeutic sessions.

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Published by the foundation: **In Search of Essence**  
Original publication in Dutch. Translation by *Joost Waterborg*  
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Painting “Eye of the world”, by Maria Groot

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About the authors



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Definitions

**Ayahuasca:**

Ayahuasca is a Quechua word. Quechua is the language of the ancient Incas. There are many translations for the word ayahuasca, one of which is 'little death'. Literally, the word means 'liana of the soul', ('aya': spirit, ancestor or deceased person; 'huasca': liana), referring to the climbing plant *Banisteriopsis caapi*, which supplies one of the main ingredients for the ayahuasca brew. In Quechua, both plant and brew are known as ayahuasca.

**Set:**

Intention, expectations and motivation of the user.

**Setting:**

The context in which the use of ayahuasca takes place.

**Sacred Voyage:**

The Sacred Voyage is a rite of passage undergone to (re)find one's own essence. It is a method that consists of therapeutic, oriental meditative, shamanistic and spiritual/religious elements. Through breathing techniques or an entheogenous agent, an alternative state of consciousness is reached. An emphasis on set, setting and preparation is characteristic for the Sacred Voyage.

**Preparation:**

A thorough preparation for the Sacred Voyage means focusing and meditating on a theme (which is determined during a two hour intake session) which is relevant for the participant. Also, participants should fast for a minimum of three days prior to undertaking the Voyage.

**Healing:**

Beneficial to mental and physical health.

**Transformational:**

Allowing people to fulfil the 'act of becoming' through their own essence.

**Lasting positive effects:**

Those aspects that have noticeably and significantly improved for the participant in question, in comparison with their state prior to undertaking the Sacred Voyage.

## Summary

This report documents the experiences of seventy people who, within the last two years, have taken part in at least one, and at most four ayahuasca sessions in the setting of the Sacred Voyage. Before the actual Sacred Voyage is made, an intake session takes place to determine what the participant's theme is. The ayahuasca ceremony is held at the end of several weeks of preparation in which the participants meditate on their theme, focus on their intentions, stick to a prescribed diet and spend the last days prior to the ritual fasting. The ceremony takes place in a one-day session with six to eight fellow Voyagers, and is led by two experienced guides.

Over the last two years, 114 people have taken part in Sacred Voyage ceremonies. These people have been approached by email to request their participation in this research project. 85 of them indicated their willingness to partake and a total of seventy respondents returned the quantitative and qualitative questionnaires within the requested time.

The questions can be grouped into several categories, such as the participants' backgrounds, prior experiences, the actual experience itself, the extent to which it is healing, the transformational effects, the positive effects of the transformation process, the importance of guidance and preparation, the aftereffects and the physical effects.

The five final questions were of a qualitative nature and gave the respondents the opportunity to expand on the theme of their voyage, their expectations with regard to that theme and on whether or not their expectations were met. Finally, respondents were provided with the chance to write about the results yielded by their ayahuasca experience, to make a statement about the use of the brew and, if they were so inclined, to make any additional personal comment.

The participants' backgrounds varied widely. Men were slightly outnumbered by female respondents, respondents had generally enjoyed advanced education and most had earlier experiences in the field of personal growth and development. For most, the Sacred Voyage provided their first encounter with entheogenous substances.

The experience was described as healing or transformational by most respondents (resp. 74 and 75%), 9% had a negative experience, 6% described a 'bad trip' and for 5 % the results were neutral. Virtually all respondents -including those reporting a negative experience- considered the use of ayahuasca in this setting as healing, or salutary for both their mental and their physical health.

The transformational effect has been measured along the parameters of self-insight, self-acceptance, insight into one's relationship with the world and with family, self-confidence, self-esteem, dealing with fears and the importance for personal development. Scores reported for these parameters, on a scale from one to ten, ten being the most favorable result, range from 6.8 tot 8.8. The positive effects of transformation, such as feelings of oneness, feeling happy, or happier, experiencing joy, love, energy of life, emotional stability, clarity of mind and calmness of spirit, feelings of connection with nature and insight into and connection with higher things all scored in a range between 6.6 and 8.3. Here, reports of experiencing love scored highest, while a connection with nature yielded the lowest results.

The role of both preparation for and guidance of the Sacred Voyage were considered of great importance (score 8.9), as was the role of music, which scored 9 points.

After drinking ayahuasca, most respondents experienced physical effects, of which nausea and vomiting were the most common. In spite of these effects, the use of ayahuasca was generally considered to be physically salutary.

Most participants reported a heightened sensitivity to impressions from their environment for a number of days after their session. Negative aftereffects were mostly reported to have worn off after fourteen days, while 60% of respondents considered the healing effects as long-lasting.

None of the participants regarded ayahuasca as a drug or even a part drug, most considered it to be a mind-expanding substance or a sacrament. Most would recommend the use of ayahuasca to others, provided that they had the proper motivation to use the brew.

This report brings forth the conclusion that for many the use of ayahuasca within the setting of the Sacred Voyage, is a way to revive the connection with their own essence. In doing so, ayahuasca can provide a means of raising lives to a higher level of consciousness and well-being.

## Foreword

The first time I drank Ayahuasca is carved into my memory forever. In 1993 I was among the participants of a Santo Daime ritual in the German state of Bavaria. At these Santo Daime meetings Ayahuasca, a bitter tea originating from South America, is drunk. Ayahuasca is famous for its visionary qualities, and for the way it cleanses both body and soul. I had gone to this ceremony after being invited by a psychologist I had met at a San Francisco conference.

I was a bit of a 'late-bloomer'. After having witnessed a considerable number of friends lose their mind in the sixties and seventies, the results of what was known as a 'bad trip', I decided to keep a respectful distance from what were considered to be consciousness-expanding substances. It had become clear to me that these substances could help expand the mind consciousness but it was equally clear that this alleged shortcut to insight could come with some unexpected risks. My experience as a counselor in a therapeutic community for drug addicts had also given me an up close look at the daunting images of the havoc addictive drugs can wreak on human life. However, I do not hold the opinion that all drugs are necessarily harmful.

Unfortunately, the view that drugs are by definition destructive dominates public opinion with a saddening tenacity. This view unjustly ignores the centuries of experience in using harmony-enhancing, consciousness-expanding plants. Unfamiliarity with these favorable aspects is what distorts any debate on the use and merits of *entheogenous* ('awakening the deity within') plants.

I myself have also been confronted with my fair share of incomprehension towards Ayahuasca, especially when I attempted to travel through customs, going from Brazil to The Netherlands, carrying several gallons of Ayahuasca in jerry cans. With sweaty hands I tried to bring Ayahuasca into the country for the Santo Daime religion for the very first time. At the time, Ayahuasca was positively illegal and importing it could mean serving several years in prison. The Justice Department did not know that this brew had a history of millennia of use in religious rituals in the Brazilian Amazon, among other places. They were also unaware that, in Brazil, Ayahuasca plays an essential part in a recognized religion.

But let's jump back to Germany, where I experienced my first Ayahuasca ritual with some friends. After having sung several songs in an indiscernible tongue (which later turned out to be Brazilian Portuguese), the other participants suddenly burst out in enthusiastic German singing. My first thought was: "Where have I ended up? It's almost like I'm in the war, surrounded by Bavarians". At the same time the leader of the ceremony sternly looked my way and said -fortunately in English-: "No, we are not Nazis!" Being taken aback by the fact that my thoughts were apparently out there open to everyone, I suddenly realized one of the alternative names for the Ayahuasca brew I had just taken: 'telepathine'. The illusion that thoughts are there only for private use suddenly belonged to the realms of history.

The experience at this ceremony spurred me on to travel to Spain, where Padrinho Alfredo, the leader of the Santo Daime religion attended a European meeting. I was provided with the opportunity to invite him for a visit to The Netherlands. He accepted my invitation and visited the following year.

In Spain, I witnessed for the first time how important and powerful the ritual setting is for guiding the contents of people's consciousness, awakened by the Ayahuasca, to their proper destination.

It is well-known that consciousness-expanding substances can release these contents of man's awareness. However, what should be done with this energy, the emotions and the visions that

are released? Without adding structure to the experience, only those truly strong of body and mind may afterwards be able to regain a firm foothold. Repressed trauma, emotional blockades, questions of meaning in life, sickness and health, oneness and harmony, or their opposites; these are all issues that are brought to the surface by consciousness-expanding substances.

In Leiden, Holland, the well known Prof. Dr. Bastiaans gained international reputation for using LSD to have his heavily traumatized patients, WWII concentration camp survivors, relive their memories and deal with them. One of Bastiaans' colleagues, the Czech psychiatrist Dr. Stanislav Grof performed an incredible feat by managing to document, under a communist regime, the experiences his patients in a psychiatric institution had under the influence of LSD. It was remarkable in its own right that his patients reported near-death experiences, rebirthing, memories of their natural birth, past deaths and reliving a whole range of spiritual and traumatic experiences. The fact that Grof was not only courageous enough to place his patients' experiences in the foreground, but also rejected the communists' strictly atheist paradigm is a true litmus test for any entheogenous experience. Courage is absolutely indispensable when stepping into worlds that normally remain closed. By recognizing these transpersonal experiences the traditionally trained psychiatrist placed himself outside the dominant scientific paradigm that only acknowledges a material origin of consciousness.

My personal experiences with the now formally founded and registered Santo Daime church in The Netherlands were by all measures tempestuous. A wide interest for this form of religious experience proved to exist. During a visit to Holland by a group of Brazilians it turned out that the police were also thoroughly interested in our affairs. Police raids of Santo Daime churches throughout Europe, coordinated by Europol, were executed simultaneously. Church leaders were arrested, and it was especially bizarre to find out that I was being taken to a prison holding unit where I had once worked as a consultant for the Justice Department, motivating drug addicts to lead a drug free existence. Civil servants threateningly ensured us they would 'put us away for years'. Fortunately I had done a lot of preparational work, allowing our fully settled in attorney Adèle van der Plas to swiftly turn up to submit the church statutes and the relevant references to leading academic experts on these specific matters. In the anxiously anticipated trial at an Amsterdam Court the scientific statements proved to be of overriding importance for the legalization of the Dutch Santo Daime church. It cannot be overemphasized that the seal on entheogenous plants, formed by the European drug legislation, can only be broken by the words of science. Most European states followed the Dutch lead and legalized and formally acknowledged the Santo Daime religion, which is now represented in almost every European country. Regular religious meetings are held throughout Europe, sometimes bringing together hundreds of participants.

This introduction is essential to sketch the historical frame of reference from which the Western world traditionally regards alterations of consciousness through the use of entheogenous. The Santo Daime church had the benefit of being able to lean on an ancient South American tradition of using entheogenous plants. The interesting thing about the work of Lars Faber is the direct inspiration he finds in Ayahuasca. From its astral dimension it helps him to find a direction in his work and to define the contents of his writings. This is an interesting development and should, in my view, be subject to the same rights and conditions as those that apply to existing recognized church communities. It goes without saying that people's actions should be accounted for in processes that deeply affect one's most intimate and personal levels. Lars has initiated this through sound scientific research. This research is a necessary condition for enabling us to retain the birthright to expand our consciousness through the use of entheogenous plants.



The following research report documents the findings of research conducted by Lars Faber and expert Dr. Maria Groot, research into the experiences of seventy clients of Lars's Sacred Voyage practice. This solid approach is testimony to the intention to use the Golden Key responsibly. The Golden Key here represents the well-informed use of entheogenous in a religious and therapeutic setting. Lars's paper is the tangible form of the need for theoretical education in these matters, required, in conjunction with practical experience, to be able to do this important work. Transpersonal psychology recognizes a wider framework than the limited theories in the fields of conventional psychology and psychiatry. Lars's books have shown him to be well-versed in the transpersonal views, a basic requirement for any therapist aiming to work with the Golden Key. The combination of a strong entheogenous agent and a solid therapeutic approach may prove a promising Key in the right hands, enabling the user to transform a great deal of suffering.

The 'bad trip' phenomenon (resulting from too much information, use at an inopportune moment, in the wrong circumstances, and/or without the right guidance) is largely caught out through a phase of sound preparation. Through a structured interview about the potential participant's medical and psychological condition, many risks are brought down to acceptable proportions. The research shows that even people who underwent negative experiences during their Voyage later regarded these as useful learning opportunities. This goes to show that proper preparation, context for interpretation, surroundings and guidance are of decisive importance for any entheogenous experience.

This report, written by Lars Faber and Dr. Maria Groot, doesn't merely present the dry statistics that accompany any scientific effort. Rightly so, a lot of space has been reserved for the verbatim accounts of Sacred Voyage participants. Some critical remarks aside, the dominant response reflects how amazement abounds at the possibilities that arise for new perspectives and a new way of living.

The entheogenous path of learning has a lot of potential for harmony and healing for those people out to find them. This work may hand many a person the handles to the meaning of Aldous Huxley's use of William Blake's quote in *The Doors of Perception*: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: Infinite" (William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). Lars Faber's use of this quote in his book "The Sacred Voyage" is very significant, as he uses it to indicate the aim of his labors. That the entheogenous experience under the right guidance and the right conditions may help to cast new light on the world is the message of every truly Sacred Voyage.

I hereby wish to express my sincere hope that the brave workers beating this new track will be given all the support that is needed. Support from both the material and the spiritual dimension.

*Hans Bogers, co-founder of Santo Daime The Netherlands  
Wassenaar, July 2008*

# 1 Introduction

Ayahuasca is an entheogenous brew from the Amazonian rainforest and is used by local shamans. It is also used in rituals of the Santo Daime church. This report documents ayahuasca's use for therapeutic purposes in a standardized setting. In chapter two, we will discuss our holistic view on mental health, which is the starting point for the Sacred Voyage. Chapter three describes the research design, the research sample, the questionnaire and the parameters that are assessed. This is followed by the results of the survey, in chapter four, which presents tables of the quantitative and gives a general impression of the qualitative results, which are given in full in appendix 2. Chapter five discusses the survey results and compares them with findings of earlier studies in this field. Finally, chapter six holds our conclusions and recommendations.

## 2 The Sacred Voyage: a holotropic perspective on mental health

### 2.1 Background

Over the last few years we have acquired a wealth of experience in the therapeutic guidance of people who have used ayahuasca within the setting of the Sacred Voyage. This experience convinced us that the method on which we report through this medium, is beneficial to people, provided the method is applied under the right conditions. This method has been dubbed 'the Sacred Voyage' and is based on the controlled, effective and safe use of the entheogenous brew ayahuasca, which finds its origins in the Amazonian rainforest.

The Sacred Voyage method was developed by Lars Faber and consists of therapeutic, oriental meditative, shamanistic and spiritual/religious elements. The book that accompanies the method and goes by the same name, has the subtitle 'the pilgrimage to the soul'. The main goal of the Sacred Voyage method is to help people get in contact and develop a lasting relationship with their essence (also known as their true self, inner Child or Divine Child).

Ayahuasca is a brew which originated in the Amazonian region and was first discovered by the rainforest's native inhabitants. We feel obliged to express our respect and gratitude to the shamans in 'the world's breeding ground' for making ayahuasca available to Westerners. To these shamans, ayahuasca, known to them as the 'Mother of all Medicine', is a holy sacrament, serving many purposes. Ayahuasca is used for spiritual initiation rituals, as medication, to induce clairvoyancy, for astral travel and for relaxation.

It has been known for some time that ayahuasca possesses some special medical qualities, as has been testified in earlier publications. As Dr. Charles Grob concluded from his 1993 Hoasca project: *"Ayahuasca is perhaps a far more sophisticated and effective way to treat depression than SSRIs [antidepressant drugs]," Grob concludes, adding that the use of SSRIs is 'a rather crude way' of doing it. And ayahuasca, he insists, has great potential as a long-term solution.*

One of the articles about the healing properties of ayahuasca, which received worldwide attention, was written for National Geographic by Kira Salak and covers Salak's personal experience with the brew. She describes how an ayahuasca cleansing ritual helped her accomplish what years of psychotherapy had failed to deliver. A day-long ayahuasca ritual rid her of a heavy depression. Lars Faber experienced a similar feat and has written "The Sacred Voyage" to describe the process he underwent. Later, dozens of other people would report having had similar experiences after using ayahuasca under his therapeutic guidance.

In spite of the promises associated with ayahuasca, little interest has been shown by the scientific fields of medicine and psychiatry. In this day and age, treating symptoms and prescribing medication like antidepressants seems to be an easier approach than tracking down and actually curing the source of the ailment, even though for shamans, this is 'all in a day's work'.

This paper reports on an effect which cannot be measured, explained, proven or replicated in double-blind, randomized, placebo-controlled studies, not only because it does not deal solely with average scores but also because it is contingent on highly individual psychological and somatic processes. The common denominator of these processes is that, despite the individually unique path people travel along, the goal is always the same: to find one's personal essence and fulfill 'the act of becoming'.

These goals, and their fulfillment, can only be assessed introspectively by the individual in question. However, because the phenomena at hand are often described as healing, transformational and even as peak experiences, the individual contributions to this research seem worth reporting and delving into more deeply.

This report will cover the findings of those who have experienced the use of ayahuasca in the setting of the Sacred Voyage, as well as the conditions under which the therapeutic sessions take place. The main focus will be on the results achieved by clients in the fields of personal growth and emotional well-being. The data used to assess these phenomena have been acquired through both quantitative and qualitative research, targeting clients of the Sacred Voyage therapeutic practice.

The data provided to us by our clients who were willing to share their most intimate and personal processes of awareness with us, have been treated with the utmost integrity. Assuming that the words connected to the experiences of our clients will speak for themselves, we feel strengthened to report in this manner, which we recognize as rather subjective. However, a factor of objectivity in this research is that clients only report in retrospect. It was not until late in 2007 that we decided to approach our clients for their personal and entirely voluntary contribution to this project. We have chosen this retrospective approach to prevent us from influencing or tainting the therapeutic processes and experiences. Our gratitude goes out to those seventy volunteers who have granted us a glimpse of their highly personal developments.

## ***2.2 Defining mental health***

Mental health: A quality of fully fledged human existence, being more than a mere absence of psychological and psychiatric disorders and more than a standard measure for assessing the

mental health of an individual. (The term quality does not refer to a generic and objective norm for mental health itself, but to the more normative nature of the term mental health.) The operational method of the Sacred Voyage uses Trimbos's 1959 definition of mental health, being: 'a quality of human existence'.

### **2.3 Therapeutic aspects**

In the process of rediscovering and awakening the personal essence, the Sacred Voyage is a rite of passage, which supports people in the act of becoming. Here, the major assumption is made that when people are out of touch with their essence, feelings of discontent, depression and other psychological and somatic symptoms and complaints may arise. Ergo, when people are able to re-establish the contact with this essence, and build a lasting relationship with it, the symptoms and complaints can disappear and the individual can fulfill the act of becoming. When an individual has not fulfilled his or her act of becoming, negative feelings such as depression and melancholy and 'negative' emotions such as anger, anxiety and grief may dominate this person's life. When an individual fulfills the act of becoming, feelings of love, peace and happiness can arise and life can become characterized by meaningfulness and aimed at connecting with others.

### **2.4 Shamanistic aspects**

Rather than on targeting the negative, our operational method aims to promote the positive, which presents itself in the form of emotions, feelings, thoughts and symptoms. This holistic approach is deeply rooted in the shamanistic traditions and views, as the following excerpt from "The Shaman's Last Apprentice" illustrates. Shaman Don Juanito:

*"Disease is only a wake up call to start living."*

*"I don't understand."*

*"Well, you see Rebekita, when we are attached to illness we only focus on disease. We forget to see life as a journey where everything is flowing in motion, so that illness and disease are actually opportunities for growth."*

*"I'm still not sure I understand."*

*"Disease is the spirit's way of expressing that it is unhappy and in pain, and that it can no longer be ignored. Most people become distressed by illness, and this only increases suffering because our fear of death causes us to fear disease. We have been taught to believe that death is punishment, and if we are good people we will not get sick, or we will be cured. It is time we start to embrace death and accept it as part of the inevitable experience of life. Illness is a chance to make life changes, to start really living. It gives us the opportunity to remember what is important in our lives, to follow our dreams, to heal old wounds and say goodbye. Illness empowers the spirit to be heard and to show the way to a more fulfilling life, for however long that is."*

Further on in "The Shaman's Last Apprentice", the shaman says:

*"The Amazonian plant, the Mother of all Medicine, Ayahuasca, will teach you to love and accept yourself. But first you must go deep within to heal your own pain and suffering. True shamans first learn to heal themselves before they can heal others. This is Ayahuasca's gift."*

In our holistic perspective we embrace this shamanistic approach to the healing of pain and suffering, in which ayahuasca plays a major part. In our views, this approach offers openings to a better life. Instead of emphasising the negative, and attempting to eliminate it (be it with or without the use of medication), which is common in the conventional Western approach to mental health, we welcome the symptoms experienced by our clients, regarding them as an opportunity in fulfilling the act of becoming. This research project will not focus on these symptoms, stressing their possible disappearance, but will emphasise the effects of the ayahuasca experience on certain parameters associated with mental health. These parameters will be defined elsewhere.

## **2.5 Religious aspects**

As far back as early Christian mysticism, references have been made to the ‘original image’ or ‘true face’. Charles L. Whitfield described the phenomenon of our essence as follows: ‘*Who we are when we feel at our most authentic, real or impassioned.*’ Our essence possesses qualities such as spontaneity, vulnerability, creativity and especially vitality. When we are in touch with our essence, we feel alive. From our own essence, we connect with others and we may shape a sense of collective awareness.

## **2.6 Ritual aspects**

*‘It has always been the primary function of myths and rituals to provide the symbols that further the human spirit, as a counterweight against all those ongoing human fantasies which tend to slow its development. In fact, it is very well possible that the frequent occurrence of neuroses in our society is a result of the disappearance of such an effective spiritual aide. We remain focussed on the un banished imaginings of our childhood and are thus averse to the necessary passages into our adulthood.’* (Joseph Campbell).

Our Western culture lacks such rites of passage to mark the transition into adulthood. We may have rituals such as birthdays, getting a driver’s license, graduating from university, getting your first mortgage, moving away from home or other events that are associated with growing up, but none of these rituals truly mark the moment of leaving adolescence behind and entering adulthood. Adolescents are often caught by surprise by adult life because the associated perks and rights also bring along many obligations and responsibilities which seem to creep up on the person involved. Also, many adolescents (and other, older people) seem to lack a place in society. Schools and universities may offer some kind of community, but the outside world often seems more like a large collection of anonymous individuals.

In primitive societies rites of passage towards ‘becoming’ are intended to release adolescents from the influence of their parents and help them take an independent place in society. The following excerpt shows a good example of such a rite of passage or initiation.

Malidoma Somé, a member of the African Dagara tribe who, as a young boy, was kidnapped by Jesuit priests and raised to become a priest himself, escaped his captors late in his adolescence and returned to his tribe. His people were worried because he had missed the crucial initiation ritual in their culture. Eventually, it was decided that Somé could go through the ritual with the younger boys. Here, he describes the initiation instructions given to him by the person who led the ritual:



*‘Somehow, what he told me didn’t sound at all strange to me, or, as I later found out, to any of the others. It was as though he was describing something we already knew, something that we’d never questioned, and had never been able to put into words.*

*This is what he said: “The place where he stood was the centre. Everyone possesses a centre that he gradually grows away from after birth. Being born is losing touch with your centre, and to develop from being a child to becoming an adult, is like walking away from it.*

*Your centre is both inside as well as outside yourself. It is everywhere. We must realise that it exists, then find it and get in touch with it because without our centre there is no way to tell who we are, where we’ve come from and where we’re going.”*

*He explained that finding our centre was the goal of the Baor (the initiation ritual). This school specialised in repairing the worn out, the decrepit, results of thirteen rainy years of existence. I was twenty years old. If I’d have stayed at home I would have gone through this seven years ago. I wondered if it would not be too late for me, but then realised it was better late than never.*

*“Nobody’s centre is like anyone else’s. Find your own centre, not your neighbour’s, not that of your parents or your ancestors but yours, and yours alone.”*

## **2.7 Non-Western aspects**

In the West, the concept of a unique and inalienable core or centre is a far less salient issue. The Western world is characterised by its focus on the exterior, the image, and on personality (which literally means ‘mask’). The exterior seems to gain more and more ground in Western society, as is illustrated by ever increasing materialism, and seems to grow at the expense of the inner being. For many, identity is not derived from their unique and inalienable centre but from material and social status associated with their education, profession, house, car and other possessions. Western man seems to have been alienated from his personal centre and has shifted his focus to the ‘shopping centre’.

The Dagara concept of an inalienable centre, unique to every individual, is not unheard of in other cultures. In fact, many cultures support a similar idea. Buddhists refer to it as ‘Buddha-nature’ and view the abdominal area as the ‘seat of the soul’. In Japan, the abdominal area is known as *kikai*, the sea of energy, in China it is *tan’tien*. In all oriental martial arts this centre is emphasised as essential for concentration, power and grace.

In the operational method of the Sacred Voyage, we assume that every human being is born with an individually unique core and that, as we have seen in the Dagara example, throughout their lives, people gradually become alienated from what is most characteristic of them. Our assumption is that this alienation from our essence is a result of upbringing, religion and education. It seems that, as people, we have developed a highly evolved social consciousness that helps us adjust to the norms of our group.

*‘Our original true essence is forgotten and replaced by the projections put upon us by family, peers, and authority figures.’ (Sandra Ingerman)*

## **2.8 The importance of childhood**

Fear of social exclusion must, at a certain point in time, have provided us with some

evolutionary benefit, because man has only been able to survive in a group setting. This fear is still with us today, and is particularly strongly present in children. Fear of social rejection has grown out of all proportion (and is, as is illustrated by the Dickerson and Kemeny quote, virtually equivalent to the fear of dying). This is especially true for children and it makes sure that they can easily adapt to the norms of a group, at the expense of their unique personal characteristics.

*'The type of stress that has the strongest effect on the level of stress hormones, which drives up the levels of hydrocortisone, is predominantly present in class rooms in the form of 'social threats' like being judged by a teacher or leaving a 'stupid' impression with other children. These social fears have a strongly inhibiting effect on the cerebral mechanisms that allow us to learn.'* (Elizuya & Rochlofs)

*'Being evaluated is a threat to the 'social self', the way we see ourselves through the eyes of others. This notion of social value and status, and thus, our self-esteem, is derived from the messages we receive from other people about the way they see us. When our reputation is at stake, this may have a remarkably strong biological effect, nearly equal in strength to situations in which our life is threatened.'* (Dickerson en Kemeny)

At school we learn how to adjust and it is there that we develop our cognitive skills. Through an ongoing emphasis on knowledge and learning, children become detached from the feelings that are unique to them and are a part of their inalienable centre. The language of physical sensation is hardly acknowledged at schools, let alone supported in its development.

Of course it is not down to education alone that children can become detached from their essence. Parents and other people involved in the upbringing certainly play a large part as well. More so now than ever in the past, both parents go out to work, which seems to reduce the importance they associate with upbringing. More and more often, and at a younger age, children are taken to child day care centers, where the real needs of a young child cannot be fulfilled sufficiently. As a result, children can become emotionally damaged at an early stage, though often this is not readily apparent because the child will adapt out of fear. Children whose needs are not acknowledged and fulfilled will, at a subconscious level, become imprinted with the message that they do not matter and that their needs are not important. Sometimes these children become troublesome or hard to manage, in other cases they may adapt and become apathetic. In both events, the children become detached from their unique and inalienable centre.

Often, a child's development is also marred by other traumatic occurrences such as violence, (sexual) abuse, neglect or bullying. Shamans refer to the effect these traumatic events have as soul loss.

*Soul loss: 'Losing crucial parts of ourselves that provide us with life and vitality'* (Sandra Ingerman)

## **2.9 Mythological aspects**

In different types of shamanism it is assumed that traumatic experiences cause parts of the soul to be split off. When this happens, these parts of the soul are assumed to end up in what is known as the Underworld, or in an alternative parallel reality such as the Upperworld.

Unlike conventional Western methods, which remain at the surface of people's consciousness, shamans have been practicing tried and proven methods for thousands of years, to descend or ascend into these worlds in order to retrieve the lost parts of the soul. The techniques applied for this goal are known as methods of soul retrieval.

In shamanism it is common for the shaman to retrieve the lost parts of his client's soul. The approach of the Sacred Voyage is to teach people to find and retrieve the traumatized parts of their soul themselves, without the mediation of a shaman or healer. This is a theme described by mythologist Joseph Campbell as the 'hero's journey'.

*'The hero's first task is to retreat from the earthly stage of secondary consequences and travel to those areas of the psyche in which problems originate, where the difficulties are truly situated, and destroy them, fighting the childhood demons of his local culture and struggling towards real, undistorted experience to deal with what Jung has dubbed the 'archetypical images.'* (Joseph Campbell)

## **2.10 Somatic aspects**

We assume that a person's essence is vulnerable and resides in the human body. In our views, the body accommodates the essence, the seat of the soul, between the throat and the lower abdomen, known as the 'somatic self' (Gilligan 1997). Through upbringing, education and/or traumatic occurrences people can become cut off from their essence. People who experience this, often refer to it as 'missing something important', 'roaming aimlessly' or 'not having a place they can call 'home''. Often, it takes years before these vague notions truly manifest themselves. When life itself still offers enough distraction, or if someone's self-consciousness has not fully developed, the case may be that the body or the psyche give notice through all manner of symptoms or complaints. We assume that most symptoms are a result of being detached from one's own essence. In other circumstances life itself will provide the means to bring symptoms to the light, such as the loss of loved ones, disease, loss of livelihood or divorce.

Psychologist Stephen Gilligan writes: *'Life flows through you, except when it doesn't.* We feel there's an enormous truth hidden in this seemingly obvious statement. The first part of the statement can be witnessed when we look at small children. There is an ongoing flow of life going right through them. First they laugh, then they cry; moments later they're surprised, then angry. There's a continuous flow of life. Many adults have lost this quality and seem to be cut off from this vital flow. When energetic blockades occur in the body, feelings and emotions can no longer flow freely. Psychiatrist Dr. Stanislav Grof refers to these blockades as COEX (which stands for Condensed System of Experience). Dr. Grof: *'A COEX system is dynamic constellation of memories (and their associated fantasies) from different periods of someone's life, with the common denominator of strong emotional charges of a similar nature, intense physical sensations of a similar kind or the fact that they share other important elements.'* Stephen Gilligan refers to the same phenomenon as *'a whole frozen family of associations'*.

Peter A. Levine writes about the stored traumatic life energy: *'In order to avoid becoming a victim, a threatened man must offload all this energy generated by danger. This leftover energy will not disappear by itself. It remains seated in the body and can force the body to form all manner of symptoms, such as fear, depression, psychosomatic and behavioral*

*problems. Through these symptoms the body attempts to keep a check on all the energy that has not been discharged.'*

Most mammals, including humans, have developed the fight, flight or freeze pattern as possible responses in the face of imminent danger. Because, most often, children do not have the first two options at their disposal, traumatic occurrences in their youth are often responded to by freezing, for fear of dying.

For now, it should suffice to mention that we assume, in accordance with the theories of Gilligan, Grof and Levine, that traumatic events tend to cause large quantities of life energy to stop flowing freely, and that both body and mind can display a multitude of symptoms and complaints to control the energy that should ideally have been discharged. This causes people to become detached from their essence.

We assume that events such as birth trauma and other issues that Dr. Stanislav Grof has dubbed 'childhood biographical issues' can cause energetic blockades, which may become frozen and of a lasting nature if they are not spotted, acknowledged and guided by significant people surrounding the child during its upbringing (such as parents, relatives, teachers and others involved in raising the child). Some relevant themes that we are confronted with in our practice are social pressure and threats to the 'social self', such as bullying, (emotional) neglect, violence, discrimination, hospitalization, abuse, loss of loved ones and other traumatizing experiences.

Our principle is based on the notion that frozen energy flows should be reactivated, to enable the body to discharge the excess energy. Our practice aims to teach people to find the blockades in themselves and 'thaw' the flow of life, to break down the energy blockade.

## **2.11 The role of the activation cycle**

Peter A. Levine about the activation cycle: *'People long to be challenged by life, and activation provides us with the required energy to take on and conquer these challenges. Deep satisfaction is one of the results of a fully completed activation cycle. The cycle is as follows: activation peaks at the point where we gather our strengths to meet a challenge or a threat. Then it is actively reduced and leaves us relaxed and satisfied. [...] Those who have been traumatized, deeply mistrust this cycle, usually with good reason. Victims of trauma associate the cycle with the overwhelming experience of being paralyzed with fear. Because of this fear, the traumatized person will prevent the activation cycle from reaching completion and will remain stuck in a cycle of fear. Victims of trauma must therefore become reacquainted with an elementary law of nature: What goes up, must come down.'*

*'Frozen areas indicate the formation of tiny crystals in the cells, immobilizing them. By being aware of this virtually immobile condition or by slowing down further whatever hardly noticeable movement may remain, you are inviting your body to delve more deeply into the story. Through this warmth and attention, the crystals become fluid and are able to leave the cells, allowing the cells their natural movement. [...] Through releasing the crystals, the cells do not only release their chemical waste products but also the memories retained therein.'*  
(Peirsman & Bakker, Cranio Sacral Therapists)

As asserted earlier, we assume that the source of many complaints and symptoms cannot only

be found in the subconscious but also in the soma, in the centre of people's inner life, where each human's essence is seated. The Sacred Voyage uses ayahuasca not specifically to reach or explore new realms of consciousness. Our method is about finding and remobilizing somatic energy blockades, after which different (higher) states of mind may be reached. This has been described by Dr. Stanislav Grof: *'...after resolving biographical childhood issues, and the perinatal trauma, individuals would often find themselves in realms of consciousness completely transcendent of time, space, and other parameters of our ordinary world view.'* (Grof, 1985)

Ayahuasca plays a major role in the Sacred Voyage because it has an unexplained but very powerful effect in breaking down energetic blockades.

It is essential to emphasize that our method does not involve shamanistic healing in the traditional sense, in which a shaman removes or heals his client's ailment. The client's focus is not on a mental experience aimed at encountering 'the divine' in a higher state of consciousness, as would be the case in the setting of the Santo Daimé church. This may be a side effect, as is illustrated by Dr. Grof's earlier quote. Ayahuasca is employed as an aide in breaking down the energetic blockades. Clients applying the method of the Sacred Voyage focus on their own body, on what they experience as energy blockades.

## **2.12 Focusing**

Peter A. Levine: *'If we, by means of focusing on our felt senses, allow ourselves to acknowledge our thoughts and sensations, and let them take their natural course, they will peak, then decrease and finally dissolve. During this process we may experience the following: trembling, quivering, vibrating, hot flushes, calm full breathing, a steadier heartbeat, perspiration, relaxation of the muscles and an all-encompassing feeling of relief, well-being and security.'*

This focusing on the felt sense (Eugene Gendlin), even when it is not used in conjunction with ayahuasca, may be a very effective tool to help dissolve the energetic blockades and to revive the individual essence, making it an important part of the process.

## **2.13 Intake**

During an intake session of two hours, prospective clients of the Sacred Voyage explain what the theme is that they wish to explore. In this process we approach the core issue at a mental level. Once we have defined the problem we shift to a different approach, to the awareness of, and focusing on the felt sense associated with the issue. The central question in this phase is: 'Where in your body can you feel what you have just described?'

We can use what the client has described as a 'handle'. Whatever we know about the problem at hand, the symptom or complaint, is now, through this handle, attached as a name to the associated physical sensation.

This handle will be used as a guideline, as something to help hang onto the felt sense. When this handle is stirred, the client can get in touch with his or her felt sense. Often, a handle consists of a certain negative conviction. These convictions are formed during childhood, often when a child has received insufficient guidance after a traumatic occurrence. This can lead to low self-esteem with the accompanying negative convictions, such as: 'I'm stupid,



nasty, ugly, evil, lazy, worthless, undeserving of love, etcetera'. When such a handle is employed, the frozen, traumatized energy will be stirred and feelings and emotions such as fear, anger or grief may crop up. Also, a sense of relief may reveal itself, often accompanied by a deep sigh, which is associated with the feeling that finally, what is truly inside is given the attention it requires. Loving attention and acknowledgement of this inner reality may cause an energy shift (Gendlin) to occur. This is known to us as 'thawing of the frozen, traumatized energy'. It entails a shift in the area of focus of the felt sense, towards a different part of the somatic self. Often, the handle is replaced as well.

When the 'problem area' in the body has been found and defined, we work with the client to remain in close contact with it, using *maitri*, which is a Tibetan word meaning unconditional loving kindness towards yourself. The thought behind this is that only loving kindness can thaw the frozen energetic blockades. Only love has this power. As far as we are concerned, the opposite is also true. Fear, (when trauma is involved, fear of dying) has at a certain point been able to freeze the energy, and is still able to do so. Therefore, learning to deal with fear is one of the central pillars of the therapeutic guidance we provide. Our guidance comes straight from the heart and uses *maitri* and loving attention, the antidote for fear.

Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh about loving attention: *'The moment your loving attention starts to tackle your fear, the fear will settle down. "I breathe in and calm both my body and mind." You can calm your feelings by simply staying with them, like a mother holds her child when it cries. [...] Loving attention is no judge, it should be seen more as someone looking after her younger sister, supporting her with care and affection. By concentrating on our breathing we can keep this attention alive and we can become fully acquainted with ourselves.'*

## **2.14 Goal**

The goal of our work is to help thaw, heal and revive the somatic centre, the seat of our soul. Accomplishing this is a process, in which every step is equally important. We treat whatever issue seems to be vitally important at that particular moment. For this very reason it is essential that our clients develop pure awareness. This is not aimed at any particular goal or outcome but merely at attempting to remain close to whatever issue asserts itself at that point in time. Awareness, in this context, is explained by Hal and Sidra Stone as:

*'The ability to observe life in all its aspects, without judging or forming an opinion about the energetic patterns being observed, and without feeling the need to control what occurs.'*

Thawing what we call the 'frozen plains of the soul' can only be undertaken as a complete process, in which no step can be skipped. It is a process of transformation and every step, no matter how large or small, is of vital importance. Every time a client successfully employs loving attention from a state of pure awareness, to remain close to whatever issue asserts itself at that particular moment, the process (frozen by fear and trauma) can proceed. The work we do is not based on regression, we do not employ means to return to someone's past. On the contrary, clients are assisted in developing mindfulness, directing their attention and feeling comfortable in being present here and now. The cognitive self, the adult the person in question has become, gets in touch with the somatic self, an aspect often underdeveloped as a result of trauma experienced while growing up. This is why the somatic essence is often pictured as an Inner Child. Our approach is not based on reliving this Child's pain through regression, but on tackling the Child's frozen energy from the adult state of awareness, and

attempting to thaw, heal and revive the qualities that are part of the unique essence of this Inner Child. It is not solely about thawing the physically frozen elements, but also about welcoming and accommodating the vulnerable aspects that have come to life. In other words, building a relationship with what Hal and Sidra Stone refer to as the disowned selves. These manifestations of the disowned self are energy patterns that are part of our essence but have not been able to grow up with us, as a result of traumatic occurrences.

Transformation as a goal

The act of fully becoming is a result of the thawing of the frozen somatic energies and accepting and welcoming the energy patterns that come to life. This principle can be seen as the process of transformation.

Robert Stamboliev about transformation:

*'The transformation process is the natural unfolding which takes place at the level of each individual energy pattern, and is suited to the nature of this particular pattern. Transformation is called on as a result of accepting and nourishing the energy patterns as they are. If we do not accept our patterns the way they are, and try to alter them instead, the natural transformation process, the natural unfolding, will become blocked.'*

## **2.15 The use of ayahuasca**

The role ayahuasca has to play in all this is not unambiguous. Ayahuasca is one of life's great mysteries. Earlier publications on the subject have all focused on mental or religious experiences. This report aims to emphasize the effects ayahuasca may have on the soma. One of our findings in working with ayahuasca is that when clients focus their loving attention on the somatic self, ayahuasca dramatically enhances the results clients achieve in thawing frozen energies.

It seems as though, through the loving kindness and the right intention of the client, ayahuasca allows itself to be guided to those areas where energies have become frozen as a result of suffered trauma. Ayahuasca seems to work towards restoring universal harmony and -in conjunction with the client's focused loving kindness- works on the thawing of energies and on the transformation process. Many of our clients report experiencing this and describe the process of thawing in great detail. It is worth noting, though, that ayahuasca works so remarkably, that it can hardly be caught in words. What it seems to do, is accelerate the thawing of traumatized energy, while, simultaneously, representing the associated memories, images, visions, feelings, thoughts and emotions. It shows us the complete picture, the reality in which soma and psyche meet.

To toy with Western standards of credibility even further, ayahuasca awakens the Inner Voice, which has been referred to by mystics for centuries.

Ayahuasca is classified as an *entheogenous* brew, entheogenous meaning 'revealing the God within'. The word for therapy is derived from the Greek *therapeia*, which was originally used in the meaning of 'tending to the Gods'. From this perspective, using ayahuasca in a therapeutic setting would be both to stir the deity within and to serve this divine being. It thaws the frozen plains of the soul, awakening one's own essence, which may be seen as divine. It stirs the Inner Voice, that may guide us through life; a voice that goes unheard by so many of us, because it merely whispers and is lost in the busy confusion of day-to-day life.

Shaman Don Juanito:

*“Because money has become the focus of life in your country, many are not following the path that will make them happy. Rebekita, we all have a guiding voice within that leads us through life. These guiding voices are our dreams, messages, and visions. The need to make money stops people from following their dreams. Then people get sick.”*

*“Don Juanito, are you saying that illness is directly related to not listening to our guiding voice?” I replied excitedly.*

*“Yes, that is exactly what I am saying. Disease is only a lack of balance in the body. Disease comes when a person fails to listen to their calling.”*

## **2.16 Hypothesis**

One of the possible outcomes of thawing the icy plains of the soul, (re)finding one’s own essence, listening to and welcoming the Inner Voice, is that people transform. They transform in the sense that they can fulfill their act of becoming. In our opinion, ayahuasca may be important as a catalyst in this process. The goal of our research is not to convince others of this point of view. Our goal is to tap and report what the results are for those people who use ayahuasca in the setting of the Sacred Voyage for the purpose of experiencing a rite of passage to help them fulfill their act of becoming. Therefore, our hypothesis is:

*Ayahuasca, as applied in the setting of the Sacred Voyage, can offer clients who are well-prepared a healing and transformational experience with lasting positive effects.*

### **3 Research design**

The research into the effects of ayahuasca, used in the setting of the Sacred Voyage, covers the experiences of participants who have taken part in one to four ayahuasca sessions within a period of 24 months. Our therapeutic practice has more experience working with ayahuasca, but only within this period of 24 months have we conducted sessions in the present standardized, structured and controlled setting. We feel it is important to mention that it is not our intention to investigate or show the medical or clinical effects of ayahuasca. In describing the working method we show that our view on transformational processes is holistic, that our aim is to achieve the overall ‘becoming’ of the individual. Our guidance is not aimed at curing ailments or relieving participants of symptoms, although, quite often, this may be an effect that is achieved, and as such, we shall report these effects. The method of the Sacred Voyage is aimed at supporting people in the process of (re)finding and awakening their own essence, which, according to our findings, has a healing, healing effect. Another aspect of the Sacred Voyage is supporting transformational processes. If finding one’s own essence can be compared with a seed, the essence of a tree, then transformation can be compared to that tree reaching full maturity, fully ‘becoming’. Our assumptions are not simply that finding one’s own essence can be healing, and that realizing one’s full potential can be a result of this, but also that these effects are lasting.

In order to report the observed effects along a set of objective parameters and make these effects, both on physical and on mental well-being, measurable, we have devised a survey questionnaire (which is presented in full in attachment No. 1).

In the questionnaire we have made an inventory of participants’ levels of education and their backgrounds. Next, we have asked them for their prior experiences, after which we have questioned them more specifically, to find out what they have experienced during and after their ayahuasca session(s). We have also provided the participants with open-ended questions to expand on the answers they gave.

#### **3.1 Research sample**

The research sample for this project consisted of those people who have participated in an ayahuasca session over the last two years and who were willing to fill out the questionnaire. 114 people were approached, of whom 85 agreed to complete a survey sent to them by email. Seventy respondents completed the survey within the set time. These people did not know one another and have independently approached us to take part in a session. The background information we compiled on these respondents consisted of the following parameters: age, sex, occupation, level of education, personal development, the amount of time that had passed between their participation in an ayahuasca session and their filling out of the questionnaire, and, finally, their previous experiences with ayahuasca.

#### **3.2 Set, setting and brew**

Ayahuasca within the structured and controlled setting of the Sacred Voyage.

The use of an entheogenous brew, such as ayahuasca, cannot be disconnected from the *set* (intention, expectations and motivation of the user) and *setting* (the context in which the use takes place).

### 3.2.1 Set (intention, expectations, motivation)

People who consider drinking ayahuasca in the setting of the Sacred Voyage, are, most often, well-informed and have given the idea much thought. Why else would they consider putting themselves through so much discomfort? Prospective clients are expected to read the book “The Sacred Voyage” in preparation, attend a two hour intake session, spend several weeks preparing the theme that is relevant to them and they are required to fast for several days. Many of our clients read the experiences of other Voyagers on the Sacred Voyage website and learn that the experience of using ayahuasca is not necessarily a pleasant one. Some reported side effects are vomiting, muscle contractions, profuse sweating and diarrhoea, which are all part of the cleansing process. Prospective ayahuasca drinkers know that a possibly uncomfortable experience awaits them. It is therefore safe to say that the individual who decides to take part in an ayahuasca session within the context of the Sacred Voyage, is motivated. In fact, only motivated people are accepted as Sacred Voyagers. When the intake session shows that people merely intend to find a new thrill, or if they are only after the experience of ayahuasca, they are referred to other settings in which ayahuasca is used, such as the Sante Daime church or a shamanistic setting. This selection is vital for the setting of the Sacred Voyage because we tend to work in small groups, with a maximum of eight participants. Motivated individuals can join efforts in creating a safe atmosphere in the group, in which they feel free to be vulnerable and open, essential elements of the Sacred Voyage.

The expectations people have cannot be disconnected from the personal issues they are dealing with. Most of the people who intend to participate in the Sacred Voyage experience symptoms or complaints that they have been suffering from for a considerable amount of time. Often, events from their early childhood are involved, such as violence, neglect and/or abuse. Many know the causes of their complaints and have had extensive therapy to ‘tackle’ these issues. There is a vast array of reported complaints and symptoms, varying as widely as is humanly possible, from psychological through to physical complaints. Generally speaking, our clients have already been through a range of both conventional and alternative treatments, though without the desired effect. Most of them feel confident that ayahuasca will be able to help them to find the source of their suffering and root it out.

Often, the people under our guidance are required to make a paradigmatic shift with regard to the intentions with which they approach the Sacred Voyage. The basic paradigm we encounter most often is that a symptom or complaint exists and needs to be fought. This is a perspective people have held their entire lifetime and often becomes apparent during the intake session. Something we hear a lot is: “I’ve been suffering from ... (any symptom or ailment) and I want to get rid of it.” Our guidance aims to help people build a relationship with the part of their *self* that is affected and to learn to look at the element of themselves they would rather be rid of, with *maitri*, or unconditional loving kindness. Through therapeutic techniques such as Voice Dialogue and focusing we help people get in touch with the reality behind their ailment or complaint. We emphasise the focus on the somatic processes and aim to re-establish the relationship between psyche and soma.

Ideally, people will have adjusted their intentions by the end of the intake session, and have shifted their focus to a friendlier approach, aimed more at ‘becoming’. In some cases this requires several preparational sessions. Most often, the intentions and approach have become clear after the intake session. People are then sent home with one or more awareness exercises, aimed at connecting with their soma, and they are asked to perform the exercises

for fifteen to thirty minutes a day, up to the day they participate in an ayahuasca ceremony.

### 3.2.2 Setting

The ayahuasca ceremony itself has been carefully composed and is constantly refined, based on the feedback we receive from clients.

The Sacred Voyage is structured as follows:

- A quiet, harmonious setting. Comfortable mattresses, covered with oriental blankets and cushions. Darkened windows. Light from candles mounted in salt crystals. Everyone in the room is provided with blankets, tissues and a vomiting basin.
- Every ceremony is led by a guide and an assistant-guide, both of whom have ample experience of guiding people on their Voyage. All guides have personally experienced the effects of ayahuasca but will not partake during the session, as is often the case in shamanistic and religious settings. This ensures that the guides are able to provide safety, protection, boundaries and guidance at all times.
- There is a maximum of eight participants per ceremony.
- The ceremony starts at 9.30 AM and will finish around 5.30 PM
- Around 9.15, clients find a space where they feel comfortable and they settle down. Once all the participants have arrived, the ceremony is opened. Clients and guides introduce themselves briefly, get in touch with their felt sense and share with the group how they feel at that moment.
- An agreement is signed, in which people indicate that they have responsibly decided to take part and do so out of free will. Also, they acknowledge that certain rules, with regard to safety, must be adhered to and that they will do so, following the guides' instructions. The agreement also stipulates that participants who are also under conventional treatment must consult their physician, psychologist or therapist before participating in the Sacred Voyage. This agreement is sent to all prospective participants ten days before the ceremony is to take place.
- Some practical details are clarified, followed by an explanation of the (possible) effects of ayahuasca.
- People are then asked if they are willing and able to grant themselves and each other the permission to fully experience whatever asserts itself that day. Often, the Sacred Voyage is a gripping and emotional ceremony, in which some participants are confronted with their deepest sorrow, while others reach new realms of ecstasy. We therefore symbolically ask permission for all the degrees of experience encountered during the session to be thought of as different colours of the same palette.
- Personal guidance takes place at the participant's request. In general, participants are left to approach their personal processes privately. When heavy emotions occur, the guides may take some initiative by offering support, in order to keep the process going.
- People are reminded of the techniques that were discussed during the intake session: getting in touch with the soma and welcoming the sensations they encounter.
- This is followed by an exercise in awareness, a kind of meditation, aimed at directing people's consciousness toward their body. This exercise finishes by focusing on the area of the heart. The participants are asked to establish contact with the heart's intentions and to place their hands, folded as in prayer, in front of the heart. Then they are asked to stretch out their arms, raising them over their heads and lifting up the heart's intentions, up to the higher self. After this, the participants are invited to open their arms and describe a wide circle, along their body, distributing the intentions throughout their personal energy field. This part of the ritual is optional, participants are free to decide whether or

not they want to join in.

- Next, everyone is supplied with the standard dose of one glass of ayahuasca.
- Participants are invited once again to get in touch with their intentions and then to ask the ayahuasca for help and healing. It is also suggested, as is common in shamanism, that participants may want to express their gratitude to the ayahuasca in advance, for the help, healing and insights it is about to provide.
- Following this ritual, participants drink the first glass of ayahuasca, of which the effects, in the dosage we employ, are fairly mild.
- Participants are now given the opportunity to introduce themselves more thoroughly and to tell the group something about their intentions and the issues at hand. After sharing, participants have the chance to light a candle at the altar, which is in the middle of the room. They can also leave a childhood photograph at the altar, to remind them of their essence. If they so please, they can tell the group what they were like as a child.
- Around 10.30, the thorough introductions are over and everyone can retreat to their own mattress. Participants are asked not to talk to one another and to refrain from interfering in other people's processes. They are also asked to keep their eyes closed as much as possible and to devote all their attention to their somatic processes. Later, when the somatic processes have settled down, they may start exploring from the mind. Obviously, these are suggestions, everyone experiences the effects of the brew in their own way.
- Music is played. Through the first part of the day, music with a sensitive and emotional charge is played. The pieces of music are carefully selected so that the composition, performance and beauty provide optimal support for the ayahuasca experience.
- An hour after the first glass of ayahuasca, the guides assess how well everyone is doing and another glass is offered.
- Every hour the guides make sure everyone is alright and see if anyone needs anything. Together, participant and guide assess whether the ayahuasca has taken effect, or whether an additional administering of the brew is necessary.
- When participants enter the difficult stages of their Voyage, they can call or beckon one of the guides for some assistance. Generally, participants are then asked to feel what is going on in their body. They are comforted and reminded of their intentions. Not a lot of conversation takes place. Most often, a few words are enough to encourage the participant to carry on and focus his or her attention inwardly. Occasionally, a little more time needs to be spent supporting someone and this support is readily available.
- At 2 PM, the last glass of ayahuasca is administered. The music changes to reflect more spiritual and ethereal themes.
- Around 3 PM, the music becomes more grounded again, helping the participants to return to the level of everyday consciousness.
- Between 4 and 5 PM, dependent on the state of the participants, the final round of sharing is started, in which participants can tell the group what the most important part of their experience was. This is the first step towards integrating the experience.

### 3.2.3 Brew

#### Ayahuasca

Ayahuasca is a Quechua word. Quechua is the language of the ancient Incas, a historically important people that lived in the Andes in South America until the fifteenth century. Today, Quechua, or a derivative of this language, is spoken by some ten million people. There are many translations for the word ayahuasca, one of which is 'little death'. Literally, the word means 'liana of the soul', ('aya': spirit, ancestor or deceased person; 'huasca': liana), referring to the climbing plant *Banisteriopsis caapi*, which supplies one of the main ingredients for the ayahuasca brew. In Quechua, both plant and brew are known as ayahuasca. Today, dozens of

names (such as 'caapi', 'cipó', 'hoasca', 'daime', 'yagé' or 'yajé') exist to describe the brew, and at least as many ingredients, methods of preparing and associated rituals have been documented.

Ayahuasca is one of the most potent entheogenous agents known to man. The brew can hold a vast array of psychotropic substances, such as nicotine and scopolamine. However, the main active substance in ayahuasca is DMT (Dimethyltryptamine). This substance occurs naturally in both plants and animals, and, in humans, it is produced by the pineal gland. In the body, DMT is quickly broken down by monoamine oxidase (MAO), a digestive enzyme which is found in every cell of the body. This enzyme causes orally administered brews based on DMT to remain without effect. To ensure that the DMT is able to reach the brain unscathed, the brew must have the means to counter the effects of the MAO enzyme. Therefore, the ayahuasca brew consists of not only ingredients to provide DMT, but also a MAO inhibitor, found in certain plants. Examples of plants that contain DMT are *Psychotria viridis* and *Mimosa hostilis*. The MAO inhibitor that is used is the alkaloid harmaline (or a derivative thereof), which is found in *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Peganum harmala*. For a brew to qualify as ayahuasca, it would have to contain *Banisteriopsis caapi*, even though in Western countries, brews made out of *Peganum harmala* also go by the same name.

It is unknown who was the first to discover ayahuasca, though the Incas are known to have been familiar with this brew since at least 2500 BC. In South America today, the use of ayahuasca is strictly limited to shamans; wise men (and sometimes women) who have gained extensive knowledge about plants, animals, humans and about the spirit, often through the use of entheogenics, such as ayahuasca. It may be considered a miracle that people without any formal knowledge of pharmacology and biochemistry, have found the relevant combination of plant extracts, among the vast diversity of vegetation in the Amazonian region. (Faber, 2006 and Klein, 2008)

Despite the fact that little is known about the origins of the use of ayahuasca, it is likely that these can be found in the Amazon basin. Archaeological findings suggest that the first usage of the brew took place at least three thousand years ago. A stone cup, dated to at least 2500 BC was found, which was engraved with what appears to be both a liana and a DMT containing species of plant. The traditional use of ayahuasca has spread over the continent of South America, from Ecuador in the West, and the Orinoco region in the North, down to Paraguay in the South East. In the Western world more and more people are becoming familiar with ayahuasca, as is illustrated by the rise of web-based shops who supply the brew's ingredients. Also, more and more countries see the emergence of ritual settings in which people can participate in ayahuasca ceremonies. The Santo Daime church, which finds its origins in Brazil can now be found all over the world. Shamans from South America travel to Western countries on a regular basis, in order to initiate people in the use of this brew.

Ayahuasca has been used by various tribes in the rainforests of the Amazon since time immemorial, and has been employed for cleansing, healing, clairvoyancy and witchcraft. It is seen as a means of liberating the soul from its physical constraints, allowing the soul to roam freely through alternative realities, where it can communicate with its ancestors. Ayahuasca is considered a holy sacrament by all the cultures with which it is associated. Many tribes also use the brew for a ritual transition into adulthood for their (mostly male) members who have reached the appropriate age of thirteen or fourteen.

The use of ayahuasca for medicinal purposes is less well documented. In some compositions the brew is known to cause heavy vomiting and diarrhoea, cleansing the digestive system of



worms and other parasites. This is known as ‘la purga’, or the purge. Also, the harmaline-alkaloid components of the brew appear to combat such parasites, showing an anthelmintic effect (Wikipedia, 2007).

Ayahuasca users find that the brew has its own voice, which speaks to those who partake, pointing out their potential, their strong and their weak points, and guiding them through the ordeals they are put through during the time the potion wields its powers. As with other entheogenics, users may be confronted with themselves, and they may experience encounters with their fears, their discomforts and their frustrations. In order to use this experience to their advantage, users must learn to control their fears, for instance, by giving in to them. Everyone is afraid of ‘snakes and dragons’, and rightly so, because they can be dangerous. But those who can muster the courage to push on will break through their fears and will reach new, safer climes. There, new threats may occur, and the process continues for several stages, until a peak is reached. At this highest level, after some seriously heavy ordeals, the ego ‘dies’ and a new person is born, a person free from the fears of the ‘deceased’. However, it may take several voyages before this final stage can be reached (Hellinga en Plomp, 2007).

### 3.3 Parameters

In order to gain an insight into the experiences of people who have participated in the Sacred Voyage, a questionnaire has been designed (see appendix 1). This questionnaire has been sent to 85 people. It requires that respondents give background information such as age, sex, education and previous experience.

The questionnaire also consisted of closed (quantitative), multiple choice questions and open-ended (qualitative) questions. The quantitative questions are either dichotomous or scored from 1-10, the qualitative questions elicit a written answer, samples of which are given in chapter five.

The complete survey consists of the following parameters. The numbers indicate the number of the questionnaire item(see appendix 1).

#### 3.3.1 The actual experience

This item is covered by the following questions:

2. The perception of the ayahuasca experience as being neutral, a bad trip, a healing experience, a transformational experience, or something else, namely:...

18. The ayahuasca experience as a spiritual experience, judged against other spiritual experiences.

3. Intensity level of experience (description of peak experiences):

*‘These are moments of pure, positive happiness, after which all doubts and fears, all inhibitions, tensions and weaknesses have been left behind. There was no more self-consciousness, any distance to the world fell aside.’*

*‘Extraordinary experience, unique in its kind, the mystical or religious experience you’ll never forget.’*

*‘The little I had read about mystical experiences, had connected the mystical to religion, visions and the supernatural. And like most scientists, I had browsed sceptically, and discarded the mystical realm as nonsense. I had always assumed that people’s experiences in this field could be the result of hallucinations, possibly hysteria, something pathological in any case. But these people telling me about their experiences were nothing like that, they were the most healthy people imaginable!’*

### 3.3.2 Healing

To investigate whether the research sample considered ayahuasca to be beneficial to their health, we asked them:

- 4.a/b. -the duration of the positive and negative effects;
- 5.a/b. -whether it was harmful or healing mentally;
- 6.a/b. -whether it was harmful or healing physically;

### 3.3.3 Transformation

Transformation is a term that refers to a process of self-acceptance and the act of becoming. To measure this process, we have devised several parameters relevant for an individual who is going through a transition, fulfilling the act of fully becoming. Scores for these parameters are measured through a series of questions, assessing:

- 19. -whether the participant is able to deal with old emotional trauma, such as fears, anger and grief, and gains more insight into his/her own childhood and the associated memories;
- whether the participant has experienced a spiritual, or even a peak experience (as covered under 3.3.1, respectively survey items 18. and 3.) with a transformational effect.

As such, the Sacred Voyage can be considered a rite of passage into adulthood, the effect of which we aim to measure through assessment of the extent to which participants:

- 8. -gain self-insight;
- 16. -learn to accept themselves;
- 9. -gain insight into themselves with regard to the outside world;
- 10. -gain insight into themselves with regard to their families;
- 11. -develop self-confidence;
- 12. -develop self-esteem;
- 14. -learn to deal with fear;
- 15. -develop on a personal level;

### 3.3.4 Positive effects of the transformational process

We consider the positive effects of the transformational process to be telling for the development of the individual, as these effects cause the person in question to:

- 17. -achieve a sense of oneness;
- 13. -to feel happy/happier;
- 20. -to experience more joy;
- 21. -to experience more love;
- 22. -to experience more energy of life;
- 23. -to have (greater) emotional stability;
- 24. -to gain clarity of mind;
- 25. -to gain calmness of spirit;
- 28. -to feel connected to nature;
- 26. -to feel connected to 'higher things';
- 27. -to gain insight into 'higher things'

### 3.3.5 The importance of guidance and preparation

The importance of guidance and preparation has been measured through questions regarding:

- 29. -the role of guidance;
- 30. -the role of music;

- 31.a. -the role of focusing on one's intention;
- 31.b. -the role of fasting;
- 31.c. -the role of meditating on one's theme

### **3.3.6 After-effects and physical effects**

The after-effects were tapped in question 32, the physical effects during the Sacred Voyage in question 34.

### **3.4 Qualitative questions**

The last five questions were of a qualitative nature and gave the respondents the opportunity to write about the theme of their Voyage (question 35), the expectations they had with regard to this theme (36), and whether or not these expectations had been fulfilled (37). Finally, we provided the respondents with the chance to expand on the results the ayahuasca experience had given them (38), to make a statement about the use of ayahuasca (39) and, if they felt so inclined, to make any final personal comment (40).

Furthermore, most of the quantitative questions also gave some freedom to elucidate the given responses.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Response to the questionnaire

All of the 114 people who have participated in Sacred Voyage sessions over the last two years have been approached to be part of this research project. 85 of them indicated to be willing to fill out the survey questionnaire and they received the questionnaire by email. Of this group, seventy respondents (82%) completed the survey within the requested time. The remaining group of fifteen was contacted to assess the reasons for their failure to complete the survey on time. These reasons are shown in the following table:

Table 1. Reasons for not returning a completed questionnaire within the requested time:

Reason	Frequency
Returned too late	2
Abroad during research project	2
Incorrect email address	1
Technical difficulties word processor	1
Forgot	3
Insufficient time due to busy holiday season	2
Ill during research project	2
Insufficient time/lack of internet connection due to move	1
Reason unknown (failure to contact)	2

Most respondents have been very thorough in describing their experiences. The responses to the quantitative questions are depicted in graphs, presented in appendix 2, excerpts from the results for the qualitative questions are given in chapter five.

#### 4.1.2 Background of the respondents

The distribution of age and sex of the respondents is given in figure 1, their level of education in figure 2. The time (in days) that has passed between the Voyage and filling out the questionnaire is presented in figure 3 and the number of years respondents have been engaged in personal development can be seen in figure 4.

The occupations reported by the respondents are the following:

Policy Advisor, Police Constable, Therapist, Accountant, Veterinarian, Psychodynamic Therapist, Therapist, None, Counselor, Trainer-Coach, Gardener/Writer/Sociologist, Pedagogic Day Care Centre Employee, Manager at a Wellness Centre, None, Medical Student, Therapist, Unemployed (in search of employment), Mother, Unemployed (in search of employment), Interim Manager/Trainer-Coach, Self-employed Entrepreneur/Social Worker/Healer, Administrative Clerk, Controller, Consultant, Medical Doctor, Business Analyst, Life Coach/Hypnotherapist, Massage Therapist, Housing Advisor, Group Leader for people with developmental disabilities, Teacher, Project Manager Direct Mental Healthcare,

Clerk, Company Social Worker, Managing Director/Designer for an Advertising Agency, Medical Instrument Technician, Unemployed (due to physical disability), Writer, Healer, 'Life Artist', Controller, Media Producer, Sound Healer, Spiritual Coach, Office Manager, Equestrian Instructor, Naturopathic Therapist, Facility Management Employee, Doctor's Assistant, Advisor at the Tax Information Hotline, Medical Student, Haptotherapist, Civil Servant, Musician, Trainer, Educational Expert, Communications Trainer, Musician, Psychiatric Nurse, Headhunter, Group Leader for Children's Crisis Welfare Assistance, None, Astrologer, Writer, Civil Servant, Artist and Teacher, Economist, Entrepreneur, General (Medical) Practitioner.

## 4.2 Previous experience

The number of people with previous experience using ayahuasca is reported in figure 5 of appendix 2. The following table shows the distribution of the number of respondents' Sacred Voyage sessions.

The 26 % of the participants had previous experience using ayahuasca. The following table shows the distribution of the number of respondents' Sacred Voyage sessions.

Table 2. The number of ayahuasca sessions respondents have taken part in:

One session	74 %
More sessions	26 %

Earlier experiences (18 respondents out of 70 had earlier experience with ayahuasca in different settings like Santo Daime and shamanistic ritual use) were indicated as equal in importance by 8 (5,6 %) of the respondents, as in the setting of the Sacred Voyage and as more important by 10 (7 %) participants.

The level of the experience is presented in figure 6, and its intensity in figure 7. Percentages of people's positive and negative experiences, and their duration, are shown in figures 8, 9 and 10. A summary of these is given in table 3.

Table 3. The nature of the experience:

	Yes	No	Don't know
Negative	9%	17%	54%
Neutral	5%		
Bad trip	6%		
Healing experience	75%		
Transformational experience	74%		

### 4.2.1 Effect on physical and mental health

The effects on physical and mental health are presented in figures 11 through 14.

### 4.2.2 Healing

The extent to which the ayahuasca experience is considered healing is measured through the duration of its positive and negative effects (question 4.a/b, figures 9 and 10), through the degree to which it is harmful or salutary to mental well-being (question 5.a/b, figures 11 and 12), and through the degree in which it is harmful or salutary to physical well-being (question 6.a/b, figures 13 and 14).

Table 4. Average values for salutariness or harmfulness, expressed on a scale of 1 to 10.

Degree of harmfulness to mental health	1.0
Degree of salutariness to mental health	8.1
Degree of harmfulness to physical health	1.1
Degree of salutariness to physical health	8.1

### 4.2.3 Transformational effect

The parameters for the transformational effect, such as self-insight, self-acceptance, insight in one's relationship to the world and the family, self-confidence, self-esteem, dealing with fears and the importance for personal growth and development are all presented in figures 17 through 27. A summary of these is given in table 5.

Table 5. Average values for the parameters of the transformational effect, expressed on a scale of 1 to 10:

Degree of spiritual experience	8.4
Ability to deal with old fears	7.6
Ability to deal with old grief	6.8
Ability to deal with old anger	7.9
Degree of insight into childhood memories	7.3
Degree of self-insight	8.8
Degree of insight in oneself, with regard to the world	8.0
Degree of insight in oneself, with regard to one's family	7.5
Degree of self-confidence	7.1
Degree of self-esteem	7.6
Ability to deal with (present-day) fears	7.1
Degree of personal growth and development	8.4
Degree of self-acceptance	7.7

#### 4.2.4 Positive effects of transformation

The positive effects of transformation, such as achieving a sense of oneness, feeling happy/happier, experiencing more joy, love, energy of life, emotional stability, clarity of mind, calmness of spirit, connection with nature and a connection with and insight into higher things are all presented in figures 28 through 40. A summary of these is given in table 6.

Table 6. Average values for the positive effects of transformation, expressed on a scale of 1 to 10:

Feeling happy	7.6
Experiencing a sense of oneness	7.9
Experiencing joy	8.1
Experiencing love	8.3
Experiencing more energy of life	7.1
Experiencing emotional stability	6.9
Experiencing clarity of mind	7.1
Experiencing calmness of spirit	6.9
Experiencing a connection with higher things	7.3
Experiencing an insight into higher things	6.9
Experiencing a connection with nature	6.6

#### 4.2.5 The role of guidance and preparation

The results for the role of guidance and preparation are shown in figures 41 through 45. A summary of these is given in table 7.

Table 7. Average values for the importance of guidance and preparation, expressed on a scale of 1 to 10:

Importance of guidance	8.9
Importance of music	9.0
Importance of focusing on one's intention	8.4
Importance of fasting in advance	8.0
Importance of meditating on one's theme	7.1

#### 4.2.6 After-effects and physical effects

The after-effects and physical effects of the ayahuasca experience are shown in, respectively, figure 46 and 48. A summary of the physical effects is given in table 8.

Table 8. Physical effects experienced by participants during the ayahuasca session, expressed in percentages of respondents:

Nausea	69%
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Vomiting	59%
Muscle contractions	51%
Heavy feeling	56%
heightened frequency of breathing	30%
Other	54%

Almost 80% of respondents have reported aftereffects. These lasted from long to very long. Negative effects are most often reported as having disappeared within 14 days of using ayahuasca, while the positive effects remained in place even after three months (figures 8, 9 and 10).

#### 4.2.7 Participants' views on the use of ayahuasca

Figure 47 presents the participants' views on the use of ayahuasca. A summary of how participants consider ayahuasca to be used is given in table 9.

Table 9. View on how ayahuasca is used, expressed in percentages of respondents:

Don't know	0%
Drug	0%
Party drug	0%
Mind-expanding substance	23%
Sacrament	59%
Other	19%

Whether or not respondents would recommend the use of ayahuasca is presented in figures 15 and 16, and is summarized in table 10.

Table 10. Whether the use of ayahuasca is recommended or advised against, expressed in percentages of respondents:

	Yes	No
Recommend	90%	10%
Advise against	21%	72%

### 4.3 Qualitative responses

Excerpts from the qualitative section of the survey, arranged by topic, are presented in the next chapter.

However, most written responses are elucidations to the quantitative questions. In general, it seems people feel the need to further clarify their answers. This makes the results quite personal and somewhat difficult to categorize.

The final questions of the survey were open-ended questions about the participants' theme of



their Voyage, their expectations with regard to these themes and whether or not their expectations had been met. Also, respondents have been asked about the results the Voyage yielded for them, and about their general opinion regarding the use of ayahuasca in transformational processes.

Finally, respondents were free to express any additional thoughts on the subject, as far as these had been left uncovered by earlier sections of the survey.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 General discussion

Research into entheogenous agents is mostly centered around mystical experiences. One of the most famous examples is that of Walter Pankhe's 'Good Friday Experiment'. This research showed that psilocybin, one of the psychoactive substances in hallucinogenic mushrooms (such as *Psilocybe mexicana*, *Psilocybe cubensis*, *Panaleous cyanescens*) can facilitate mystical experiences for its users when administered in a religious setting. An important section of the research sample reported having had a mystical experience. However, what the report of this experiment does not document, is what Rick Doblin points out, the fact that most participants were at the time also engaged in their own difficult psychological battles.

Doblin writes: *'Some of the backlash that swept LSD and similar substances out of the research labs and the hand of physicians and therapists can be traced in part to the thousands of cases in which people who took the drugs in non-research settings were unprepared for the frightening aspects of the drug experience and ended up in hospital emergency rooms.'*

According to Doblin, one of the causes for people's the unsuitable preparation and their subsequent panic was due to the inadequate coverage of precautionary measures in Pankhe's thesis and in the popular media. Time Magazine even wrote: *'All students who had taken the drugs (psilocybin) experienced a mystical consciousness that resembled those described by saints and ascetics.'* Quotes like these turned out to have a disastrous effect.

Even though 60% of our sample considers the ayahuasca experience to be powerful, and 43% even reckons it offers a peak experience (Shulgin: *'Extraordinary experience, unique in its kind, the mystical or religious experience you'll never forget.'*), this, in our view, should not be what the emphasis is on. We prefer to emphasise what William James, in 1902, referred to as 'the fruits of life'. For James it was unimportant how the mystical experience was evoked, what mattered was the way in which it could have an impact on someone's life (Hruby, 2001).

Although the actual peak experience itself only lasts several hours, the healing power of it can be overwhelming (Maslow, 1961). Maslow recounts of two of his patients, one a long-time sufferer of depression with suicidal tendencies, the other suffering of severe panic attacks, who were both immediately restored to enduring health after having a peak experience (each experiencing such a peak only once).

Maslow goes on to say:

*'The little I had read about mystical experiences, had connected the mystical to religion,*

*visions and the supernatural. And like most scientists, I had browsed sceptically, and discarded the mystical realm as nonsense. I had always assumed that people's experiences in this field could be the result of hallucinations, possibly hysteria, something pathological in any case. But these people telling me about their experiences were nothing like that, they were the most healthy people imaginable!*' (Maslow, 1961).

Despite the fact that 75% of our research sample considers the ayahuasca experience, within the setting of the Sacred Voyage, to be healing, and 74% of the respondents even consider it transformational, we should not lose sight of the fact that these results cannot be assessed outside of the context that yields them. They are not representative for use of the agent per se. Most of the people describing their experiences have years of experience of working on their personal development. What they have in common is that they have all taken ayahuasca within a therapeutic setting, most often to tackle themes which they have been unable to sufficiently deal with through more conventional therapies. These are themes at soul level, such as being unwanted, abused, neglected, humiliated or battered, themes that deal with birth and death, with loss and mourning, themes that push people to seek powerful support, themes that move people towards using a powerful agent, one that is known not to be a drug or even a party drug. None of our respondents consider ayahuasca to be such, the majority consider it to be a mind-expanding substance (23%) or a sacrament (59%).

In general, our respondents did not set out with the aim to have a peak experience but to lighten their emotional burdens. They found the courage to undergo all the side effects that accompany the Sacred Voyage, and are discussed in the book that goes under the same name. Not many people will happily welcome vomiting, diarrhea, muscle spasms and profuse sweating. These effects are still aside from the intense, and often frightening experience that the use of ayahuasca can initially deliver. The peak experience reported by many of the respondents can, in many cases, be seen as a reward for enduring all the discomforts and challenges, for undergoing the solid preparation and for the participants fully confronting themselves, including their darker sides.

This is the context in which we are confident to present the results of our research. However, despite the convincing results, 43% reporting a peak experience, 75% considering the use of ayahuasca as healing, and 74% finding that it is transformational, with lasting results for 60% of respondents, we still feel the need to express a restriction on the direct interpretation of our findings. Both set and setting of the Sacred Voyage stretch far beyond merely administering the brew. Participants go through a thorough preparation, are well-informed through the compulsory reading of "The Sacred Voyage", the book that accompanies the activities of our practice. During a two hour intake session people decide on the theme most relevant to them, they meditate and focus on this theme in the weeks leading up to their session and spend the last three days in advance fasting. Furthermore, they are guided with care, love and attention and the right music, in a setting which is ideally suited to the ayahuasca experience. The appreciation for this approach can be seen from the scores allocated to the relevant parameters, guidance scoring an average of 8.9 and music averaging 9.0 points out of 10. The scores for the nature of the experience should be interpreted bearing the complete picture of the Sacred Voyage set and setting in mind.

This is relevant because the use of ayahuasca is not necessarily synonymous with positive results, as no entheogenous agent is. Entheogenous substances should only be used with the greatest amount of care because they hold the potential to delve deeply into subconscious layers of the mind. With careful preparation and use, this can lead to major breakthroughs, as

have been reported in this project. However, ill-prepared or un-careful use may lead to frightening experiences, as the following report of a bad trip by ‘Spirit Quest’ illustrates:

*‘That’s when the hell started. While the lady in the background continued to talk, I saw the ceiling of the room being sucked up into a kind of green whirlpool. I knew this was it, that this was where my bad trip started and there was nothing I could do about it. Physically, I felt terrible and the green veil over the ceiling, and the lady screaming in the distance grew larger and larger. I felt as though everyone and everything had gone mad and I was soon to follow. When I woke up the next morning I realized it had come to an end, that my hellish trip was over.’* (www.drugsforum.nl).

Remarkably enough, no one in our research sample reports anything similar to this account, even though the majority of our respondents are inexperienced with regard to the use of ayahuasca and many have never been confronted with any other mind-expanding agent, or have even felt something of an aversion towards them.

Experience teaches us that an important cause for the occurrence of positive results is in the guidance and preparation. Furthermore, we have found mindfulness (an attentive, relaxed concentration) and focusing on physical sensations to be indispensable techniques for successfully employing ayahuasca’s potential. People who are instantly lead away by the colorful realm they enter into, invariably get lost in an unknown and threatening world, as is illustrated by ‘Spirit Quest’s’ account. However, those who can remain attentively, yet non-judgmentally present, while they are engulfed by the energies and physical sensations ayahuasca induces, can expect healing and transformational effects, often even followed by a mystical or religious peak experience. At least, these are our tentative conclusions, based on our intense experiences with the people in our research sample, and on the results they have reported.

The following chapters will delve into the various aspects of our research in a more detailed fashion.

## **5.2 Background of the respondents**

This study has gathered information from seventy people, regarding their experiences during the ayahuasca ceremony conducted in the Sacred Voyage, and the effects this ritual has had on their physical and mental well-being in the period after their participation.

The response rate of 82% was striking, seventy out of 85 people returned a completed survey form within the requested time. Apparently, participants felt it was important to document the experience, and to us this indicates the importance the ritual has had for many people.

Although people’s experiences during the actual Voyage have not been invariably favorable, the effects after the Voyage have been positive for a great majority.

With regard to the respondents’ backgrounds, more women than men have participated in the research (figure 1), and most respondents fall within an age bracket of thirty to sixty years old. Most had enjoyed higher education, which is reflected in the occupations listed.

Research under users of *Salvia divinorum* (Gonzalez *et al*, 2004) has shown a slight overrepresentation of male users (56%) and an average age of 25, whereas our survey shows an average age between 40 and 50. This is more in line with the average age of 42 years old, reported of first time users of ayahuasca in the setting of the Santo Daime church, while the average age for first time users of ayahuasca in the setting of the UDV (União Do Vegetal)

church is much lower, at 31 years old (Barbosa *et al*, 2005). A group at an ayahuasca retreat in Amazonia consisted of eleven men and five women of a variety of backgrounds, mostly higher educated and ranging from 26 to 71 years old (Winkelman, 2005). Research into participants of ayahuasca rituals in the Amazon (Kristensen, 1998) showed that the sample had an overrepresentation of men and that the participants, all between thirty and sixty years of age, had widely varying levels of education.

### **5.3 Occasion**

The immediate causes for people to use ayahuasca are very diverse. Inspiration from the book “The Sacred Voyage” was mentioned, as were other publications, previous experiences, accounts of friends’ or other participants’ experiences, stumbling across it on the internet and other occasions. Some other reasons were formulated as follows:

*‘As a result of my interest for Jungian Analytical Therapy, and my passion for Jungian theory in general, I began to experience a growing desire to gain insight into what it is in my sub consciousness that drives my behavior. Cognitive therapy may offer a first step in this but, as far as I am concerned, doesn’t always reach the deeper layers. For the day-to-day consciousness it remains a guess whether or not you’ve touched upon the essence. To me, ayahuasca is a safe way of reaching the subconscious and, without the ego intervening, to receive its messages. Lars’s book really set my blood flowing and put me onto this track.’*

*‘I had been on the path of experimenting with psychedelics for some time, (mainly natural entheogenics, but also the occasional synthetic substance). The experiences intrigued me and showed me some of the blissful, but also the frightening emotions deep inside me. I took to reading a lot about psychedelics, both in books and on the internet and after having taken in so much information on the healing powers of ayahuasca, I decided it was time to try it.’*

*‘I first learned of the existence of ayahuasca when I was about seventeen years old. I was keen to find out what it was like. At the time I was told that you should not go out looking for ayahuasca, you should chance upon it. Last year, ayahuasca happened to find itself on my path a number of times, it felt right to go and find out what it was like.’*

The group of sixteen participants of an ayahuasca retreat in Amazonia gave the following reasons for taking part: seeking emotional and spiritual healing, learning to cope with disease, learning to let go, a need for a connection with Mother Nature, a quest for physical and emotional healing, cleansing the body of toxins, a need for clarity of mind and enlightenment, as part of a spiritual path, a calling from the plants, to guide other users, to experience the deity within, curiosity for spiritual experience, an interest in meeting fellow users, for the effect on artistic expression, out of scientific curiosity, the notion that it would help to find information about the nature of familial relationships, for the benefit of future development and career, to overcome self-destructive patterns, to find closure on issues left undealt with, to find a new direction in life, to get into motion, to help develop the qualities of a medium, to enhance the level of imagination, to overcome alcohol abuse and finally, to go through the visual experience and find out what it could mean for his work (Winkelman, 2005).

### **5.4 Nature of the experience**

With regard to the previous experience of the respondents, for two thirds of the sample the use of ayahuasca was entirely new, even though most had extensive, in some cases more than twenty years of experience in working on their personal development.

The amount of time between the (last) session and filling out the questionnaire ranged from fourteen days to a full year.

For those with previous experiences with ayahuasca, earlier experiences were considered equal in importance for 14% and more important for 11%.

The experience was described as healing and transformational by most, while the intensity ranged from noticeable to peak experience. Most reported the experience as being 'powerful'.

A sample of the reactions:

*'I had anticipated a peak experience, and had set myself up for one. When it didn't occur my thoughts were all over the place and I was really bummed out. I didn't feel right up to the moment that I could go up to someone and lie down on a mattress, after which it all seemed to pan out alright. I dreamt up explanations for what went wrong but now I realise I tried to force something and just couldn't accept things the way they actually were.'*

*'The profundity of my insights into myself were already indicated in the Santo Daimé dream and, similarly, the Sacred Voyage has brought me an incredible result in that respect.'*

*'It was both frightening and a psychedelic bad trip, yet afterwards, it has also proven to be healing and transformational, freeing me of the results of whiplash injury.'*

*'For me, many things have fallen into place. It's as though, subconsciously, this is what I've been working towards for so many years, finally giving all the knowledge and wisdom I had gathered, a place in my body. Something like that... It felt as something much larger than a mere stimulant. It really felt like something I'd given myself, given my inner child, despite all the fears that were inside me.'*

*'It's given my life a whole new and positive twist. It made me find my calling in life!'*

*'The ayahuasca allows you to get in touch with your magical child, the child many adults have forgotten about, the one that holds many beautiful experiences, as well as those that have been left undealt with.'*

Only a small number of people reported having had negative effects of the experience. Most of these disappeared within fourteen days, yet some described them as lasting.

The positive effects were generally experienced over a longer period of time and are judged as lasting by most respondents.

A sample of the responses regarding the negative experiences:

*'After the ayahuasca Voyage I had a sense of not being entirely down to earth. After a night's sleep this side effect had disappeared.'*

*'The only negative effect was the headache in the night after my first Sacred Voyage experience. The next day it had gone. I don't consider the feelings of fear, grief and doubt I had as negative. The ayahuasca doesn't breed these feelings but merely brings them to the surface from deep down inside you, with a force that simply cannot be ignored. Experiencing these nasty feelings, I was actually reliving them, as a way of dealing with painful emotions'*

*from my youth.'*

*'Headache and fatigue. (Lasting 1-3 days)'*

A sample of responses regarding positive experiences:

*'About six months after my Voyage, something slowly started to change inside me. I began to accept myself as I am, accepting all the sides I have. And only after a full year, everything had fallen into place, and I'd really gone through all of it. So the positive effects did not reveal themselves until later, and are lasting.'*

*'I've undertaken the Voyage just over two weeks ago. I still feel joyful and energetic. And I'm able to feel at an increasingly deep level.'*

*'Lasting positive effects so far. I reckon that if the ayahuasca works in a transformational way and can add to personal growth and realization, there are only positive effects.'*

*'The evening and the two days after the Voyage were amazing. I felt light and warm, vulnerable but strong. Everything touched me, my heart was wide open and I had an incredibly pleasant contact with the people around me. Little conversation, just a lot of feeling and a great deal of enjoyment. After a few days the level of bliss sank down to 'normal' proportions and some old patterns returned. But still, especially in my behavior towards others, I feel a lasting change has occurred. I feel much happier giving in to my impulses to 'give'.'*

*'Reliving and dealing with the old pain and grief have put me in good spirits, lasting to this very day. The insights I have gained have also served me well to this very day.'*

Most respondents offer a negative response to the question whether the experience has been harmful to their physical or mental health.

A sample:

*'The first few days I thought it was beneficial but after seven days this effect has dropped down to zero. But because I cannot say whether or not this is a lasting result, or whether I may need a second session to fortify this positive effect, this is my answer for now.'*

*'It has strengthened the positive inside me, the belief in myself. Furthermore, it has helped to clear up old trauma.'*

*'No negative effects whatsoever, just positive ones.'*

*'Judging by my reluctance to being born, I must have lacked in joy of life. I was already tired from thinking and feeling by the time I was born. Before I took the brew, I have asked the angels to stay with me and I have agreed with the ayahuasca that I would be prepared to face my dark sides. The healing nature of the brew is revealed in the recognition of those dark sides.'*

*'Everyone should do this. Ayahuasca knows exactly how to 'break open' your spirit in a very subtle way, in order to get to the core, rather than having to spend years having psychological conversational therapy sessions.'*

As far as the subjective experience of ayahuasca users is concerned, most people appear to describe the experience as pleasant (Riba & Barbano, 2005). For the negative experience, feelings of fear were mentioned. However, these were not lasting and could be overcome through offering verbal support.

## **5.5 Effects on mental and physical health**

Most respondents were very positive about the salutariness of ayahuasca for their mental and physical health. Negative effects, to mental as well as physical well-being, were hardly ever mentioned.

A sample of the responses to the questions on mental health:

*'In its most simple form a way of relieving stress, though after having repeated the experience, it improved my mental health, made me a better person.'*

*'Because ayahuasca allows you to look beyond the veil of the 'I', you learn to look at yourself and see through yourself better and better, something that the ego would never allow. Learning to 'see' is the key to change and I experience that time and time again, through Santo Daime as well as through the Sacred Voyage.'*

*'I sure think it has a healing effect, though I do believe it is essential to be in the right setting and have the right guidance. Also, it seems crucial to direct your aim towards a certain theme that you feel the need to work on.'*

*'I finally get myself. This results in a massive amount of inner peace and in me finally allowing myself to come first, to stand up for myself.'*

*'For me, ayahuasca has a purifying effect, at several levels. I find it hard to assess and determine if and how harmful or healing this experience has been for me. I believe the question is too subjective.'*

A sample of responses to the questions on physical health:

*'Extremely cleansing for the body, getting rid of toxins, leading to a higher energy level.'*

*'Ayahuasca is no gentle healer. The first effect, such as the infection of my salivary gland, can be pretty severe. On the other hand, I believe ayahuasca gives you as much as you can handle. People used to being hard on themselves might be able to handle more than more sensitive and emotional people, and might be better able to face up to the challenges of making breakthroughs.'*

*'The combination of fasting and using ayahuasca has a cleansing effect and can lift emotional blockades.'*

*'I feel quite neutral about the physical aspect. I was incredibly tired after the Voyage but I don't really consider that either harmful or healing.'*

The effects of regular use of ayahuasca have been assessed in the so-called Hoasca project.

This project has researched the biochemical, pharmacological, psychological and psychiatric effects for ayahuasca users in the setting of the Brazilian UDV church, which uses ayahuasca in rituals, and have compared them with a comparable control group (reviewed by Dobkin de Rios & Grob, 2005). Users turned out to operate at a higher level with regard to personality parameters and neuropsychological characteristics. Important determinants seem to be set, setting and the power of suggestion (Dobkin de Rios & Grob, 2005).

Research documented the comparison between forty adolescents who had ritually taken ayahuasca at least 24 times, within the setting of the UDV church community, and a comparable control group whose members had never taken ayahuasca (Da Silveira *et al*, 2005). Comparisons were made for items such as drug abuse, binge drinking, anxiety-related disorders, symptoms of depression and those of ADHD. For most characteristics the groups were comparable. However, for several phenomena, the experimental group scored significantly better. ADHD was present in a considerably smaller portion of the group taking ayahuasca than in the control group (one versus six individuals). Eleven girls in the ayahuasca group suffered from anxiety-related disorders, as opposed to seventeen girls in the control group. The experimental group counted three girls who showed low appreciation for their appearance, whereas the control group counted ten of these girls (Da Silveira *et al*, 2005).

Effects of the use of ayahuasca on the presence of feelings such as anxiety, panic and desperation in members of the Santo Daime church have also been compared to effects of placebo use as a control experiment (Santos *et al*, 2007). The immediate effects of ayahuasca showed a significant decrease in the levels of panic and desperation, compared to the placebo group. The levels of anxiety did not change.

Research under six healthy volunteers with earlier experience of the use of ayahuasca, showed that ayahuasca induced an altered state of consciousness and stimulating psychedelic effects, which grew in intensity with an increase of the dosage (Riba *et al*, 2000). The volunteers experienced changes in their perception and their thought patterns and had visions and memories of recent, often emotionally charged events. The effects were generally described as pleasant and desirable, except for one participant who became disoriented and scared. Slight effects on participants' blood pressures and heart rates were measured but these were not considered clinically relevant.

Investigation of the experiences of 28 first time users in the settings of the Santo Daime (19) and UDV (9) church communities has aimed to evaluate the short-term psychological aftereffects (Barbosa *et al*, 2005). Participants were assessed at a point from four days to one day prior to their ayahuasca session, and were revisited one to two weeks after their experience to evaluate their mental health and any alterations in their state of consciousness. Only one of the participants had had a distressing experience, the others indicated having experienced mostly visual phenomena (64%), feelings of peace and harmony (54%), strengthened insights into themselves, life and behavior (39%), and changes in the image of their physical self, like oneness with the surroundings and the division of mind and body (32%). Behavioral changes after the session included a greater feeling of serenity for 29% and higher levels of assertiveness for 18%. 14% experienced more joy in life and another 14% experienced higher levels of contentment and feelings of ease. Just one person had started to worry more (4%) (Barbosa *et al*, 2005).

## **5.6 The transformational effect**

The transformational effect has been measured along the parameters of self-insight, self-confidence, insight into oneself with regard to the family and the world, self-esteem, dealing with fear, old emotional trauma, grief and anger, personal development, and gaining of insight



into childhood memories.

The average scores for these parameters ranged from 6.8 to 8.8 (on a scale of 1 to 10). This means that the average respondent considered the use of ayahuasca in the setting of the Sacred Voyage to be a transformational experience with considerable positive effects.

Virtually all the respondents were very positive with regard to the degree to which they gained insight into themselves (figure 17). A sample of the responses to the questions about this theme:

*‘As I mentioned before, ayahuasca makes you aware of your own pitfalls. It brings you closer to the universal wisdom which is hidden in everyone’s body, mind and soul, but is often buried under heaps of emotional, mental and physical pain. The ayahuasca helps you to reach through all that and get in touch with your true ‘Self.’*

*‘The insight was very clear and simple. After reaching that insight you need to learn to integrate it into your life and weave it into who you ‘think’ you are.’*

*‘It was most confronting, I’m deeply emotional because of these therapies.’*

*‘Without losing much time, I’ve been drawn through many ‘blockades’ that had stood in my way for years. It gives you insight to help you understand. This is different for each different individual.’*

The insight into people’s relationship with the world was also very good for most (figure 19), while the insights gained in relation to people’s families was positive but much more varied in its nature.

A sample of the responses:

*‘Learning to feel, and living through that universal wisdom, immediately makes it clear that your happiness is connected with everything that lives: stretching from Mother Nature to old souls, to as far as your own enemies.’*

*‘There was no such thing as enjoyment before the Sacred Voyage because it was systematically quenched by my environment. Now, step by step, I’m gathering the strength to enjoy life my own way. In other words: my naturally cheerful disposition is now being nourished.’*

*‘Ayahuasca has brought more calmness and ease into my family. The place all the members take and the love we have been allowed to share has now had a light cast on it from a much wider perspective.’*

*‘I haven’t gained much of an insight into my family life.’*

*‘The weapon of guilt, used by the family, no longer works on me.’*

The questions about the Sacred Voyage’s effect on self-confidence and self-esteem were generally responded to positively but there were also some for whom these topics were not noticeably affected by the Voyage (figures 20 and 21).

A sample of the responses to questions about self-confidence:

*‘Ayahuasca strengthens my self-confidence by elucidating the steps I have taken in the past*

*and what their impact is on the bigger picture.'*

*'Freedom. Freedom to choose. Freedom to express yourself. Freedom to be who you are.'*

*'I finally know what was under it all. I'm now able to look at things from the viewpoint of 'me'.'*

*'Well... I know that this answer will seem to go against the other things I've written but I keep noticing that it's still a sore point. Despite the wonderful experience I've had, I still haven't fully rid myself of this pattern of insecurity and this tendency to not love myself.'*

A sample of the responses to questions about self-esteem:

*'I can now appreciate some of the characteristics I used to brand as negative.'*

*'Ayahuasca touches you where you're most vulnerable, especially there. And then it lets you feel the beauty, the quality of that vulnerability.'*

*'Self-esteem... What is the self? I relation to what? Nothing is true, everything's an illusion... the self included. Improving self-esteem has a highly paradoxical quality to it. The true self is simply itself and isn't judged within any frame of reference, denoting it as good or not good, valuable or worthless. Should a value label be attached, it will always be the ego allocating this value... which in itself is an illusion. Okay... self-esteem, to me, is something like... am I prepared to live according to universal law? ...I'm getting there!!!'*

Another clear division can be seen in the responses to the questions about dealing with fear. There is a small group of respondents who have hardly noticed any change and a larger group who report a considerable effect.

Again, many felt inclined to add a written response to the multiple choice question. Some examples:

*'Fear of allowing myself to be me is an issue in my life. The ayahuasca experience brought this fear to the foreground in all its aspects.'*

*'This was not an issue for me. Whenever I fear something I force myself to face it or to undergo it.'*

*'In the aftermath of the experience, my fears have disappeared entirely. And that after fifty years!!! Fears can be examined and tackled from a completely different state of consciousness.'*

Respondents' personal development was invariably positively affected by using ayahuasca in the setting of the Sacred Voyage. Again, a sample of the written comments:

*'I've been working on my personal development for a very long time. However, as a result of a myriad of wonderful and spiritual experiences, it rather went all over the place. Ayahuasca has offered me more direction, as though, subconsciously, I am now heading in the right direction. It has helped me take an enormous leap.'*

*'I got stuck and ayahuasca has helped me get out of the rut I was in, helping me to get on with*

*my life.'*

*'It has given me several insights about the illusion of life and about the movie in which we all have a part.'*

The responses to the questions about dealing with old emotional trauma (fear, anger and grief) and the insights into childhood memories, shows another division between the few reporting no, or just a slight effect, and the many who have been strongly and positively affected.

A sample of the responses:

On dealing with fear:

*'I believe the transformational aspect of the Voyage is in the potential ayahuasca shows you. I have my doubts about other people's transformational experiences. Maybe they are felt as they are described, or maybe it feels that way in the short or middle term but I don't think long-term patterns are really thoroughly evened out. That requires action. However, there may be exceptions, such as my fear of having a second child, which took just half an hour to transform into faith!'*

*'I have not yet been able to make a breakthrough with regard to that fear from the womb that I relived. But that is just an aspect, my courage to be who I am has grown considerably.'*

On dealing with anger:

*'The anger I encountered was easily dissolved through the much wider perspective of the bigger picture.'*

*'It was there afterwards and is still present to some extent. It hasn't disappeared or become more manifest because of the session.'*

*'A lot of anger and screaming, and profuse sweating.'*

On dealing with grief:

*'At this point I am not convinced that ayahuasca should, or could be supported by any other therapeutic setting. On the contrary, during my Sacred Voyage I have been relieved of deep sorrow.'*

*'Some of the emotional charge has disappeared but most of it has left me afterwards and in other sessions. It did set something in motion, though!'*

*'Emotional pain is love misunderstood. Once I started looking at my grief with love, almost all the sorrow had disappeared. In my everyday life, grief leaves such a deep groove that I get stuck in it... because this grief is linked to my greatest love. Giving up my sorrow means giving up my love.'*

On dealing with childhood memories:

*'Reliving your childhood memories with the awareness of an adult enables you to gain new insights.'*

*'There have certainly been moments when I relived my old memories. Yes, some things fall in their proper place now, like my role in the family, which I didn't understand before, but do now.'*

Most respondents rate the degree of spirituality of the ayahuasca experience higher and more positive than other spiritual experiences they have had.

Again, a sample of quotes:

*'Ayahuasca offers the grand finale that all other spiritual experiences work towards. Ayahuasca encapsulates the others and intensifies them to boot.'*

*'They're experiences I'll never forget. They've made a deep impression on me.'*

*'It all feels so much grander than all the other things I've done. Especially because I'm such a massive control freak, it feels like a major victory to consciously let go and just let things come as they do.'*

The research done in the Amazonian ayahuasca retreat reported effects such as a heightened sense of self-awareness, insight into deeper layers of the self, sometimes enlightenment, access to a higher self and higher levels of consciousness (Winkelman, 2005).

## **5.7 Transformational experience**

The positive effects of the transformational experience have been measured through the following parameters: the degree of happiness, a sense of oneness, experiencing more joy, more love, more energy of life, (greater) emotional stability, gaining clarity of mind and calmness of spirit, feeling a connection with nature, with higher things and gaining an insight into these higher things.

The results for positive effects measured on these parameters ranged from 6.6 to 8.3, on a scale of 1 to 10.

Regarding the feelings of happiness, a few people report very little effect, but most respondents were very positive.

A sample of the responses:

*'Ayahuasca gives me a lot of room to feel happy about myself, happy in my body and its vast potential and happy in my contacts with others. Seeing the past (and part of the future) presented before me and seeing the thread that runs through the story of my life, I have developed a certain calmness and a blissful feeling of faith.'*

*'It doesn't affect my happiness directly but because it allows me to move closer to myself and make choices that suit me, I end up feeling happier as an indirect result.'*

*'I can feel simply happy and get in touch with those feelings much more often now, just by being.'*

A sense of oneness was experienced by most to a greater or a lesser degree. A number of people enjoyed a truly beautiful experience during their Voyage.

A sample of reactions:

*'During my ayahuasca experiences I have been granted the unutterably beautiful sense of oneness for the first time.'*

*'The realization that we are all connected already, even though we don't often feel it that way. In our essential consciousness it is already all there, but our ego needs the experience to enable us to reach it, to travel there.'*

The degree to which people experienced more joy scored very highly for many respondents, it was often allocated the highest score.

Some responses:

*'Enormous, deep joy, love, faith, connectedness, it's simply all there. We already live in a state of Love, Faith and Connectedness, we just need to open up to it.'*

*'By also re-experiencing your 'dark sides' (your suppressed aspects) again, joy becomes much more intense and beautiful.'*

The feelings of love were also very highly appreciated by many.

A sample of quotes:

*'Because I don't place myself and my vulnerability in the foreground so much, I am much more able to open up to others. Relationships develop more easily and these relationships, as well as existing ones, reach a greater profundity.'*

*'The love I feel has everything to do with relinquishing myself to what 'is'. Love, for me, is all about accepting what is, and expressing it.'*

The reports of the effect on people's energy levels were more varied, though for most people this effect did score fairly highly.

Some reactions:

*'Positive, but it didn't last very long.'*

*'The intensity of the experience left me needing two days to physically recover. It gave me an energy boost that echoed for weeks.'*

The parameters emotional stability, clarity of mind and calmness of spirit all scored an average of about seven points and all showed similar patterns, a few people were affected very little and a large group of respondents reported distinctly positive effects.

A sample of the reactions:

*'During the experience you're knocked off your foothold so severely, that afterwards you certainly feel some kind of stability.'*

*'It's the whole process of dealing with emotional issues that makes me a stronger person. (Psychological) complaints and doubt are opportunities for personal growth. Ayahuasca has helped me understand this process of growth and to see how pain and fear have their place in man's emotional palette.'*

*'Especially right after the session, I felt so clear and receptive, and felt I could see through things more easily.'*

*'Well, I certainly try to look at things from a different perspective now. The session has taught*

*me that things are often very different than I think. I'm trying to stretch my view of the world.'*

*'After the session, I had a strong sense of calmness, also about what would follow. Despite my emotional turbulence I did feel I knew in which direction I was headed. That calmness did leave me again but I feel I can still return to it when I choose to.'*

*'My spirit has not become much calmer.'*

Regarding new insights into and feeling a connection with higher things, most respondents reported a favorable effect.

A sample of reactions:

On the connection with higher things:

*'Only since my ayahuasca session do I feel connected with the cosmos.'*

*'I have felt a deep respect for life, the universe and its perfection, even though I don't always understand it. It's not something I'm capable of questioning, my knowledge is too limited to judge it.'*

On the degree of insight into higher things:

*'It hasn't unveiled anything for me in the sense of wisdom or insight. Simply that it's veeery uncomplicated. Maybe that in itself is a major insight! That all Love already exists and that it's HERE where life takes place, on EARTH, with my nearest and dearest.'*

*'The connection between body and spirit, chakras, karmic awareness, all these familiar themes, let's say my 'book knowledge', have actually been revealed to me through EXPERIENCE, during this Voyage.'*

The question on a connection with nature elicited the most varied responses, and on average, it received the 'lowest' score, 6.6 points. Again, there is a clear division between those with intense experiences and those who hardly noticed any effect.

*'A very strong connection with the animal kingdom. I feel strongly linked to animals, as much to the spider in the bathroom as to next door's dog.'*

*'I started out giving this a score of 5, but I've changed it to 8 because, when I let it all sink in a little, I realize I've become more aware of everything that's 'alive', more aware that there's a whole world beyond my perception. It gives me a sense of awe and wonder.'*

There are hardly any fields of research that allow comparisons to the ayahuasca experience to be made, except studies into other entheogenics. Research into near-death experience (NDE) is a remarkable exception though. Apparently, NDE tends to take people into a state of consciousness similar to that induced by the use of ayahuasca. It can hardly be considered purely coincidental that the native inhabitants of the Amazon refer to ayahuasca as 'little death'. One of the first things reported by mystics, Buddhists, people who have gone through NDE and those who have taken ayahuasca, is a bright white light. Another similarity in the accounts of people with an NDE and ayahuasca users is their confrontation with universal knowledge.

*'I have been in the Heaven that takes up most of his light, and saw things there that those who descend from that height cannot speak of or forget...'*

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), *Divina Commedia*.

The light is often described as a very bright, but not blinding light that shines through everything. People are very strongly drawn to this light and are often fully absorbed by it. Sometimes the light is dubbed a light being and religious people often consider the light to be Jesus, and angel or a light being. The nature of people's religious background strongly determines the name they endow this light being with. There always seems to be a direct communication with the light being, as though it can read your mind and answers you through your thoughts. In and around this light, people experience absolute acceptance and unconditional love, and they are brought in touch with deep knowledge and wisdom. Answers to the most profound questions seem to be given before the question is even asked (Van Lommel, 2007).

Van Lommel describes the transformational effect of NDE as an 'experience of insight in life', which entails an increase of appreciation for life, life being given more meaning and the material world becoming less important. It also entails acceptance of and unconditional love for the 'self', others, nature and an insight into the connectedness of all that is, the so-called sense of oneness. This is remarkably similar to what is often reported by Sacred Voyage participants.

### **5.8 The role of guidance and preparation**

The roles of guidance and music were widely considered of great importance, scoring averages of 8.9 and 9, respectively.

A sample of responses:

On guidance:

*'It defined the setting, offered that little bit of security needed to be able to fully relinquish yourself to the experience and allow healing where healing was needed.'*

*'The guidance was warm and pleasant, and all the care provided before and after the session was excellent.'*

*'Guidance took place during the preparation (in the weeks prior to the session) and on the day itself. If the medical world were to be open to this approach it would consider it to be 'very professional'.'*

On music:

*'During shamanistic ceremonies, live music had helped me reach the darkest pits and the lightest heavens of my soul. Recorded music did support this process but not to the same extent, as though it has less feeling to it. It doesn't tap as directly into the energies flowing, I imagine. Music can certainly be defining for the nature of your Voyage, it helps you 'get in touch'.'*

*'The right music triggers emotions in you, so that they can be exposed more easily and you are more open to experiencing them deeply and healing them.'*

The role of preparation, focusing on one's intention, fasting and meditating is also highly appreciated. It is remarkable that no one felt inclined to elucidate their quantitative responses with written comments.

The roles of both set and setting are thought to be vitally important.

In the aforementioned ayahuasca retreat in Amazonia (Winkelman, 2005) a two week workshop is given along lines of the following format. A nightly ayahuasca session is followed by two days of resting, artistic expression and scientific presentations, after which another session is held. The sessions are held in an open room and at the start of each session, all the participants are invited to share their intentions and expectations. After this, the first cup of ayahuasca is administered, with additional portions being provided according to participants' needs. After the first ayahuasca is administered, the participants can retreat to mattresses spread around the room. During the session, mainly instrumental music is played, reflecting influences of musical styles from all over the world (Winkelman, 2005). This setting is strongly reminiscent of that of the Sacred Voyage, even though that lasts just one day but, in turn, does require extensive preparation. The participants' assessments of the positive effects of this setting (see 5.5 and 5.10) merit qualifying this as a good format.

Research into first time ayahuasca users in the Santo Daime and UDV church communities also documents the importance of expectations, motivations and suggestion for the witnessed effects (Barbosa *et al*, 2005).

In his outline for the ideal therapeutic setting for DMT sessions, Strassman (2001) points out the importance of a soothing environment. He has witnessed the negative impact of a sterile, clinical setting on the outcome of DMT or psilocybin sessions (Strassman, 2001).

## **5.9 After-effects and physical effects**

Many people, almost 80% of all respondents, report after-effects.

A few examples:

*'Up to 36 hours afterwards I felt really vulnerable and open, so I was very careful in my contacts with the outside world.'*

*'For a number of days it was difficult for me to be in crowded, noisy places because I experienced everything so much more intensely. And finally, after so long, I finally felt nice and warm.'*

*'I seem to have become a little more alien to this world, especially when I witness people worrying about things that make me think: 'Wake up, man!' Your painful experiences are there just for you. My development consists of now being able to look on them with compassion and allowing them to teach me what it's like to express your grief, teach me what it's like to be in the here and now, to be your own person among others.'*

Many respondents experienced physical effects during the Voyage, with nausea being reported most often, then vomiting, muscle spasms and a heavy feeling and a whole realm of other effects.

A sample of the responses:

*'There was one part of my stomach in which an extremely heavy feeling was concentrated. There was a flow of energy through my legs and feet.'*

*'Exhaling for such a long time, making it take so long before I could breathe in again. Also, I had some trouble swallowing.'*



*‘Diarrhea, yawning, puffing, crying, quivering. All ways of making that blocked up energy (physical as well as emotional) flow again and leaving nasty feelings behind me.’*

The physical effects of ayahuasca are well-documented (Riba *et al.*, 2000 and Riba & Barbanoj, 2005). In a pilot study with six participants and a clinical study with eighteen healthy participants, pharmacology and the safety of use were studied. The use of ayahuasca resulted in a slight increase of blood pressure and heart rate, the results being significant for the diastolic pressure only. It was concluded that from a cardiovascular point, there are no major risks associated with the use of ayahuasca. However, it should be noted that these measurements were only done after singular use by healthy individuals who did not perform any physical exertions. Other physical effects reported included a changing physical sensation, nausea, feeling hot or cold, tingling sensations and gastrointestinal disruptions. Despite many people feeling nauseous, people only vomited in four out of 54 sessions (Riba & Barbanoj, 2005).

From an extensive literature study into the effects of the use of DMT and the alkaloid harmaline, as are both found in ayahuasca (Gable, 2007), it was concluded that use in this setting was relatively safe, safer than the use of alcohol, and that the risk of dependencies (addiction) and lasting psychological disorders was minimal. It was remarkable though, that desirable long-term psychological effects *are* reported, when used in an unambiguous social context (Gable, 2007).

There are certain risks, however, when ayahuasca is used in combination with particular forms of medication (antidepressants, opiates and painkillers), herbs (St.John’s wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) and ginseng (*Panax*)) or other stimulants, such as ecstasy. In all the literature there is only a single report of a man, a twenty-five-year old, who, according to the title of the article, died as a result of an excessive amount of DMT in an ayahuasca brew (Sklerov *et al.*, 2005). However, the pathologist ruled out hallucinogenic amines as having caused this fatality, and verdict on the cause of death remained inconclusive.

Regarding the long-term effects of ayahuasca, most respondents reported positive experiences. There were negative effects, but these had all disappeared within a period of fourteen days, while the positive effects remained of significance more than three months after the ayahuasca session. In a personal communication, Strassman has informed us that his DMT research yielded similar results. He writes: ‘I’ve had the chance to meet with a number of our volunteers during this last year, and all of them I spoke with reported long-lasting and profound changes in their lives because of their participation in the research. It just took a long time.’

Without the right set and setting high dosages of DMT did cause psychedelic effects but did not lead to truly transformational change (Strassman, 2005).

### **5.10 Participants’ views on the use of ayahuasca**

Respondents’ views on the use of ayahuasca were invariably favorable. None of the people in our research sample considered ayahuasca to be a drug or a party drug, most saw it as a mind-expanding substance, a sacrament or as something else.

Some examples of alternative definitions:

*‘Please don’t use the term sacrament. This will only lead to confusion and to intolerance towards ayahuasca. It isn’t a secret... it’s more of a revelation ;-)* (The word sacrament is

*derived from the Latin sacramentum, which means secret (of faith.).'*

*'Support, or assistant in spiritual experience.'*

*'Truth serum that enhances profundity.'*

When asked whether people would recommend the use of ayahuasca to others, or would rather advise against it, most expressed that they would recommend it, but only under specific conditions.

Some responses:

*'I would advise against it for people who lack stability of the autonomic nervous system.'*

*'I've noticed it doesn't feel good to recommend it. It's such a specific type of substance. If it's right for the people you're telling your story to, they'll ask for it, and then I'd recommend it.'*

*'It's so dependent on the person in question. I'd certainly recommend it to some people, but would advise against it with others. It seems to me that you should at least have been working on issues of awareness for some time before trying ayahuasca.'*

*'I wouldn't recommend it to just anyone, only to those who'd treat it with care, certainly not to the group just out to experiment.'*

*'I would recommend it to others but only if they were really willing and courageous enough to use it for a seriously introspective experience, to get in touch with all the aspects of themselves, and not just for the thrill of the trip.'*

*'It's both yes and no for me. My Voyage was a tremendously positive experience, so I'd lean towards recommending it to others, but I also consider ayahuasca to be such a powerful thing that people would really have to be ready for, so in some cases I would advise against using it.'*

### **5.11 Respondents' personal experience of the Voyage**

The last five questions of our survey were open-ended question about the theme of the Voyage, people's expectations with regard to this theme and whether or not their expectations had been met.

The themes varied widely but could roughly be categorized as follows:

Table 10. Themes of the Voyage

Theme	Frequency
Inner Child	13
Self-insight	23
Relationships with others	9
Relationship with parents	5

Old trauma, fear, grief	11
Goal of life	5
Corporality, physical problems	11
Work	4
Other	5

Winkelman (2005) mentions spiritual growth, insight into relationships and personal development as the main motivations for the people in his research to have entered the program of the Amazonian ayahuasca retreat. Dealing with emotional trauma, finding a goal in life and overcoming addiction are also mentioned. Remarkably enough, there were also two participants who had entered out of (scientific) curiosity. Again, people only took part after conscious deliberation.

The ten respondents in Kristensen's research (1998) listed the following, hierarchically ordered motivations for their participation: personal growth, curiosity, mental or physical healing, vacation, connection with the earth, interest in shamanism, being a shaman in training, and being on a crossroads in life. Again, a group of people consciously seeking a spiritual experience.

Concerning the expectations people had when taking part in the Voyage, it turned out that some had an open approach, ready to take things as they came, whereas others had clearly defined expectations.

When asked whether or not their expectations had been met, a share indicated that they hadn't, some reported they had and for others the experience surpassed their expectations. The following table shows the responses given:

Table 11. Expectations and outcome:

Outcome of the experience	Frequency
Expectations were met	16
Expectations were partly met	7
Outcome fell short of expectations	12
Outcome exceeded expectations	6

Asked for the results the Voyage had yielded them, most respondents reported favorable results. Insight into the world and themselves, personal space, calmness and self-confidence were among the results mentioned most often.

Some examples:

*'My own SPACE, my own TRUTH.'*

*'It has meant a lot for my personal development. I now dare to put myself first, I feel happier, making me more mentally balanced. This results in me feeling more comfortable with myself, giving my confidence an enormous boost. I now face the world with my head held high and my feet firmly rooted, no one can push me aside or walk all over me.'*

*'It can really be summarized as a deeper sense of physical consciousness, no matter how odd that may sound. My 'knowing' is now firmly anchored in my body.'*

When asked for a personal statement on the use of ayahuasca, all the responses were highly favorable with regard to the use of ayahuasca in a therapeutic setting. Expert guidance was often considered to be essential.

Some examples:

*'I'm strongly in favor of using ayahuasca in transformational processes. I'm convinced it isn't harmful or addictive and that it can be extremely useful in clearing away blockades that are hardly, or not at all affected by medication and conventional therapies.'*

*'Ayahuasca is simply a transformational substance, and a pretty tough one at that. For those who prefer the gentle, step-by-step approach, it might be too much. But for those who are ready to take a leap in their level of awareness, or for those with seriously obstinate ego characteristics, unable to get out of particular patterns, it can be a real help to break things open. (This was certainly the case for me, I had an incredibly strong control mechanism, or superego, or whatever you want to call it, and a pretty stiff inferiority complex.)'*

*'It's a really powerful brew, which can help people who are up for a process of development and prepare themselves properly, to have a healing experience, one that can give your life a turn for the better. It cannot be predicted what ayahuasca will offer you but it always holds the following ingredients: intuitive knowledge, self-appreciation, ecstasy, faith and religious awareness.'*

*'This brew is older than the wisdom of this modern age. It's part of a heritage that should be dealt with integrity and care. It should be used out of the freedom and self-awareness of (searching) people, in order to answer their sincere questions. Ayahuasca is a gift from Mother Nature.'*

The participants in the ayahuasca retreat research (Winkelman, 2005), named, among others, the following effects of the use of ayahuasca: enhanced self-awareness, personal development, better understanding, self-insight, learning to let go, dealing with fear and old emotional trauma, a connection with the Divine, emotional and physical healing. The term drug tourism does not apply to this group, as only one of sixteen participants took part out of curiosity. Most were out to find personal spiritual growth and spiritual experiences with nature, God and the spirit world.

Other research into the participation in ayahuasca ceremonies in the Amazon (Kristensen, 1998) also documents all ten participants as being content with their results, which were described as shedding of ego/pride, connection with other entities, feeling better and stronger, clarity of mind, intense joy, facing fears, connection with nature, decreased levels of stress, physical healing, and were all described as being wonderful.

Our research gave respondents the opportunity to write a personal comment if they felt not all the aspects of their Voyage had been covered by the rest of the survey. This yielded widely varied responses, some referring back to the way people had experienced the Voyage.

Some examples:

*'What I missed was a section on CONVICTIONS, my experience is that ayahuasca also has a*

*strong mental effect on your convictions.'*

*'This was my first experience of drug use and my preconceived opinions on addiction and hangovers have gone. Ayahuasca has stirred up the best in me, deep inside.'*

*'I would organize healing weekends, where ayahuasca is part of the program, along with meditation, yoga, expressive dance and breathing techniques (rebirthing). I believe a combination of deep relaxation and intervention techniques (ayahuasca and rebirthing) would prove very powerful and effective.'*

## **5.12 Therapeutic effects**

An article on the several lines of research into the use of ayahuasca (McKenna, 2004), has indicated the recognized biomedical effects, potential therapeutic applications and a line of inquiry for clinical studies. The Hoasca project, which systematically compared 15 members of the UDV church who had used ayahuasca for a minimum of ten years to a control group, showed that the ayahuasca users performed better in memory tests, were more confident, showed less anxiety and were more optimistic. Furthermore, the UDV members showed an absence of psychiatric problems, even though, before their entry in the church, eleven of them had been diagnosed as alcoholics, two were depressed, four had a history of drug abuse (cocaine and amphetamines), eleven were addicted to nicotine and three suffered from anxiety-related disorders. Also, five of the subjects who had a history of alcohol addiction showed violent behavior related to their condition. All these psychopathological phenomena had disappeared upon entry into the UDV church community. The subjective impression of the participants was that the use of ayahuasca in the setting of UDV had improved their mental and physical health and had supported improvements of their interpersonal relations, work and relationships within their families (McKenna, 2004).

McKenna considers treatment of nicotine, alcohol and drug addiction as some of the potential therapeutic applications of ayahuasca. Furthermore, the use of ayahuasca, in the right, safe and helpful setting such as that of the UDV church, is seen as being able to lead favorable, permanent alterations of behavior and lifestyle.

The use of DMT may also positively affect people's functioning (Strassman, 2005). Strassman states: 'Let's summarize this small number of follow-up conversations and interviews. Volunteers reported a stronger sense of self, less fear of death and greater appreciation of life. Some found they were better able to relax, and they pushed themselves a little less. Several volunteers drank less alcohol or noted they were more sensitive to psychedelic drugs. Others believed with greater certainty that there are different levels of reality. We have also heard of powerfully felt validation and confirmation of previously held beliefs. In these cases, views and perspectives became broader and deeper, but not essentially different.'

However, Strassman also notes that DMT in itself is not so much therapeutic, but that set and setting determine its effect. He says: 'What the volunteers brought to their sessions, and the fuller context of their lives, was as important, if not more so, than the drug itself, in determining how they dealt with their experiences. Without a suitable framework -spiritual, psychotherapeutic, or otherwise- in which to process their journeys with DMT, their sessions became just another series of intense psychedelic encounters.'

The accounts of physical ailments disappearing, even cancer being cured (Topping, 1998), are

more anecdotal. It is known, however, that ayahuasqueros in Peru are famed for their longevity, vitality and mental clarity. Many of these shamans reach ages between seventy and ninety years old, an exceptional lifespan in these parts of the world (Luna & Amaringo, 1991).

In the sixties, LSD and other hallucinogenics, such as psilocybin were already being used for therapeutic purposes (Snelders & Kaplan, 2002). Up until 1966, doctors in the Netherlands did not require special permits to administer hallucinogenic drugs for therapeutic goals. The first experiments in Holland took place in the fifties, in psychiatric institutions, where psychiatrists enjoyed more or less free rein. An argument used to support the use of these agents was the pressure exerted by the industry and the fact that psychoanalysis was not suitable or affordable for most of the chronic psychiatric patients. Most of the psychiatrists working with LSD are reported as having used it themselves as well.

The work of Professor Bastiaans, who was particularly successful in his work with survivors of the German and Japanese concentration camps, is especially well-known. His warm, paternal approach and emotional attachment made him very popular among his patients, but it also caused controversy among his fellows, who held professional detachment in high regard. Later, when LSD became associated with hippies and the Dutch anarchist movement Provo, and the connection was made with the disturbances during the wedding ceremony of the pretender to the Dutch throne, princess Beatrix, use of the drug was criminalized in Holland.

Several prominent psychiatrists also turned on LSD, pointing out its role in inducing psychoses. Psychiatry rapidly lost interest in the therapeutic use of LSD and other similar substances (Snelders & Kaplan, 2002).

The only one to persist was Dr. Bastiaans, who, after he had formally retired, continued to work with a self-help group of heroine addicts who wanted to cure themselves with the aid of ibogaine, a hallucinogenic plant used in African initiation rituals. This therapy has yielded some highly favorable results, especially with regard to countering withdrawal symptoms (Bastiaans, 2004). After the death of one of the patients, probably as a result of an illicit dose of heroine, the project was cut short and hallucinogenics disappeared from the therapeutic palette.

### **5.13 Future**

Ayahuasca does not appear to be very interesting -financially speaking- for the pharmaceutical industry, mainly because it consists of plant extracts which cannot be patented and are thus not commercially exploitable. To add to the controversy of ayahuasca, it has turned out that, in the seventies, in Holland, one of the components of the brew, DMT (N,N-dimethyltryptamine), has accidentally ended up on list 1 of the Dutch government's Opium Law, a list of forbidden substances. Substances on this list are considered to pose a risk to public health, an assessment that definitely does not apply to DMT. Worldwide, there is no conclusive evidence of any DMT or ayahuasca fatalities, and, as ayahuasca, DMT is not addictive. In fact, the contrary is true, in many cases DMT can be helpful when tackling addiction.

Our research shows that many people taking ayahuasca have experienced positive effects on their physical and mental functioning, so much so in many cases, that it was described as a transformational experience. No one thought of ayahuasca as a drug or a party drug, rather, it was seen as a means of gaining self-insight and experiencing spiritual and personal growth.

Therefore, it is lamentable that, in Holland, the use of ayahuasca is not fully legal at the moment. Legal use is restricted to the religious setting of the Santo Daime church. However, for many people, this setting is not ideal because the religious aspect may be undesirable and

because its ceremonies take place in large numbers.

Clinical chemical analyst and toxicologist Professor Dr. F.A. de Wolff writes the following about DMT: *'DMT, when orally administered, is quickly broken down by the enzyme monoamine oxidase (MAO), after which, as such, it is unable to reach the central nervous system. An oral dose of DMT is therefore not naturally active. In light of this, it is not altogether clear why DMT has been on List I, sub C, of the Opium Law, since the nineteen-seventies.'*

Still, in a case tried in 2007, the Dutch Supreme Court has decided as follows: *'The Court has established that the fluid, resembling ayahuasca, as was confiscated by the plaintiff, contained DMT. DMT is grade I listed under the Opium Law. The Opium Law states that, for purposes of satisfying treaty-based obligations, listed substances are qualified as having been proven to influence human consciousness, and are, as such, hazardous to man's health and a risk to society.'*

When asked to comment on this judgment, psychiatrist Rick Strassman, a leading expert on DMT and writer of *"DMT: The Spirit Molecule"*, wrote: *'There are many drugs and medications that raise blood pressure and heart rate. Suggestions that ayahuasca is dangerous because of this makes little sense. Perhaps the judge is thinking of the risk to benefit ratio; nevertheless, I know of no deaths attributable to ayahuasca, except perhaps the Canadian case, in which a massive nicotine overdose was believed more contributory.'*

The Court is right in arguing that it is an agent that affects consciousness. It is not without reason that shamans use it for initiation rituals and to help them when healing people. The risk of damage to people's health is minimal, however, and the use of ayahuasca is in no way harmful to society. Possibly, Jodi Lang Santry's 1996 research under young members of the Brazilian UDV church community can shed some light on the matter. Lang Santry encountered children who had been using ayahuasca their whole life. She viewed these children as *'beings who had fallen straight from heaven'* and she was touched just by being near them, witnessing their charisma. She started to wonder what the impact of ayahuasca might be on the consciousness and transformation of the world (Lang Santry, 1996).

However, at present, the time does not yet seem ripe for Holland to critically review its stance towards the use of mind-expanding substances. At the time of writing (January 2008) a Parliamentary majority has turned against the legal use of hallucinogenic 'magic mushrooms' and seems to be riding the wave of a media-hype which was started in the summer of 2007, following a number of incidents. This political stance is diametrically opposed to the advice published in a report by the Dutch Centre for Coordination, Assessment and Monitoring of New Drugs (CAM), which reports on research done by order of the Ministry for Public Health (see attachment No. 3).

The use of ayahuasca is not entirely free of risk and can in individual cases pose a hazard to someone's health. This has been argued by Professor Dr. Wolff in 2001 and is considered general knowledge. These same statements could also apply to drinking alcohol or lighting fireworks, both are not without risk, and their danger is considered to be common knowledge. Nonetheless, we drink alcohol and light fireworks, sometimes even simultaneously and the consequences of this are also commonly recognized. It seems to us that proper education is a more fruitful way forward than prohibiting the use of a brew which is being used safely throughout the world, and probably has been for more than five thousand years.

There are contraindications for the use of ayahuasca. These include pregnancy, inclination towards psychoses and the use of particular medication (especially antidepressants).

In our view, a risk assessment should be made for each individual case of using ayahuasca, rather than banning it for everyone. Ayahuasca is not something that will easily attain the status of a party drug, or one fit for experimenting with. It takes a full day to prepare ayahuasca and it requires an expert hand to make a good brew. The side effects, covered elsewhere in this report, include vomiting and diarrhea, rendering this substance unattractive for recreational use. We argue that people who aim to use the brew for personal growth and development should be able to obtain top-class information on the subject. In our publications, such as our book, “The Sacred Voyage”, we point out the risks and contraindications, and these topics are dealt with at length during the intake session we have with our clients. We openly advise against the use of ayahuasca for those with a contraindication, and when in doubt, we advise the prospective client to consult their physician or psychiatrist. The individual’s safety goes before anything else. It would be lamentable, however, if measures that are too restrictive, such as those now in place in the Netherlands, would stand in the way of the desirable effects ayahuasca can have on people’s health, consciousness and well-being.

This research aims to show what the positive effects of using ayahuasca have been for the consciousness and well-being of those who have used the brew within the therapeutic context of the Sacred Voyage. We have found ayahuasca to be an important catalyst in processes of awareness. We realize that this view is not (yet) commonly accepted. However, in the full knowledge that there were once times in which one could be thrown in prison for arguing that the earth revolved around the sun (Galileo) or could end up being burnt at the stake for working with herbs (The Inquisition), we feel it is important to report our findings, recalling the words of doctor Stanislav Grof, psychiatrist and entheogenics researcher from the very beginning:

*‘It is certainly wise to obey the laws if our primary concern is personal safety and comfort. However, it often happens that in retrospect, history places higher value on those individuals who violated questionable laws of their time because of foresight and high moral principles than those who had issued them for wrong reasons.’*

Our point of view is that the use of ayahuasca in therapeutic, religious and shamanistic settings is so very important because, for many, it is a way of restoring contact with their own essence. As can be read in the many testimonies in this report, ayahuasca is a means of transforming lives to a higher level of consciousness and well-being.



## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

### Recommendations:

For specific therapeutic purposes, it should be made possible to obtain a legal dispensation for the use of ayahuasca in therapeutic or shamanistic sessions, as is presently the case for the religious context of the Santo Daime church. Shamanism is not an institutionalized religion but the epitome of personal and individual experience of and connection with higher things. The immediate goal of the use of ayahuasca in both therapeutic and shamanistic settings is to restore people's connection with these higher things. This goal allows the ritual use of ayahuasca to be qualified as a religious act and, as such, would render it subject to article 9 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR).

The therapeutic use of ayahuasca should be subject to conditions safeguarding proper education on the subject, ample preparation and quality of both setting and guidance.

In order to establish what the long-term effects of ayahuasca are, this research should be repeated after a number of years.

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## Appendix 1: Questionnaire

### Research into the effects of ayahuasca within the setting of the Sacred Voyage

#### Personal Information

Name (first name, last name optional) : ...  
 Occupation : ...  
 Highest completed level of education : ...  
 Date of filling out questionnaire : ...  
 Date of your Sacred Voyage : ...

How long have you been involved in processes of personal development and self-awareness?

...

#### Motivation

What was your immediate reason for choosing to undergo an ayahuasca experience?

...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

#### 1. Prior experience

Have you used ayahuasca before, in a different setting? Please circle the appropriate answer:  
 Yes/No

a. If yes, in which setting?

...

b. If yes, was that experience less important, equally important or more important for you than your last Sacred Voyage?

...

#### 2. The experience of the use of ayahuasca

Please indicate the way in which you have experienced ayahuasca. Circle the appropriate answer:

-Neutral;	Yes/No
-Bad trip (nasty and frightening);	Yes/No
-Healing experience;	Yes/No
-Transformational experience;	Yes/No
-Other, namely:	...

Opportunity to expand on your answers: ...

#### 3. Intensity level of your ayahuasca experience

Please indicate the level of intensity of your ayahuasca experience within the setting of the Sacred Voyage. Mark the appropriate phrase with 'X'.

-No noticeable effects or change in awareness	...
-Some noticeable effects and some change in awareness	...
-Clearly noticeable effects and change in awareness	...
-A powerful experience and strong change in awareness	...
-A unique mystical or spiritual experience,	

also known as a peak experience\* ...

\*Definition peak experience. Shulgin: “*Extraordinary experience, unique in its kind, the mystical or religious experience you’ll never forget.*”

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

4. Duration of aftereffects, following the ayahuasca experience

a. If you have experienced negative effects following your ayahuasca experience, how long did these last? ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

b. If you have experienced positive effects following your ayahuasca experience, how long did these last? ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

5. Ayahuasca: harmful or healing for mental health?

a. Do you feel ayahuasca is harmful to your mental health?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = not harmful at all; 10 = very harmful).

Score: ...

b. Do you feel ayahuasca has a healing effect on your mental health?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = not healing at all; 10 = very healing).

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answers: ...

6. Ayahuasca: harmful or healing for physical health?

a. Do you feel ayahuasca is harmful to your physical health?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = not harmful at all; 10 = very harmful).

Score: ...

b. Do you feel ayahuasca has a healing effect on your physical health?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = not healing at all; 10 = very healing).

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answers: ...

7. Ayahuasca: recommend or advise against?

Would you recommend the use of ayahuasca to others? Please circle the appropriate answer:

Yes/No

Would you advise against the use of ayahuasca for others? Please circle the appropriate

answer: Yes/No

Opportunity to expand on your answers: ...

8. Self-insight

Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience concerning insight into oneself?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

9. Insight into oneself with regard to the world

Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience concerning the insight into oneself with regard to the world?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

10. Insight into oneself with regard to family

Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience concerning the insight into oneself with regard to family?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

11. Self-confidence

Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience with regard to gaining self-confidence?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

12. Self-esteem

Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience with regard to improving self-esteem?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

13. Feeling happy

Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience with regard to increasing feelings of happiness?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

14. Dealing with fear

Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience with regard to learning to deal with fear?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

15. Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience with regard to your personal development?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

16. Self-acceptance

Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience with regard to accepting yourself in



all your capacities?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

#### 17. Sense of oneness

Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience with regard to evoking a sense of oneness (everything being one, feeling connected with the universe)?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

#### 18. Spiritual experience

Comparing the importance of the ayahuasca experience to other spiritual experiences you have had, how would you rate the ayahuasca experience?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

#### 19. Old emotional trauma -fears/anger/grief/childhood memories-

a. Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience with regard to helping you deal with old emotional trauma (fears)? Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

b. Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience with regard to helping you deal with old emotional trauma (anger)? Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

c. Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience with regard to helping you deal with old emotional trauma (grief)? Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

d. Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience with regard to gaining insight into your youth and childhood memories? Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

#### 20. Experiencing joy

Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience with regard to being able to experience joy?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

21. Experiencing love

Which score would you award the ayahuasca experience with regard to being able to experience love?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

22. Physical energy levels

Has the ayahuasca experience had any effect on your physical energy levels?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = no effect whatsoever; 10 = a very strong effect)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

23. Emotional stability

Has the ayahuasca experience had any effect on your level of emotional stability?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = no effect whatsoever; 10 = a very strong effect)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

24. Clarity of mind

Has the ayahuasca experience had any effect on feeling a clarity of mind?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = no effect whatsoever; 10 = a very strong effect)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

25. Calmness of spirit

Has the ayahuasca experience had any effect on feeling a calmness of spirit?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = no effect whatsoever; 10 = a very strong effect)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

26. Connection with 'higher things'

Has the ayahuasca experience had any effect on feeling a connection with 'higher things' (in whichever way you see these; God, the universe, etc.)?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = no effect whatsoever; 10 = a very strong effect)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

27. Insight into 'higher things'

Has the ayahuasca experience had any effect on your insights into 'higher things'?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = no effect whatsoever; 10 = a very strong effect)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

28. Connection with nature

Has the ayahuasca experience had any effect on your feeling connected to nature?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = no effect whatsoever; 10 = a very strong effect)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

29. Guidance

How would you rate the importance of guidance during your ayahuasca experience?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

30. Music

How would you rate the importance of music during your ayahuasca experience?

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answer: ...

31. Preparation

How would you rate the importance of preparation for the ayahuasca experience?

a. Focusing on your intention

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

b. Fasting

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

c. Meditating on your theme

Please score from 1 to 10 (1 = unimportant; 10 = very important)

Score: ...

Opportunity to expand on your answers: ...

32. Aftereffects

Have you experienced any aftereffects following your ayahuasca experience? Please circle the appropriate answer:

Yes/No

If yes, which, and for how long?

...

33. Ayahuasca

What do you consider ayahuasca to be? Please mark the appropriate answer with 'X'.

(Party)drug ...

Mind-expanding substance ...

Sacrament ...

Other, namely: ...

34. Physical effects during the ayahuasca experience.

Please circle the appropriate responses to the following questions:

Did you feel nauseous? Yes/No

Did you vomit? Yes/No

Did you experience muscle contractions or spontaneous motion? Yes/No

Did your body feel heavy? Yes/No

Did you experience a heightened frequency of breathing? Yes/No

Did you experience any other physical effects? Yes/No  
If yes, which? ...

35. Opportunity to write about the theme of your ayahuasca experience: ...

36. Opportunity to write about the expectations you held with regard to this theme: ...

37. Opportunity to write about whether or not these expectations were met: ...

38. Opportunity to write about the results the ayahuasca experience has yielded for you: ...

39. Opportunity to make a statement in favour of or opposed to the use of ayahuasca: ...

40. Opportunity to make any additional statements, should you feel that aspects of the ayahuasca experience, or issues concerning the use of ayahuasca have been left uncovered in the rest of this survey: ...

Assent

Do you grant the researchers permission to publish your responses in the report of this research project? Please circle the appropriate answer.

Yes/No

If yes, please indicate which way your responses should be published. Mark the appropriate answer with 'X'.

Anonymously ...

Using only my first name ...

## Appendix 2: Quantitative responses

Background participants (figures 1-4)

Figure 1: Age and sex in actual numbers (n =70)

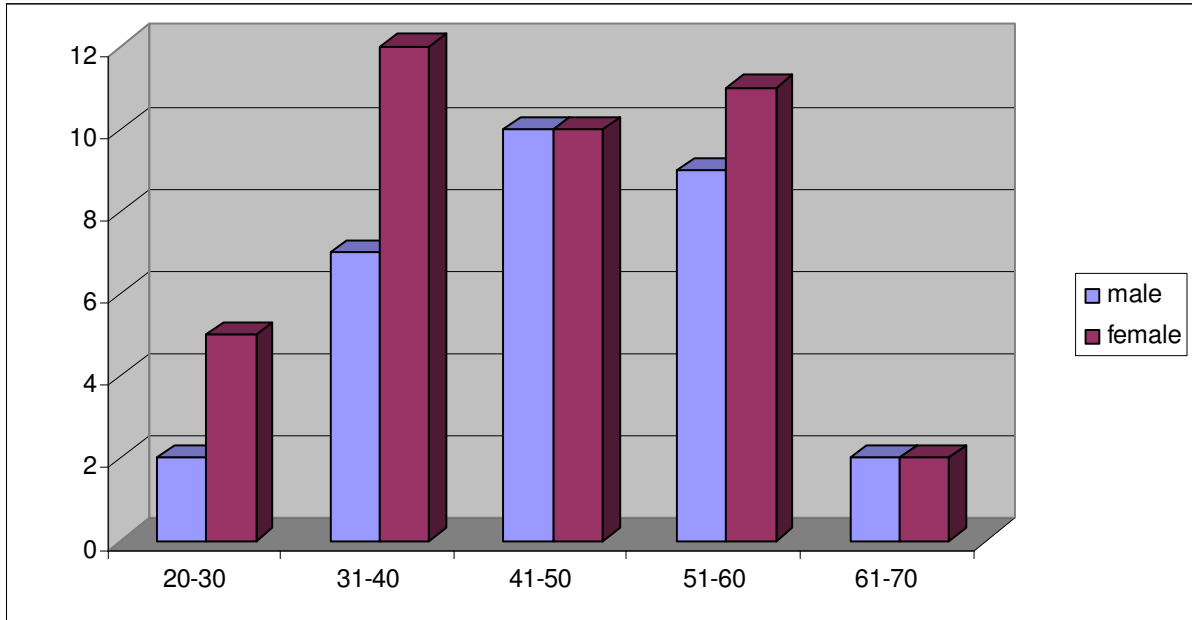
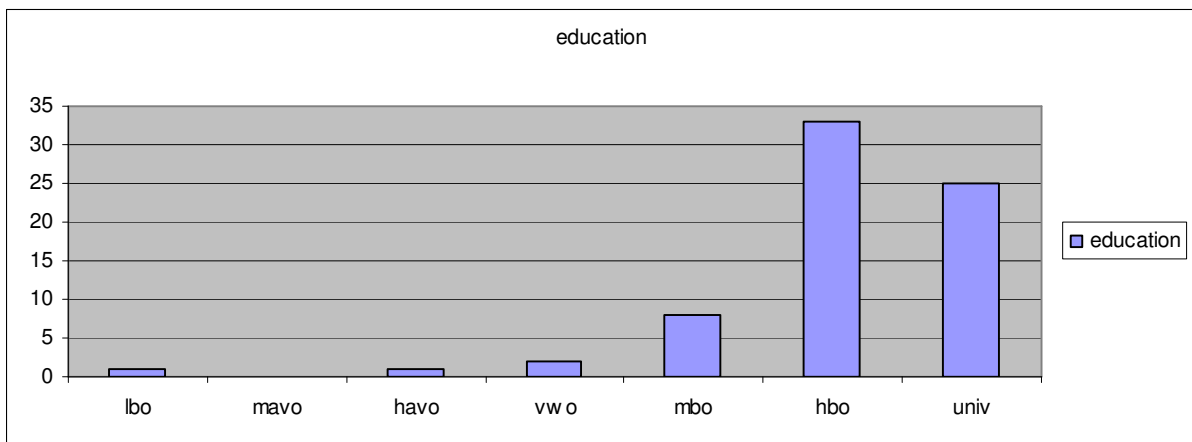


Figure 2: Level of education in actual numbers



Lbo = low  
 Mavo/havo = medium  
 VWO = higher education

Figure 3: Time in days passed after experience in 67 participants, bars indicate actual numbers

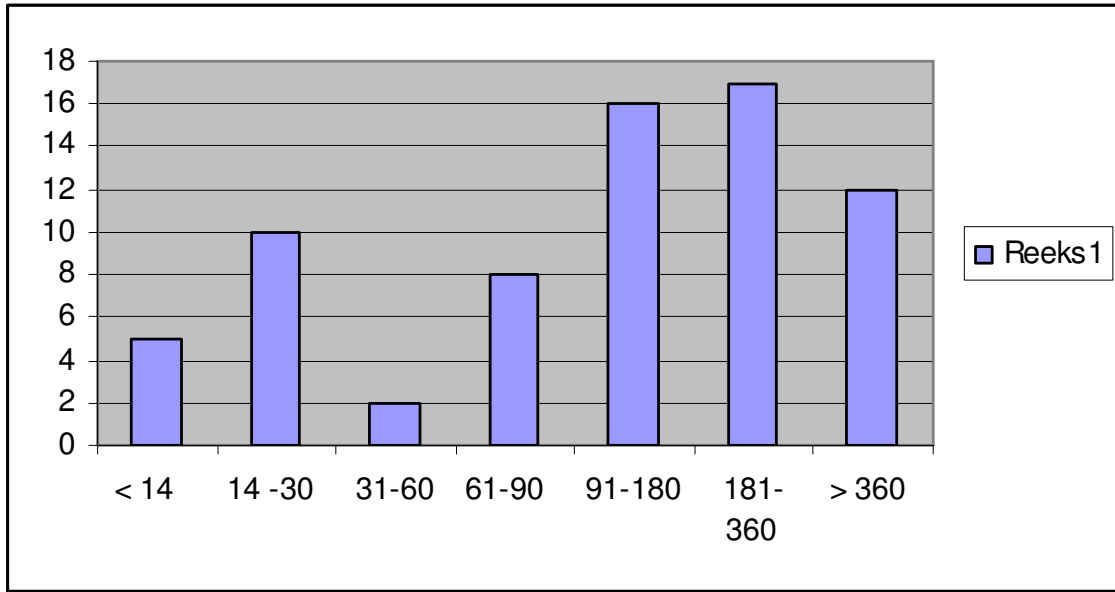


Figure 4: Years involved in personal development

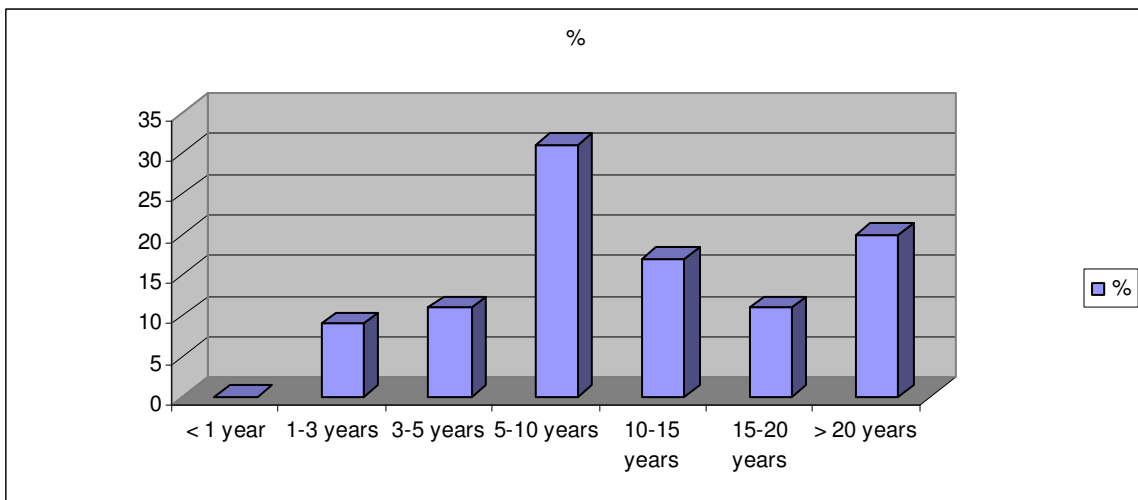


Figure 5: Question 1: Number of people with earlier experiences (%)

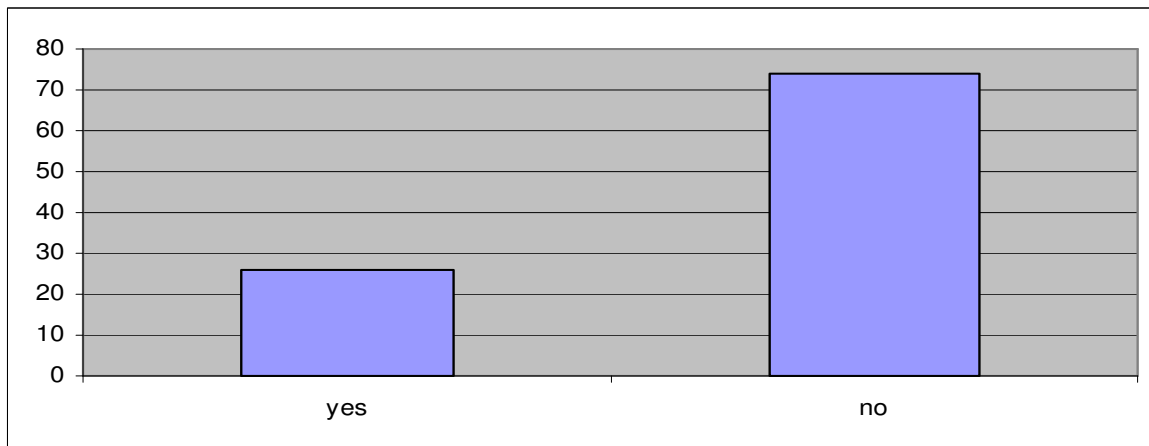


Figure 6: Question 2: Level of experience

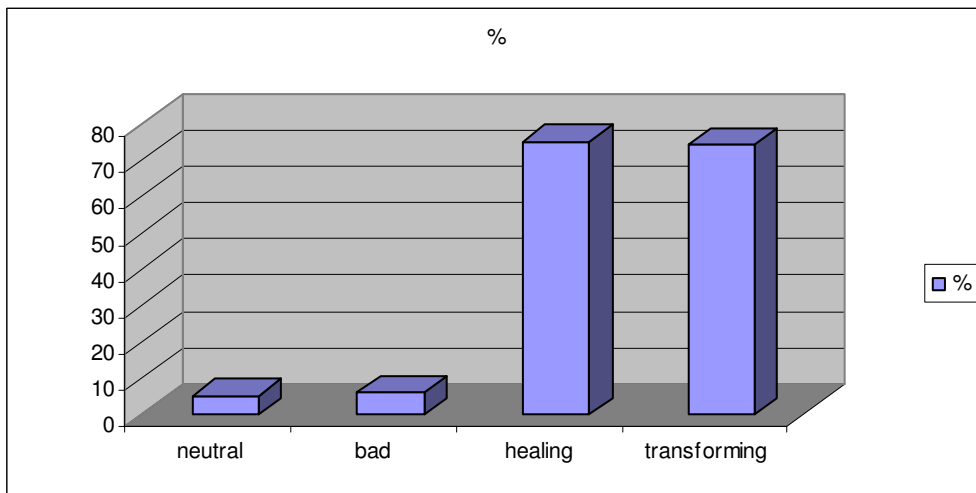


Figure 7: Question 3: Intensity of the experience

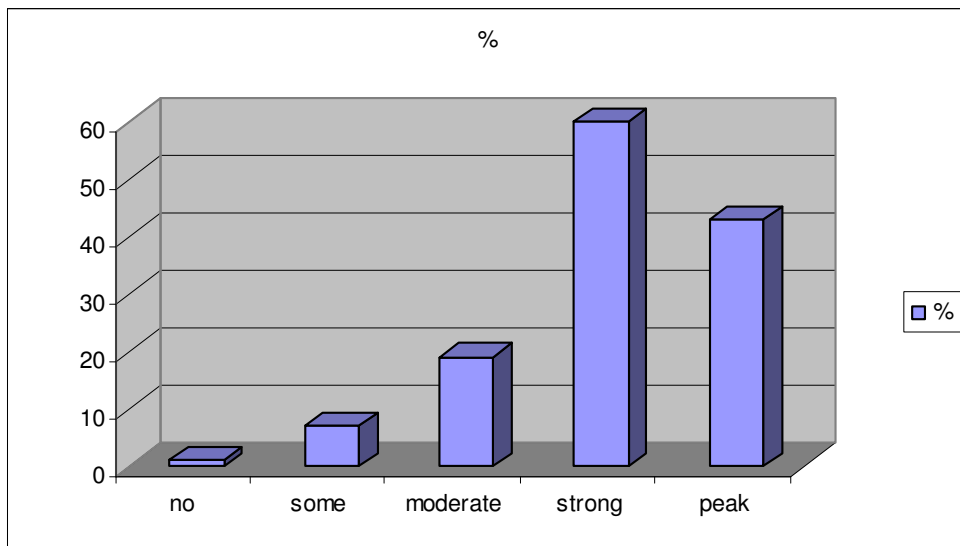
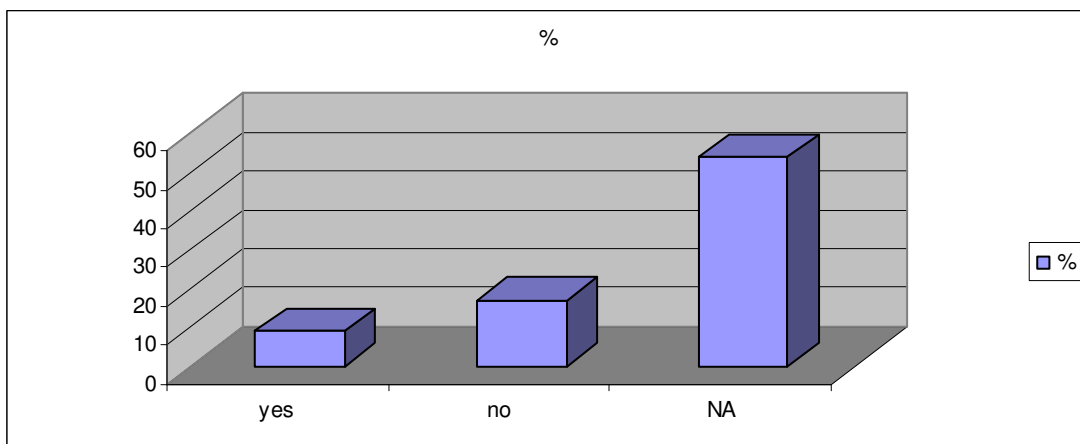


Figure 8: Question 4: Percentage of people with lasting negative effects



\* NA = not applicable

Figure 9: Question 4a: Period of time of the negative effects of ayahuasca.

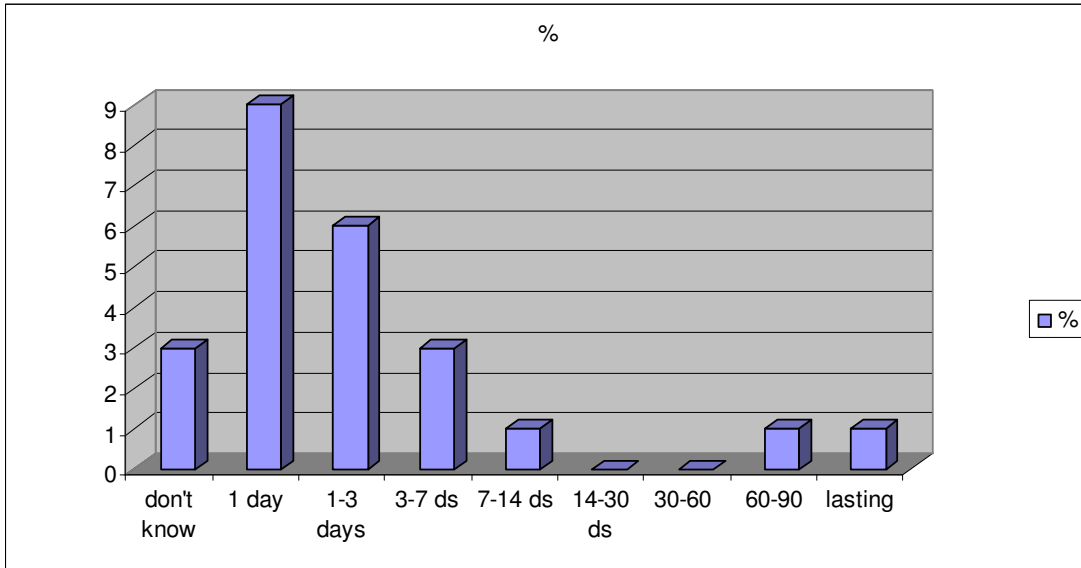


Figure 10: Question 4b: Period of time of positive effects

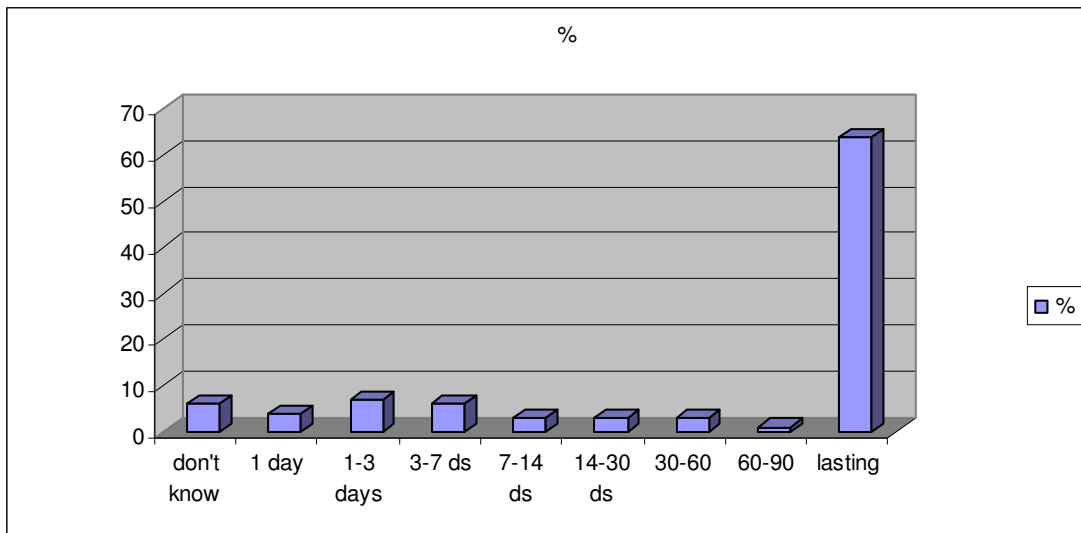


Figure 11: Question 5a: Healing to harmful effects on mental health (scale 1-10)

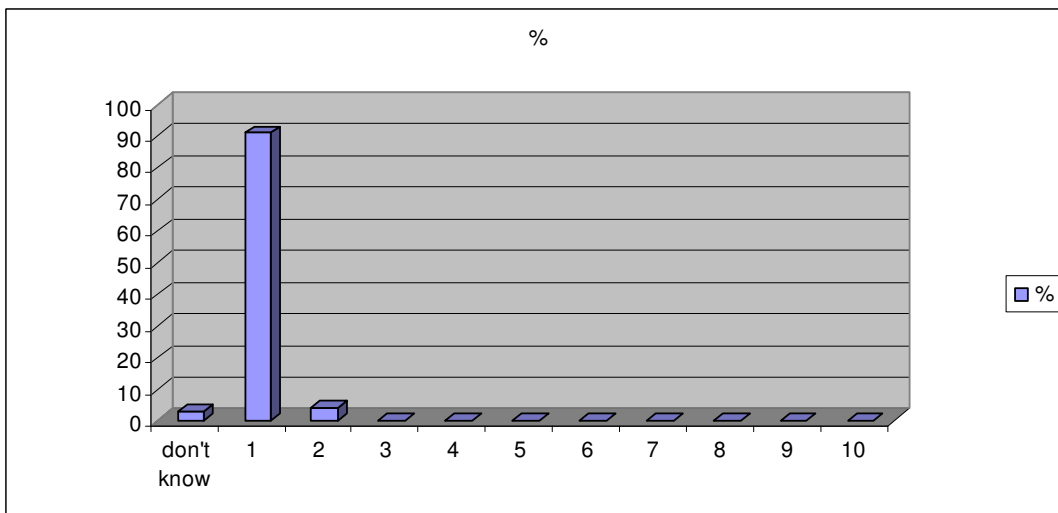




Figure 12: Question 5b: Level of healing effect on mental health

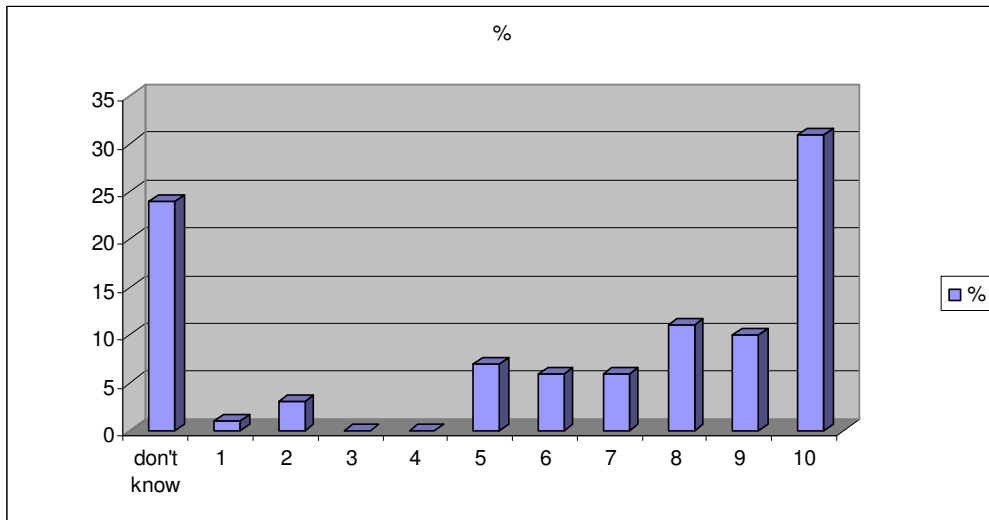


Figure 13: Question 6a: Not harmful to harmful effects on physical health (scale 1-10)

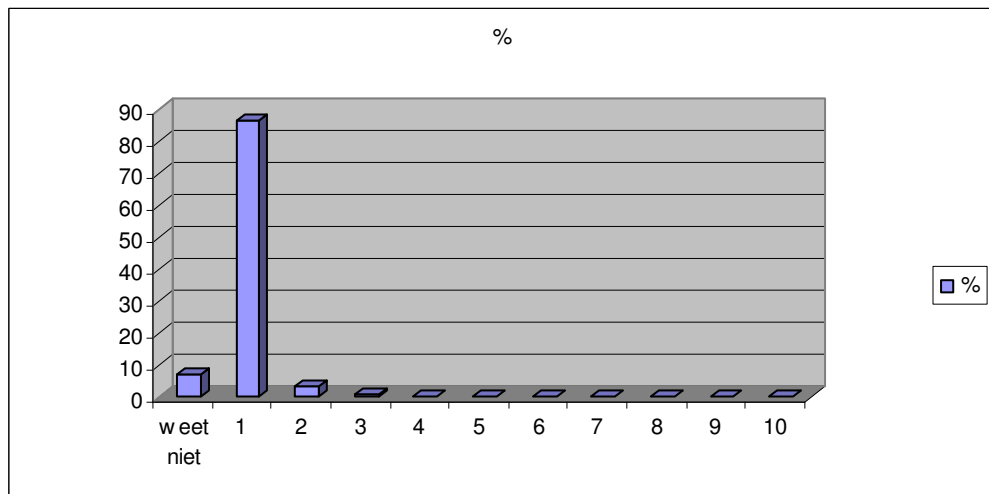


Figure 14: Question 6b: Level of healing effect on physical health

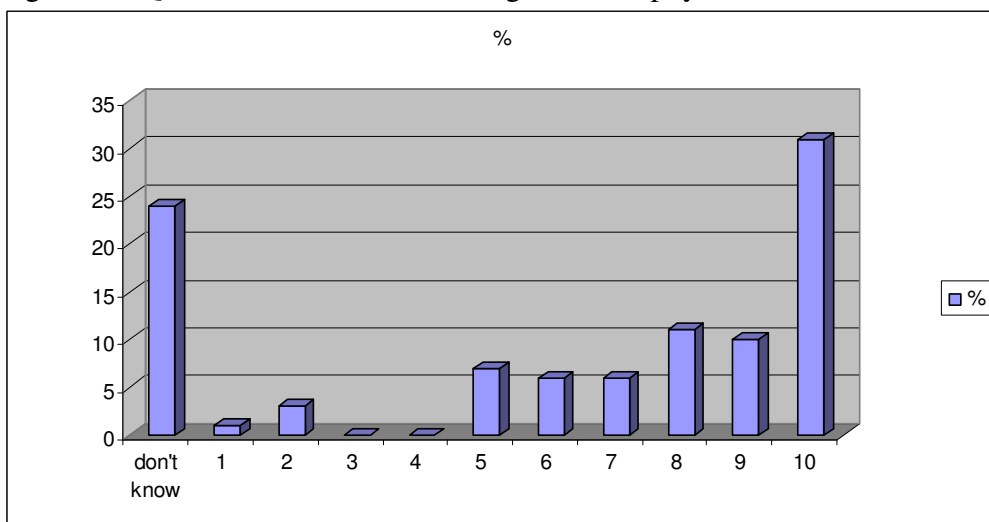


Figure 15: Question 7a: Recommending the use of ayahuasca

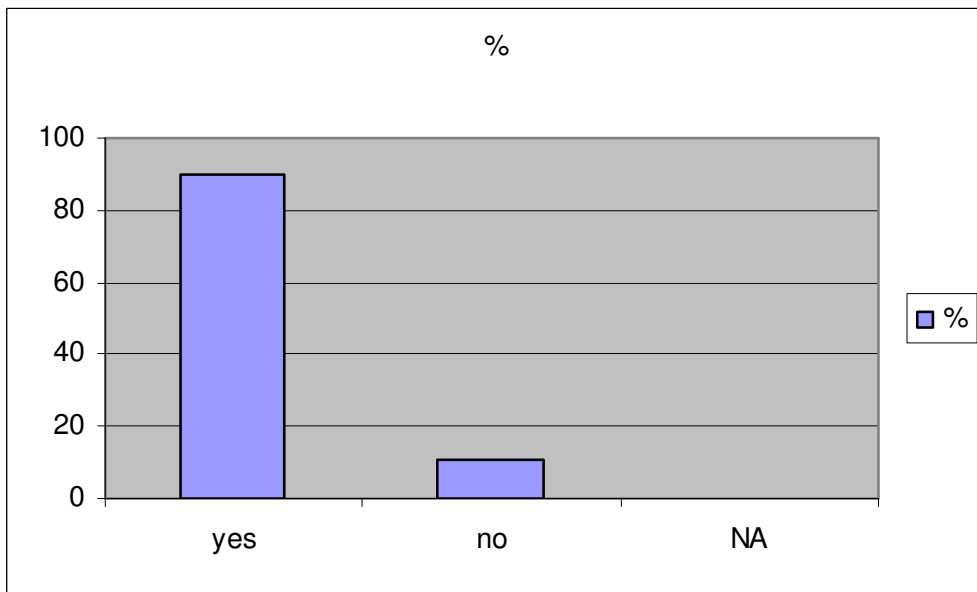


Figure 16: Question 7b: Not recommending the use of ayahuasca

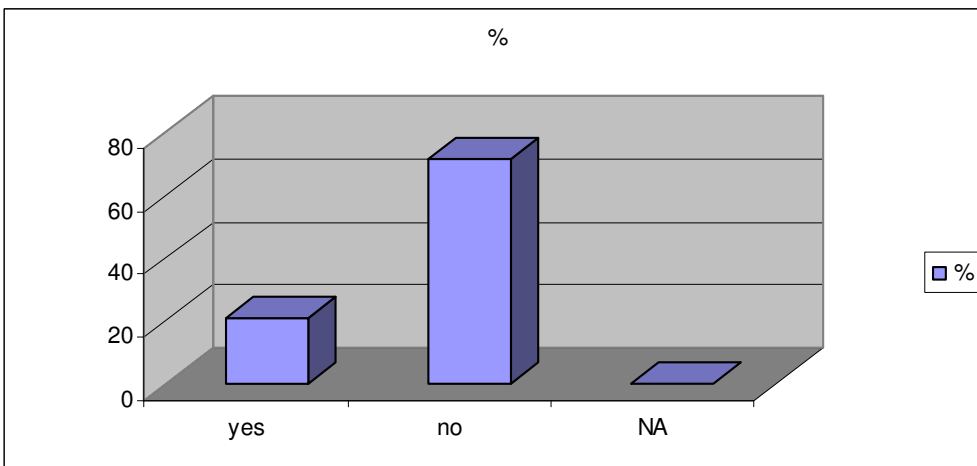


Figure 17: Question 8: Effect concerning insight into oneself

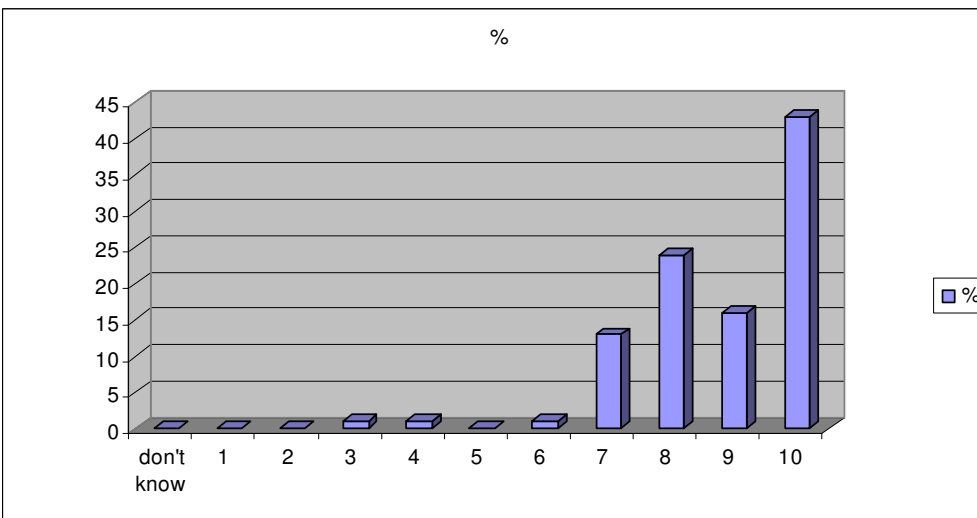


Figure 18: Question 9: Effect on insight into oneself with regard to the world

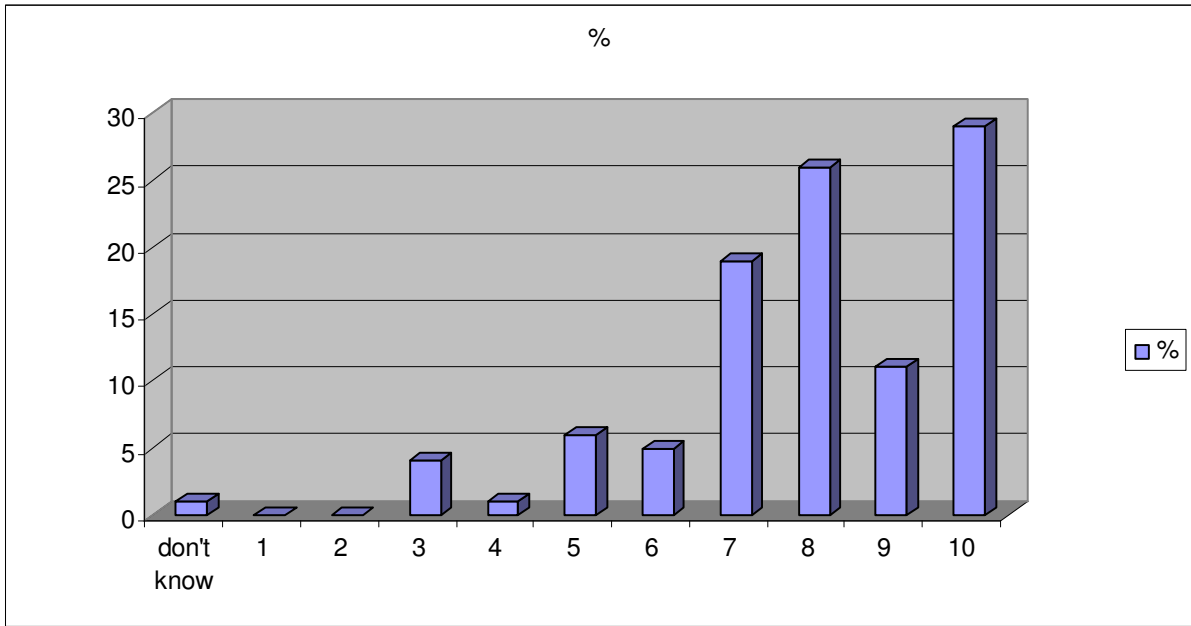


Figure 19: Question 10. Effect on insight into oneself with regard to family

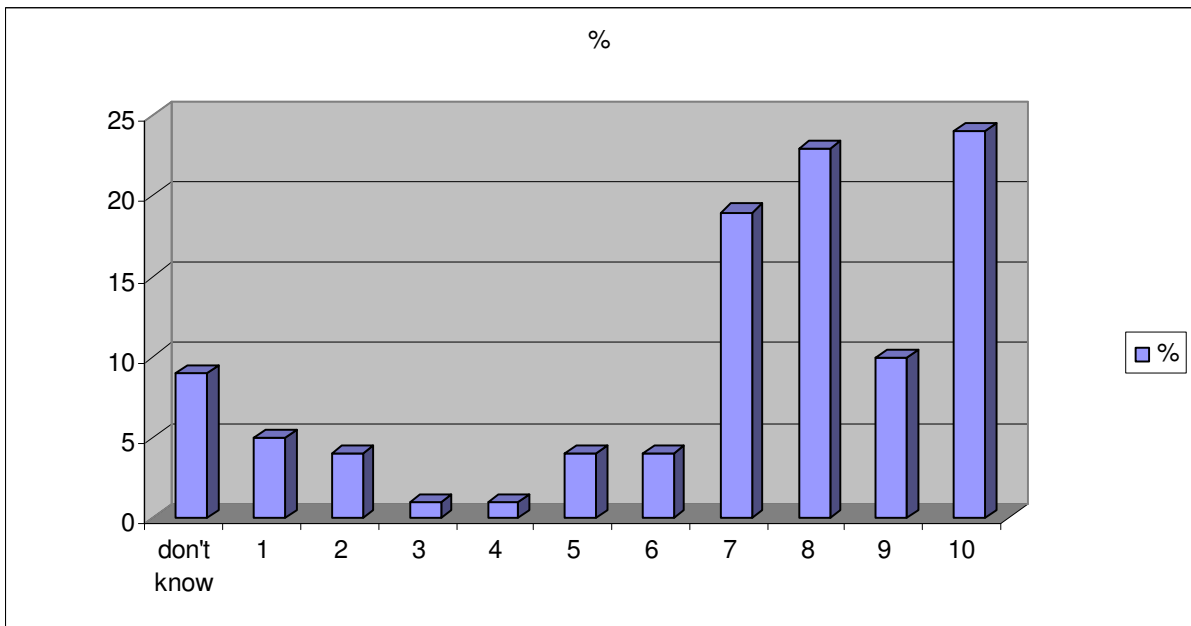


Figure 20: Question 11. Effect on self-confidence

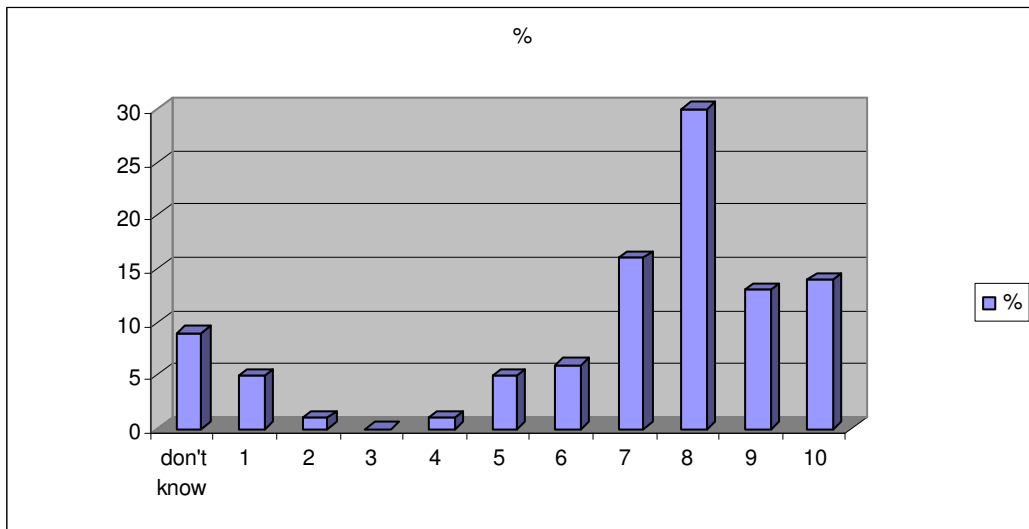


Figure 21: Question 12: Effect on the feeling of self-esteem

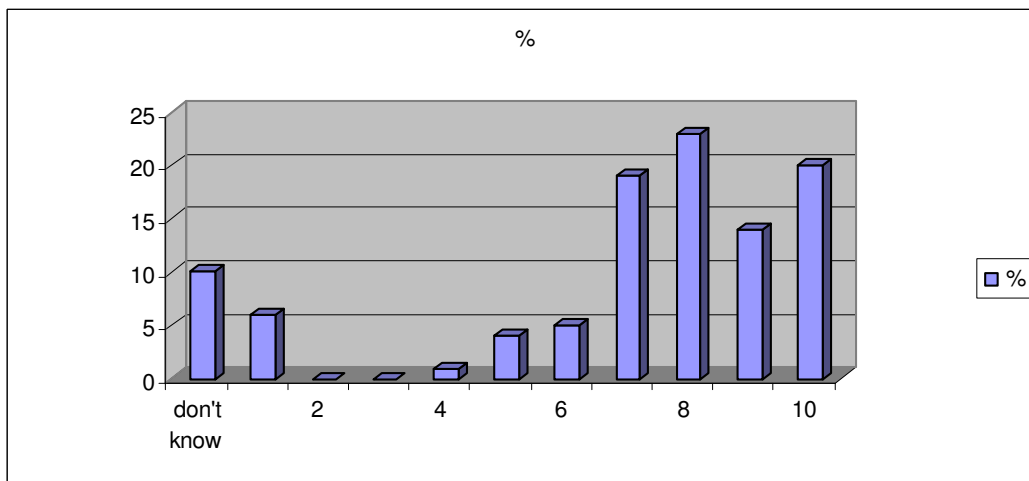


Figure 22: Question 13. Effect on feeling happy

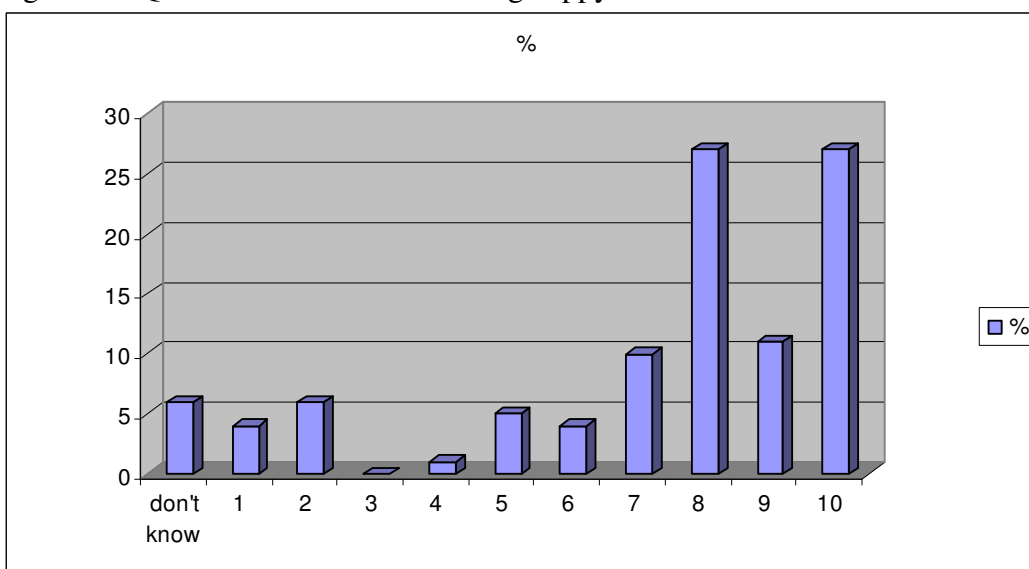


Figure 23: Question 14: Effect on dealing with fear

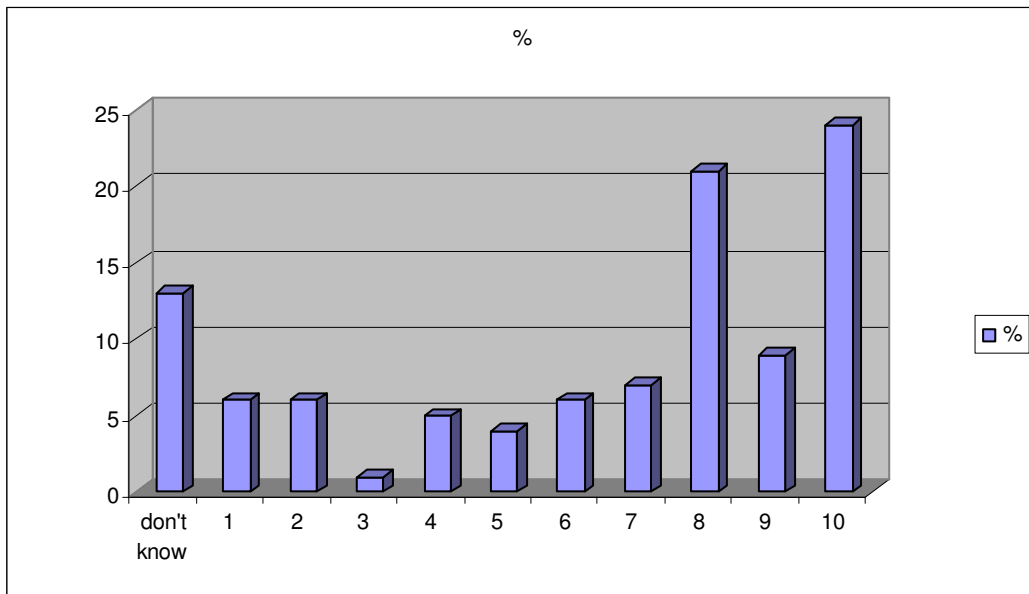


Figure 24: Question 15: Importance for personal development

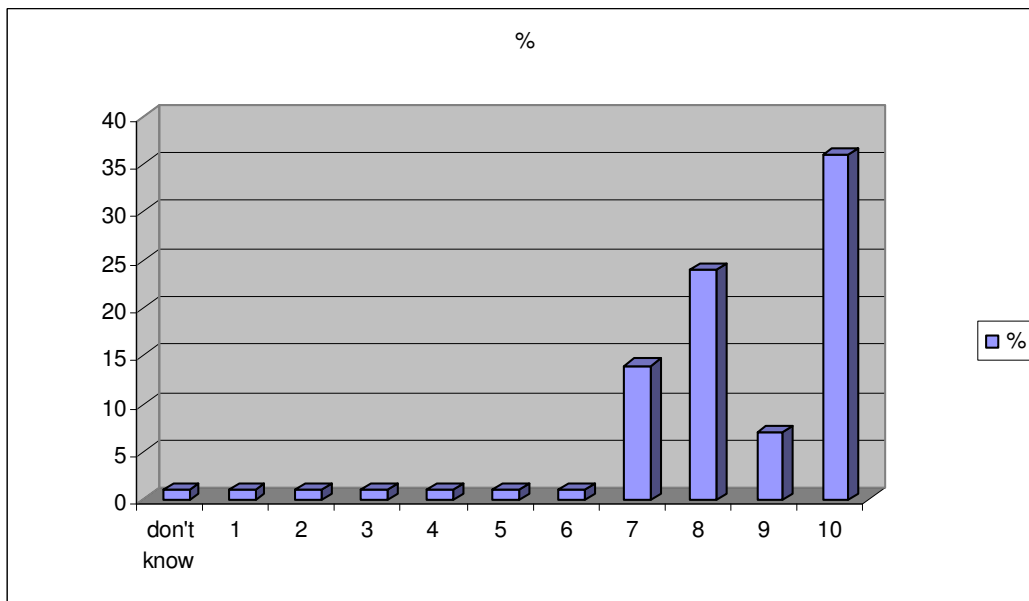


Figure 25: Question 16: Importance for self-acceptance

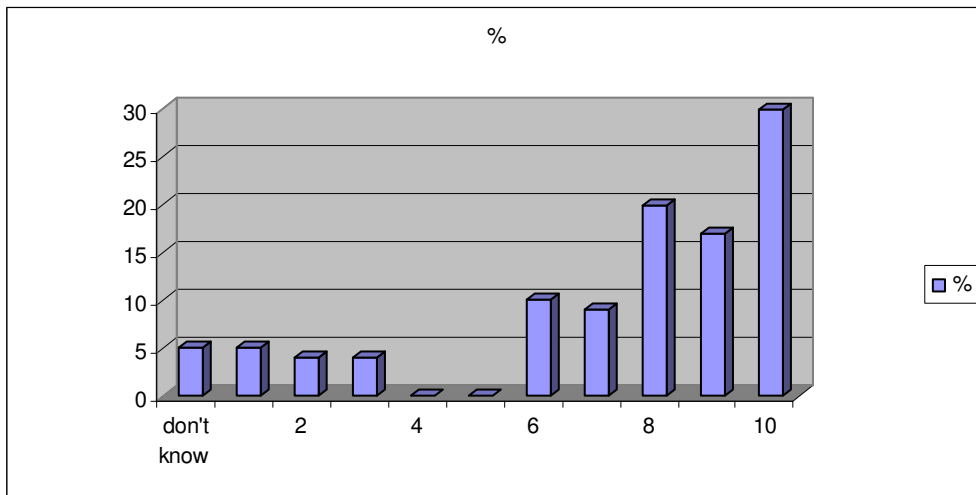


Figure 26: Question 17: Importance for the sense of oneness

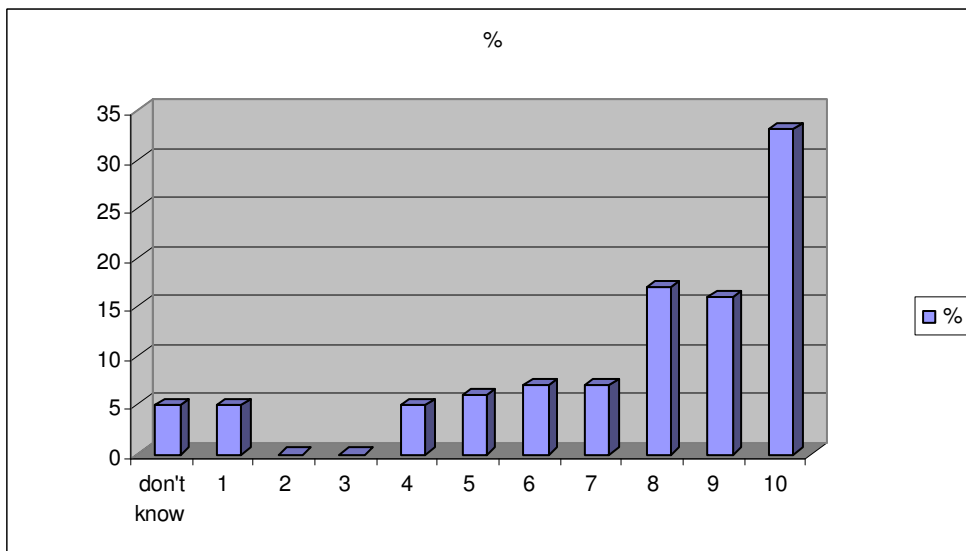


Figure 27: Question 18: Importance as spiritual experience

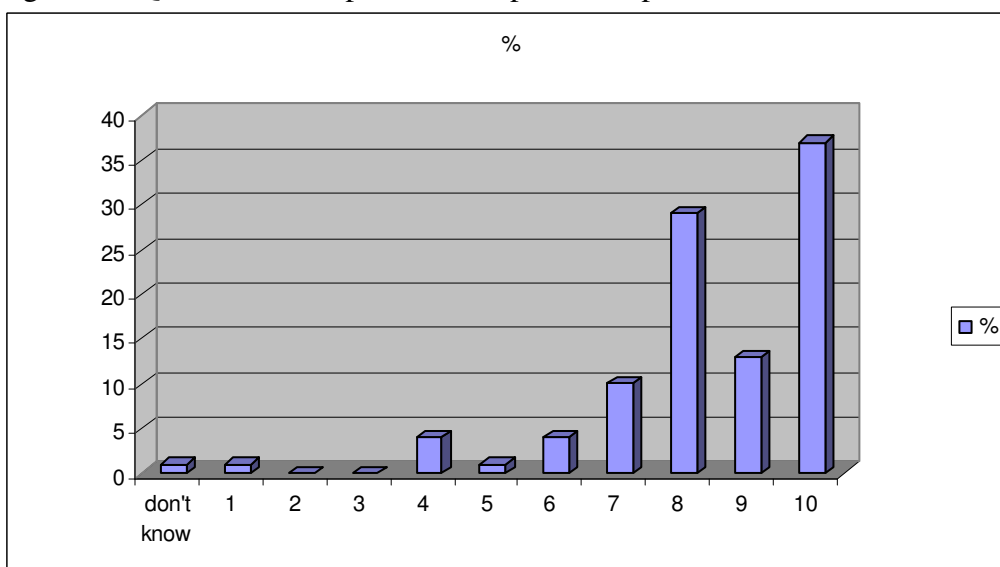


Figure 28: Question 19a: Effect on dealing with old emotional trauma (fear)

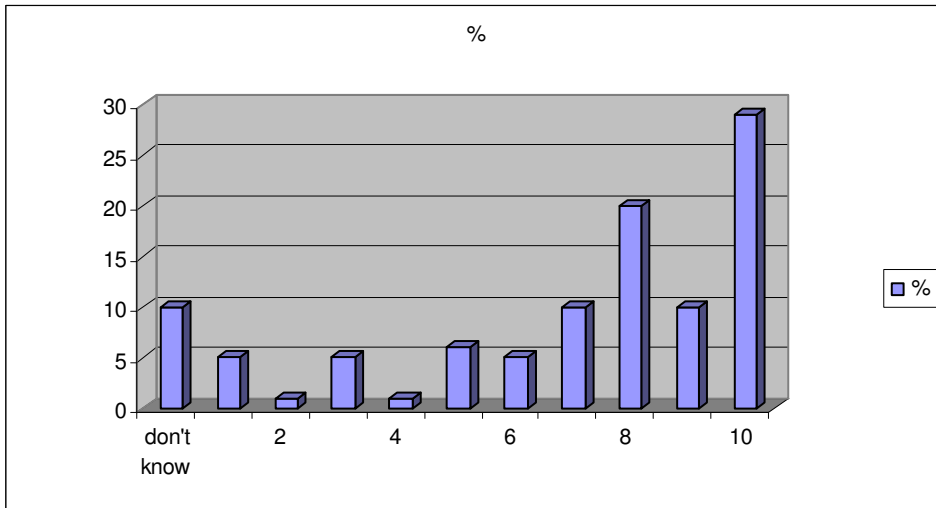


Figure 29: Question 19b: Effect on dealing with old emotional trauma (anger)

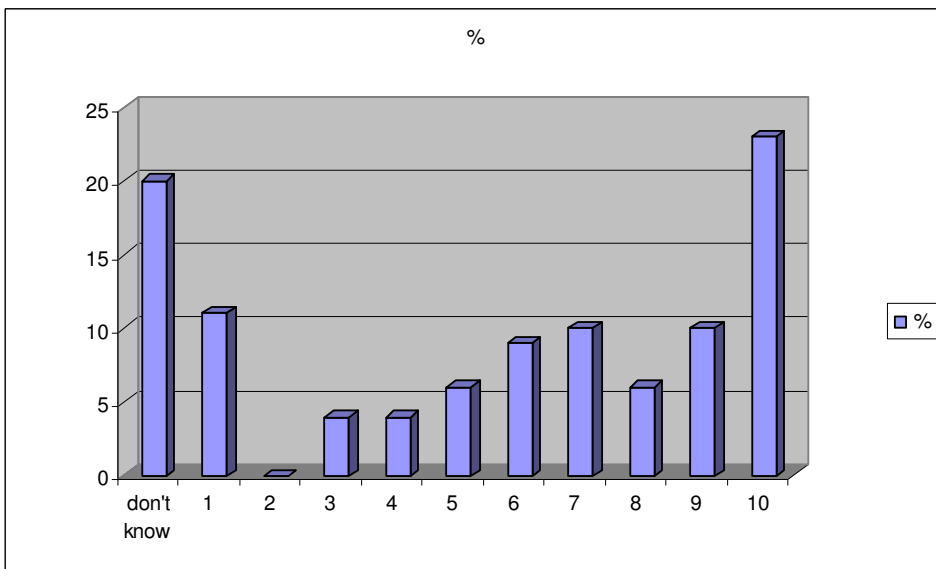


Figure 30: Question 19c: Effect on dealing with old emotional trauma (grief)

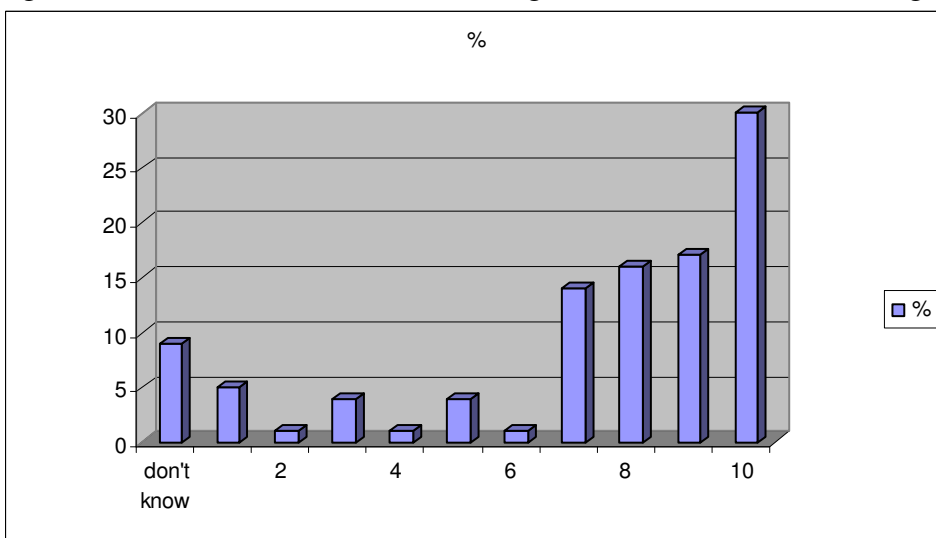


Figure 31: Question 19d: Effect on dealing with childhood memories

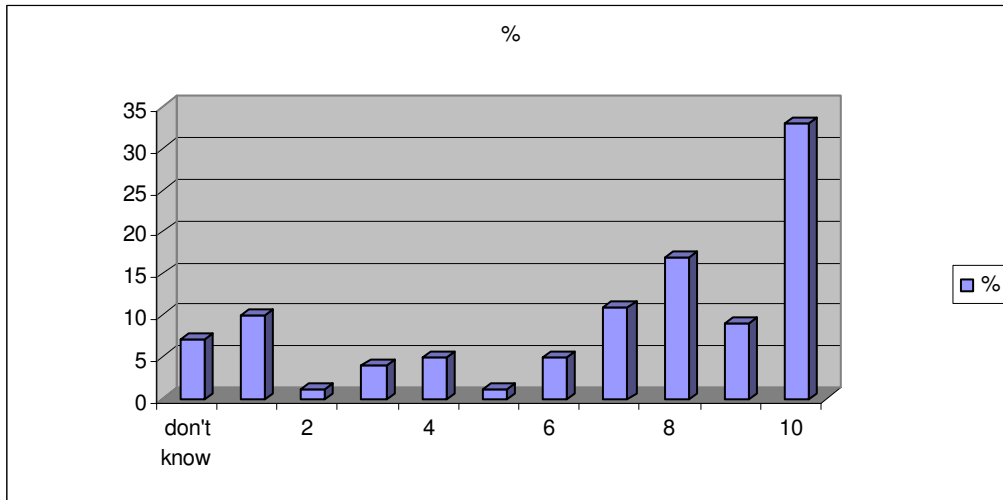


Figure 32: Question 20: Effect on experiencing joy

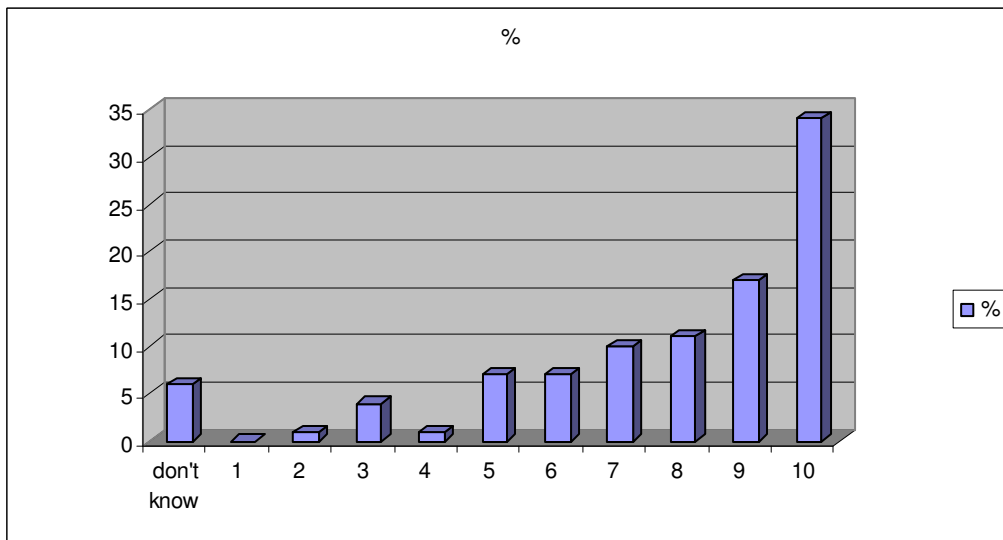


Figure 33: Question 21: Effect on experiencing love

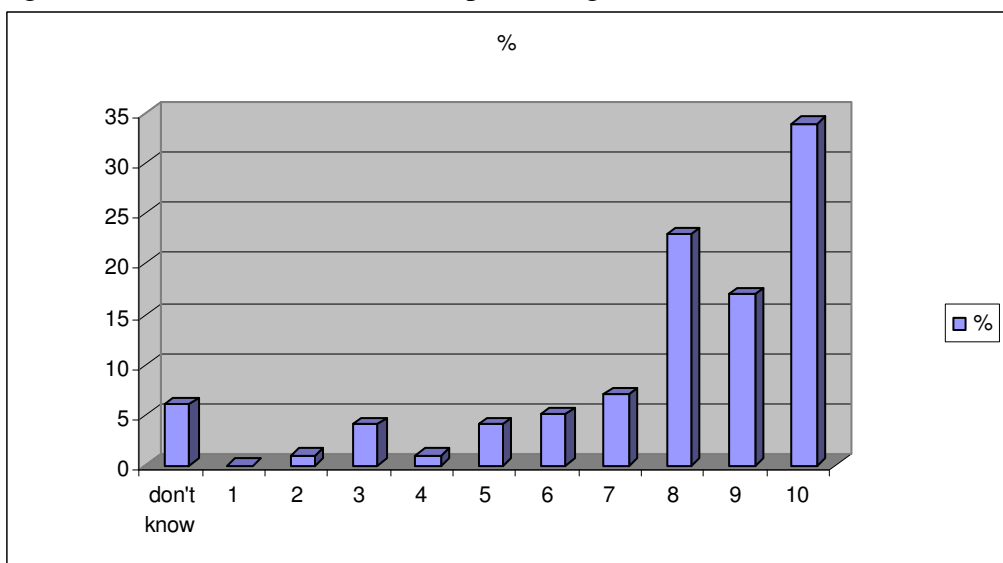




Figure 34: Question 22: Effect on level of physical energy

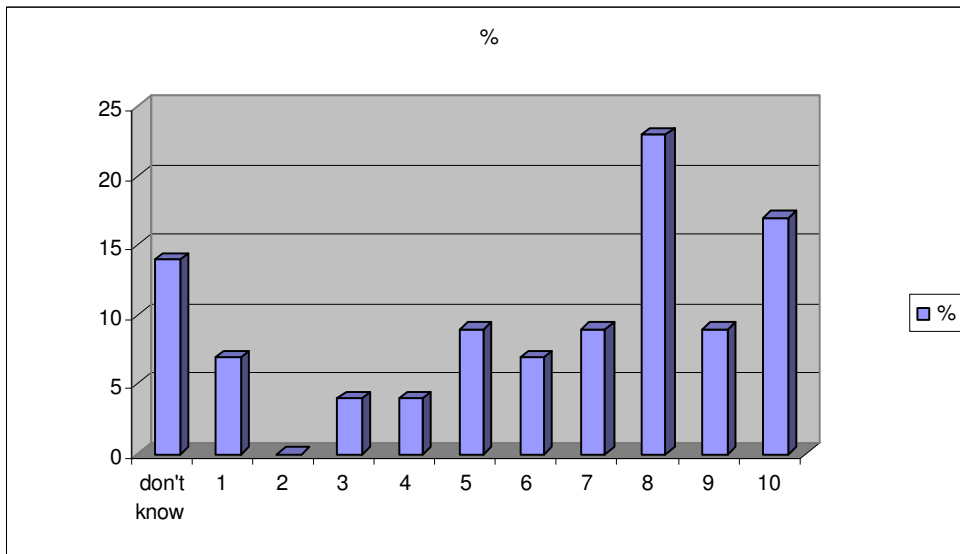


Figure 35: Question 23: Effect on emotional stability

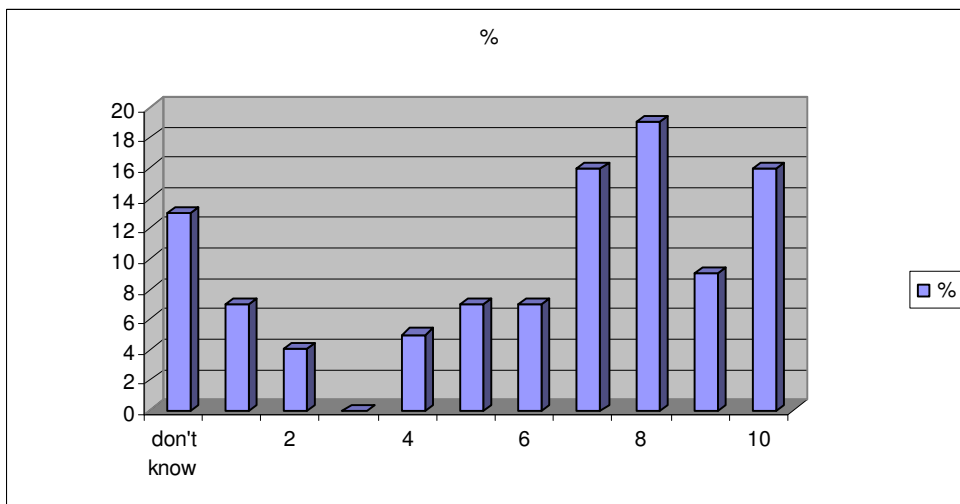


Figure 36: Question 24: Effect on clarity of mind

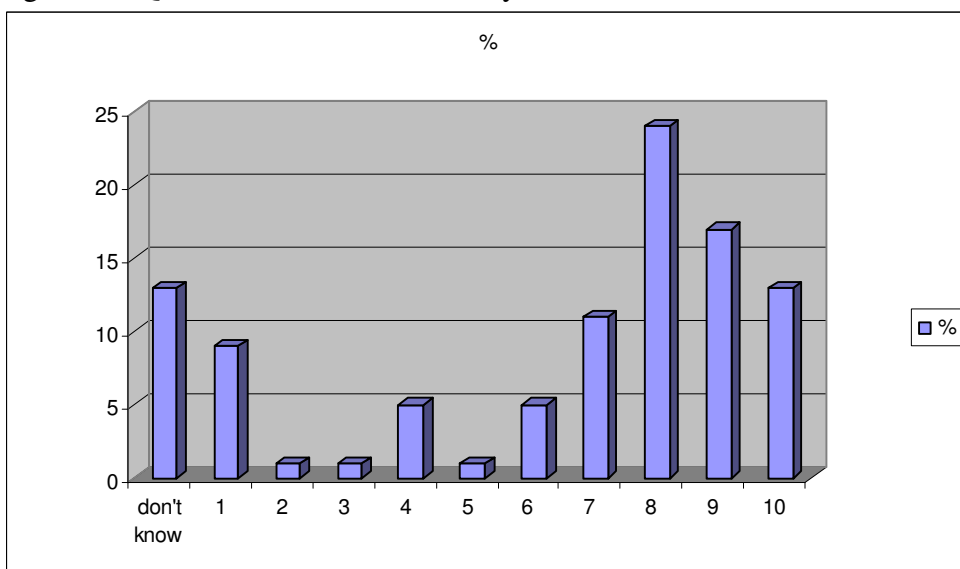


Figure 37: Question 25: Effect on calmness of spirit

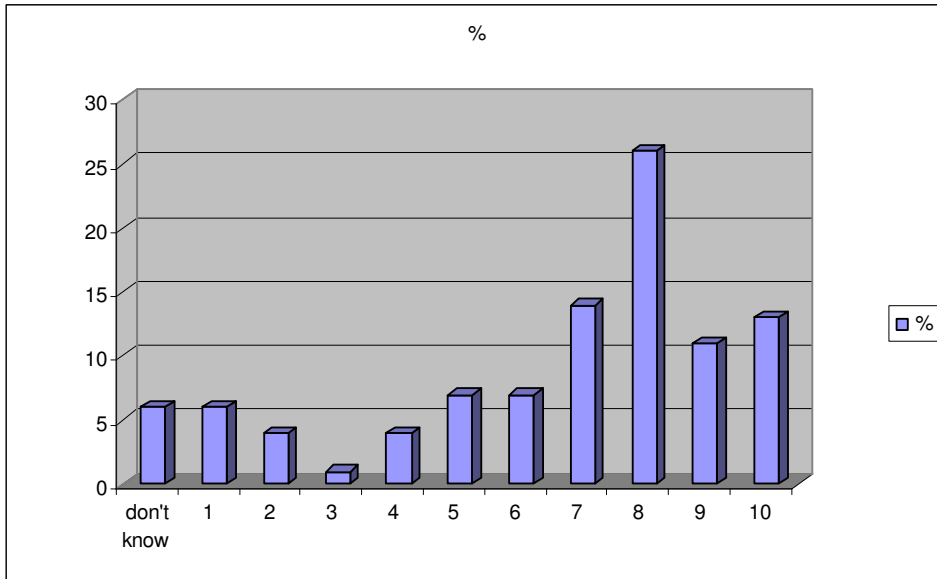


Figure 38: Question 26: Level of connection with higher things

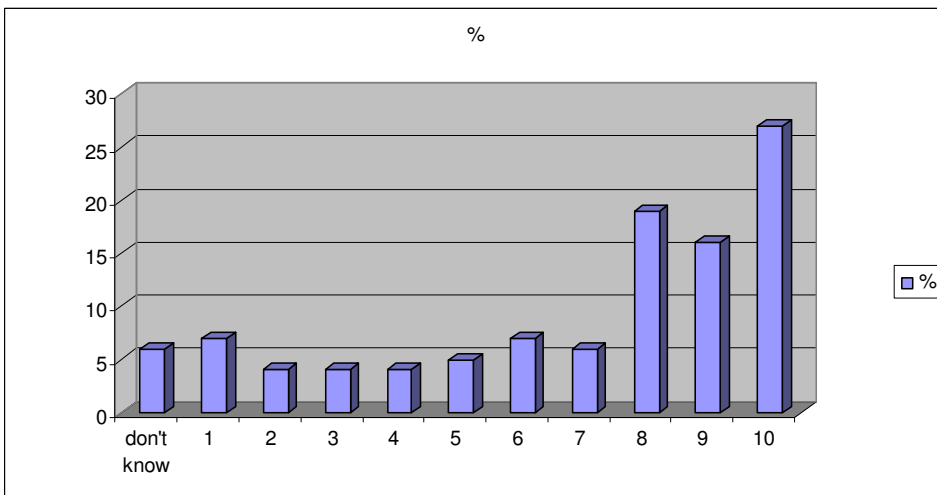


Figure 39: Question 27: Effect on insight into higher things

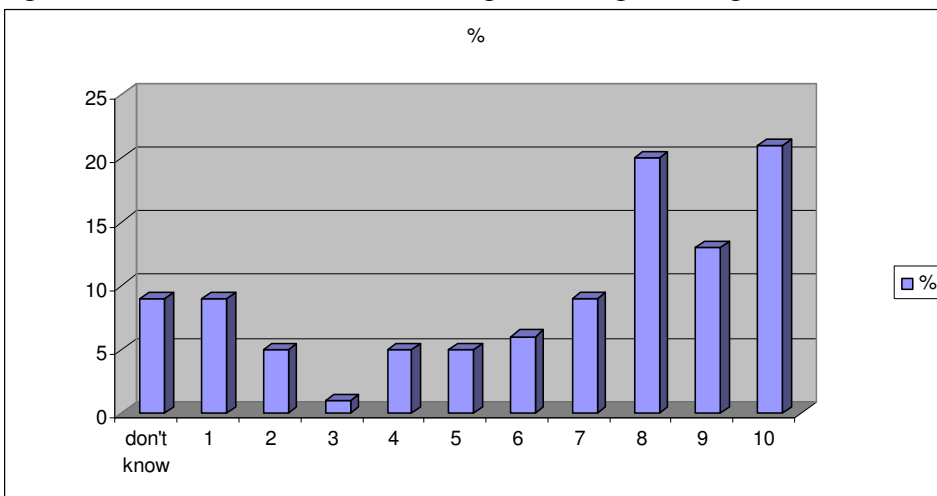


Figure 40: Question 28: Effect on connection with nature

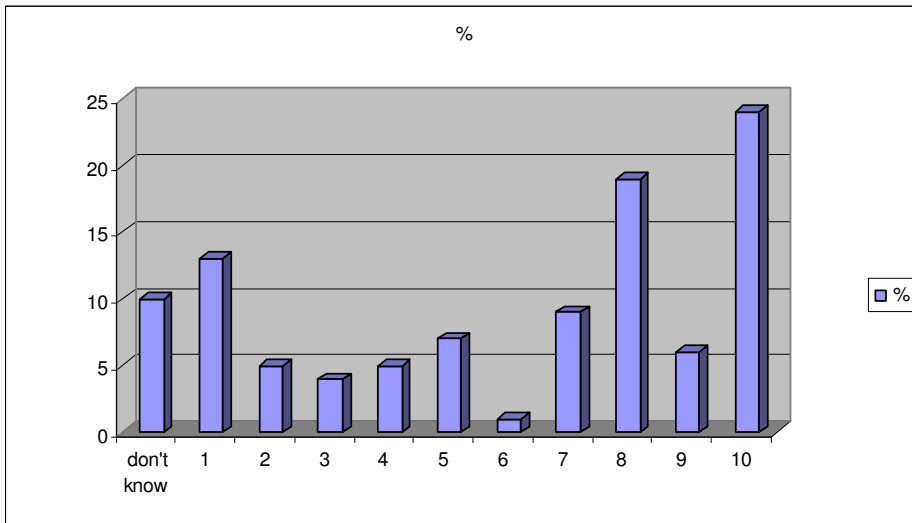


Figure 41: Question 29: Importance of guidance during the experience

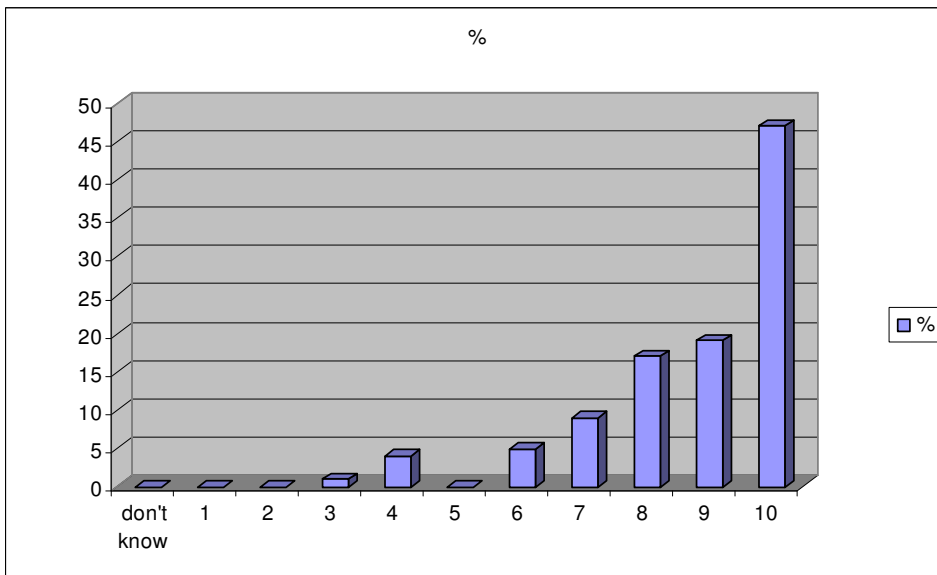


Figure 42: Question 30: Importance of the music

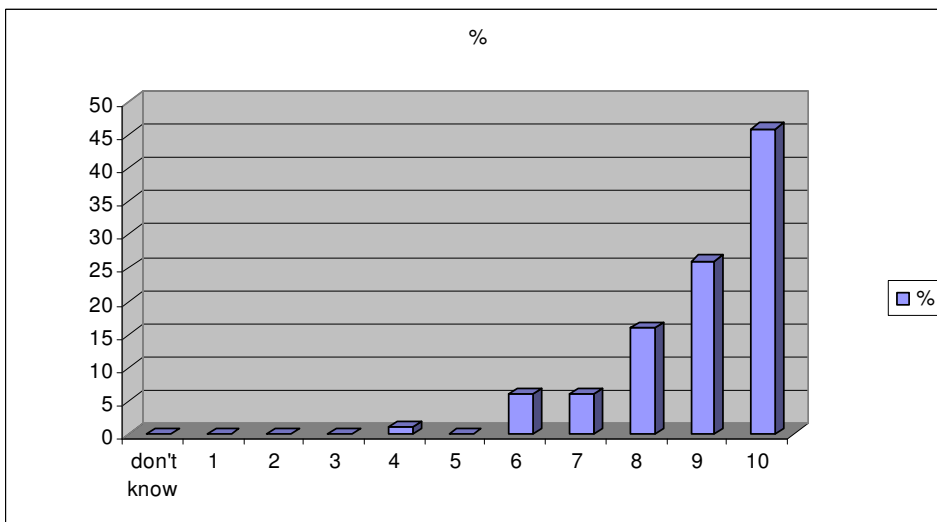


Figure 43: Question 31a: Role of focusing on intention

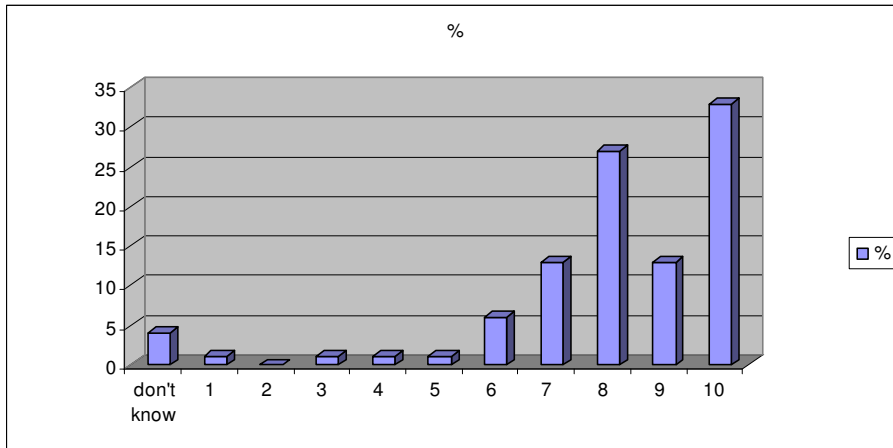


Figure 44: Question 31b: Role of fasting

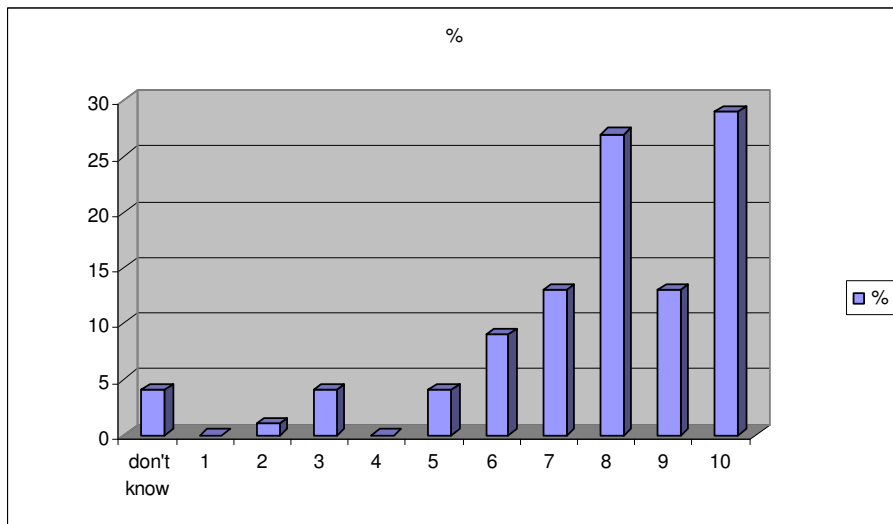


Figure 45: Question 31c: Role of meditation

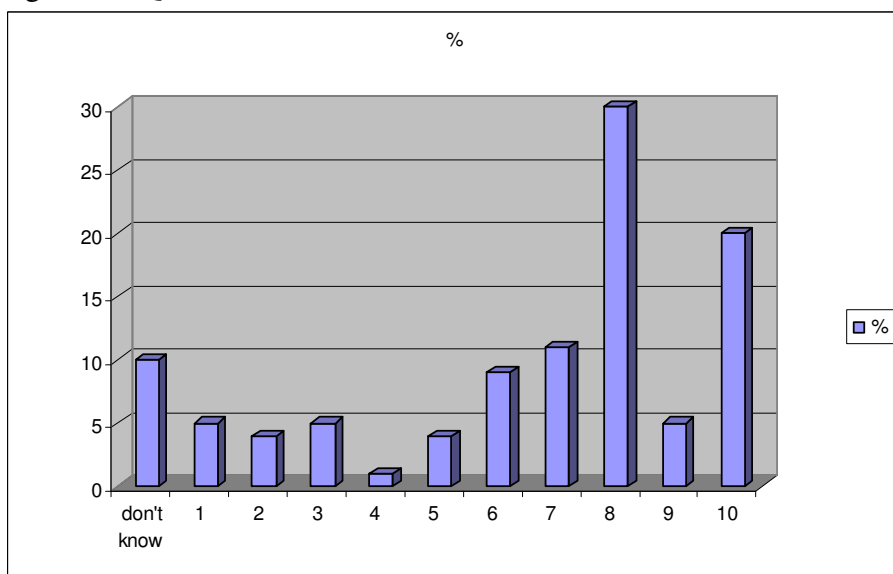


Figure 46: Question 32: Presence of after-effects

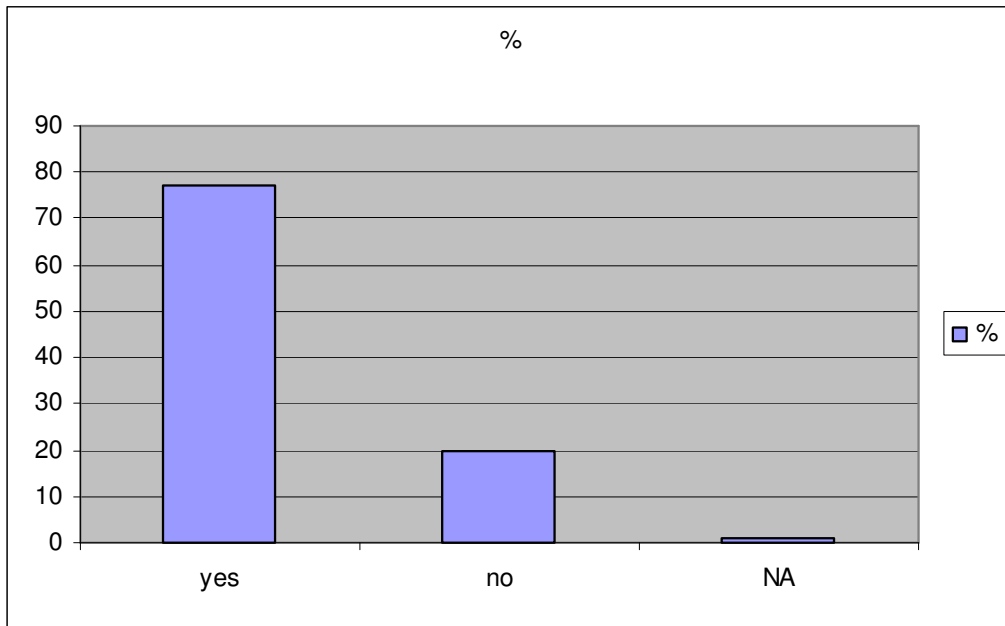


Figure 47: Question 33. What do you consider ayahuasca to be

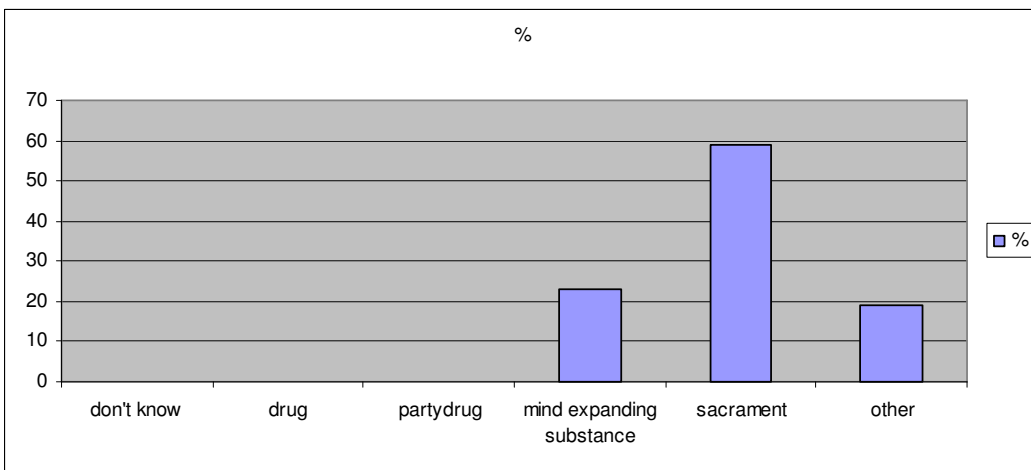
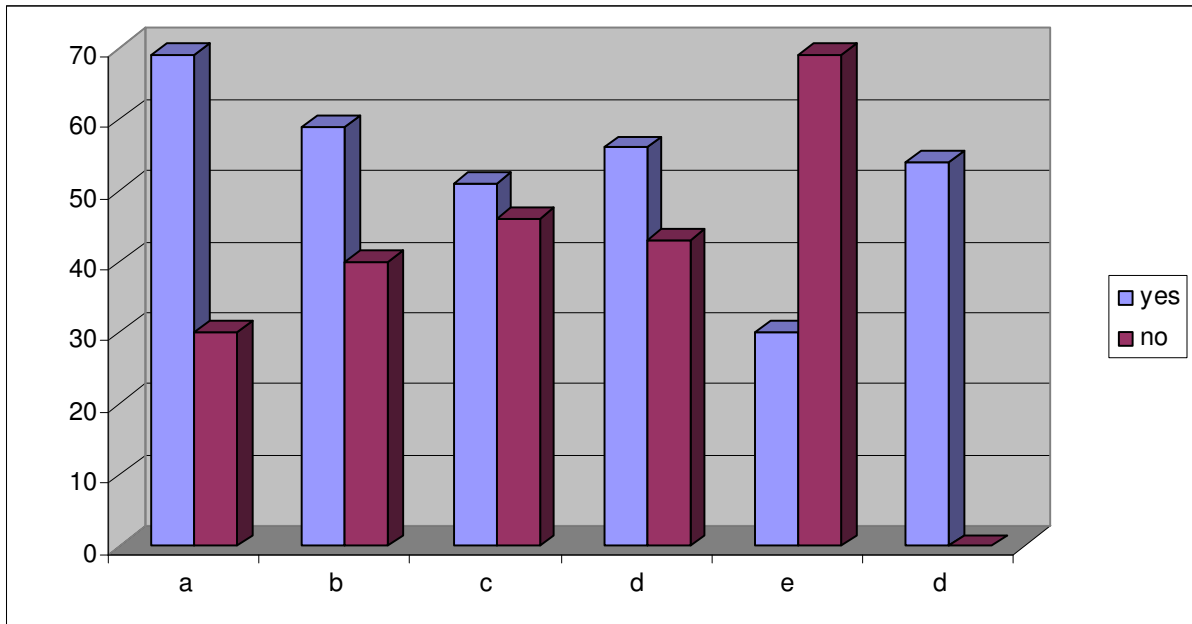


Figure 48: Question 34: Physical effects: a. nausea, b. vomiting, c. muscle contractions, d. feeling heavy, e. heightened frequency of breathing, d. other



## **Appendix 3: Risk assessment of magic mushrooms**

Quote from the risk assessment of mushrooms containing psilocyne and psilocybine ('magic mushrooms'), June 2007.

“The use of hallucinogenic mushrooms ('magic mushrooms') results in such a low risk for the user's personal health, as well as for public health, that prohibition of these mushrooms is an excessive measure, and is disproportionate to the trouble and damage caused by current use. This is the outcome of research by the Dutch Centre for Coordination, Assessment and Monitoring of New Drugs (CAM), performed by order of the ministry for Public Health.”

The full report from which this quote was extracted can be found (in Dutch) at:  
[www.rivm.nl/bibliotheek/digitaaldepot/cam\\_paddo\\_advies.pdf](http://www.rivm.nl/bibliotheek/digitaaldepot/cam_paddo_advies.pdf)

## **About the authors**

### **Lars Faber**

Lars is the author of the books “De Gewijde Reis” (The Sacred Voyage) and “De Heldenreis” (The Hero’s Journey), which cover among other topics the safe use of consciousness-expanding substances. By coincidence he came into contact with the use of entheogenic plants and mushrooms. It appeared that these plants had a soul of their own and they showed him the path that shamans have walked for ages. He discovered that when childhood pains and grief were faced and brought into the Light, they were transformed into joy of life.

In the recent years he developed a specific, safe therapeutic setting for interested people to use ayahuasca for personal growth and transformation: “The Sacred Voyage”. In this setting he has guided more than hundred participants on their special search for their essence.

### **Maria Groot, D.V.M., Ph.D.**

Maria has studied veterinary medicine and works as a scientist in a Research Institute in the Netherlands. In her work, but also out of personal interest, she studied the medical use of plants and other application of plant constituents. Apart from that she has a strong connection with nature which results in a open form of communication with plants as well as animals. During her first meeting with Lars she mentioned her desire to combine science with spirituality. After her own positive experiences with the Sacred Voyage, Lars asked her to help with the investigation of the experiences of the participants of the Sacred Voyage. This resulted in this cooperative effort in which she focused on the format of the questionnaire, the processing of the results and writing of the discussion and summary.



