





FOUNDATION FOR MENTAL WELLNESS

I hope this book's original concept has morphed into something more meaningful in people's lives than just being a how-to book. After all, another how-to is just that. I never thought I'd be sharing intimate details of my life in the hope that my experiences might be a catalyst for change in others. I'm not known in my corner to be a reticent person; I wear my heart on my sleeve and speak my mind. It's gotten me into trouble on occasion, but being vocal is my *modus operandi*, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I reckon it stems from my over-the-top dysfunctional upbringing and my philosophy that if I'm not going to take any shit from my family, sure as hell, I'm not taking it from anyone else. Talking about how I feel in the aftermath of a given situation has always been therapeutic for me, and I have to look after my own well-being. I find one of the most powerful tools for mental well-being is communication.

I'm grateful for all the opportunities I have had to be part of circle talks, with an invitation to leave my pride at the door in an open forum for discussion. One of the most powerful of these talks was after an ayahuasca ceremony in Peru, where over twenty people had participated in the ceremony the previous night. Most talked

about being dumped on by family members, friends, and lovers. It was mind boggling to hear the same angst come out of the mouths of others. Walking back to my hut after the marathon group discussion, I felt a lightness in my step that hadn't been present earlier. I definitely let go of some pent-up bad energy that afternoon, and not just with my contribution to the discussion. I think really listening to others and being aware of mettā helped create a soothing atmosphere for the group. It encompassed me in a comforting balm that helped ease my mind and body for a release of dark energy. A friend I met in the jungle on that trip said to me, "Heal thyself." These discussions are a gateway to do just that, and I imagine my sharing here will bring forth more healing within myself. I'm grateful for this opportunity to share how I established solid ground to fight the good fight and prosper on this planet . . . with good health and a smile.

Before establishing a solid foundation for proper living with the elements of yoga, meditation, and enhancing with cannabis and ayahuasca, my mental health had resembled a drive in the country: winding roads with crests and valleys aplenty. Now I feel like there are no forks in the road, and although the road still has some dips, they've levelled out for the most part. Before my first ten-day meditation course, my life was always one of learning, crazy adventurous fun times, sport, parenting, and of course, as with all of us beings, misery and suffering. One could say that I've had quite the colourful life before erecting a white picket fence around these vital elements, and colourful implies the dark as well. Lord knows I've had many a day where all I saw was shades of grey (wrote a song about it, and here's how she go . . . just kidding). At this point in my life, I can honestly say that the colours of a more meaningful life are more vibrant because the sheen of misery and suffering are not as prevalent as in those times, thereby allowing the colours of an enriched life to cascade around me.

I have never been the guy to rue the day away, regretting occurrences from my actions. Regrets? I have a few, but that's life; we all make choices. I view them more as a learning tool than something resembling the rueing. Living in the past is never ideal. Still, reflection

can be helpful when using past experiences as intel for better choices in the present. Pondering the past is more valuable, as it evokes a thought process more congruent with positivity, whereas rueing is synonymous with negative connotations. That said, I wonder where I would be in life if I hadn't come into contact with yoga, meditation, enhancing with cannabis, and participating in my fair share of ayahuasca ceremonies. Back then I would appear happy go lucky to the outside world, but inside, I still felt a bit lost, even disconnected. While I'm incredibly ecstatic that I made the choices to have these elements in my life, let's put aside the pondering, rueing, and even wonderment of the past and reflect on the positive impact these elements have had on my mental health.





YOGA

I've revelled in recounting the exploits of my yoga journey in this book, so I'll keep this chapter to the bare minimum. Since it's a massive pillar in establishing the foundation for proper living, a little more romancing of the art of life is in order.

Yoga has been such a magnificent teacher, part I. One of the first things it taught me was humility; I never envisioned Bikram yoga would demand such mental and physical fortitude. Never have I been more challenged, especially in terms of patience and the maturing process. Most new athletic endeavours have me trying to sprint off the line. Yoga has taught me that I need to learn to walk with asanas before I toe the line for a one-hundred-meter dash. Not only has yoga been a great teacher, she's also been a great friend. Never a friend to judge; instead, she's a companion that motivates, transforms, and heals.

Yoga has, without a doubt, healed my body. Equally, it has helped me with my mental health. When I've had a case of the Monday blues, and it's only Sunday, my new companion has often taken me by the hand and gotten me into the studio. I was quick to realize on days like this that I wasn't just going to the studio to live in the present for ninety minutes. It was to be a part of the room's collective energy, thus allowing the vibrational energy of the class to penetrate my body and ease my mind. I've always enjoyed the walk back home

on days coloured in those blue tones—a complete 180 mentally from the seemingly long walk to the studio two hours previously. There is something to be said about the energy of a yoga class, about being a part of a community of like-minded, kindred souls.

Being an active form of meditation, yoga's demand for concentration and mind/body connection has unmistakably strengthened my Vipassana meditation practice and vice versa. The by-product of this marriage, the hidden gem, if you will, is found in that both are vocal when one doesn't want to come out and play. If I haven't meditated in a few days, my yoga is affected, falling out of posture and disrupting the room's harmony. Conversely, if I haven't practiced yoga for a few days, my meditation sits are more agitated because my body isn't at ease. I found it fabulous that my mind self-taught itself, establishing a barometer for my mental health. It now tells me when I've been negligent in my practices.

The long-awaited addition of Yin yoga into my practice is already paying off big dividends and easing my body at the end of the day, prepping for a good sit and then a restful sleep. My practices have me in possession of a better sleep pattern, which bodes well for getting up on the right side of the bed. Can I get a hallelujah?

One Love
2.0





VIPASSANA MEDITATION

The answer to world peace, to universal peace, is this wonderful gem of non-sectarian meditation. The core values of Vipassana should be taught at the kindergarten level, instilled in each one of us as soon as we know the difference between right and wrong. I don't get the argument that one religion or one race is superior to another. In each faith, there is moral conduct that must be adhered to by all the devotees. I grew up in a Catholic household, and I heard words such as the following many times: "Thou shall not steal; thou shall not kill." If each sect has these codes of morality, why is there all of this killing in the name of? Why do we stockpile trillions of dollars in weaponry instead of stockpiling creativity? If we had rites of passage that continued to teach and recalibrate our moral compasses as we grew into mature beings, harsh or false words would not be in our vocabulary. Thinking impure thoughts wouldn't even be on our radar. Unwholesome actions would be non-existent, as we would be living in a world paved first and foremost with good intentions. Love and kindness would be the horticulture that grew alongside this path, a path, I might add, free from the aggravation of small pebbles and thorns, so we could walk barefoot and organically

connect to Mother Earth. What a pleasant world that would be. It's next-level stuff in the hierarchy of consciousness. Only namaste peeps are invited; no joiners.

I am a thankful individual for being shown the path in this lifetime. If one has practiced Vipassana in a past life, the path will present itself in each subsequent lifetime; that is the belief taught during a course. While many people conclude that reincarnation is not a thing, I can only convey my thoughts on the subject. Without getting too deep or philosophical, one aspect of life that Vipassana has shown me is that karma is real. We have to right our wrongs. We must balance out the scales of wrongdoing, accomplished only by being subjected to what goes around, comes around. I haven't been a saint in this lifetime, but I believe I've repaid that karma and a few other lifetimes worth as well, and that is why I think past lives . . . *are a thing*.

If I had a nickel for every time Dana said that I should write a book about all the absolute chaos, despair, and freak incidents that I've endured, I'd have fat stacks of those silver five-cent pieces; that's for sure. Most would think it a book of fiction and not some colourful autobiography. Not to get into any shaming because that would be a book inside a book, and we got no time for negativity in this book of love. I'll save those stories for a rainy day, but I will articulate that most of my despair has been from my parents. I alluded earlier that praise and recognition were not present in our household growing up and there continues to be acts of random unkindness to the present day. I don't get how parents can be so negligent when it comes to nurturing their offspring. Having Stephanie in my life is one of the greatest gifts of this lifetime. Some friends I've known since we were just little kids starting in life have themselves a band called Blackburn. No bias, but one of the best R&B bands ever. A song they wrote, aptly named "A Gift," conveys that pride is the highest form of love. It gives me such fabulous sensations throughout my body each time I hear this track because I was singing this tune to my little girl long before my childhood buds gave it the moniker.

Talking about stacks of five-cent pieces, a reasonable question by you, the reader might be, “Why would you bring this to our attention if this is a story for a rainy day?” This brings us to why I’ve dedicated a chapter to Vipassana. It is in no way to try to sell you on the fact that you should go and sit a course. The best sales associate for this wonderful gem is the change others see in a person who has taken a ten-day course. I’m bringing this to the forefront because I hope my authentic and honest nature strikes a chord with others who have lived a similar life, that my written word might not only be of some comfort but also something that you may ponder in times of despair. To give insight and the courage to soldier on.

Vipassana saved my life. Figuratively and most importantly, literally. I’ve been on the cusp of taking my own life many times throughout my existence on this planet. Negligent in giving love, respect, and kindness, opting instead for shame, ridicule, and abuse, my parents dropped the ball regarding child-rearing. From time to time, it has left my siblings and me with fragile perceptions of ourselves. I will tell you this: I would never want my daughter to look at me with the shame and embarrassment that I’ve felt for my mom and dad over the years with their shenanigans. Conveyed in one of the discourses listened to by Vipassana students every night over the ten days of a course, suicide is not the answer to our perceived problems and mental anguish. It can never be the option because on the other side of that door they say, is the same life. Suicide merely resets the current life by hitting repeat. Underlying tone? We must endure all the hardships, trials, and tribulations brought forth because of our karma. We have to take ownership of our misdeeds.

Since I attended that first Vipassana course back in 2008, I don’t ask the “why me” question anymore. In one of the courses I attended while at the meditation centre in Australia, I came to realize that all these years, instead of asking that question of self-pity, I should have immediately discarded it. Trashing the query in favour of knowing the good in my life has been from my good karma, the “cup half full” metaphor comes to mind. I have a few courses under my belt,

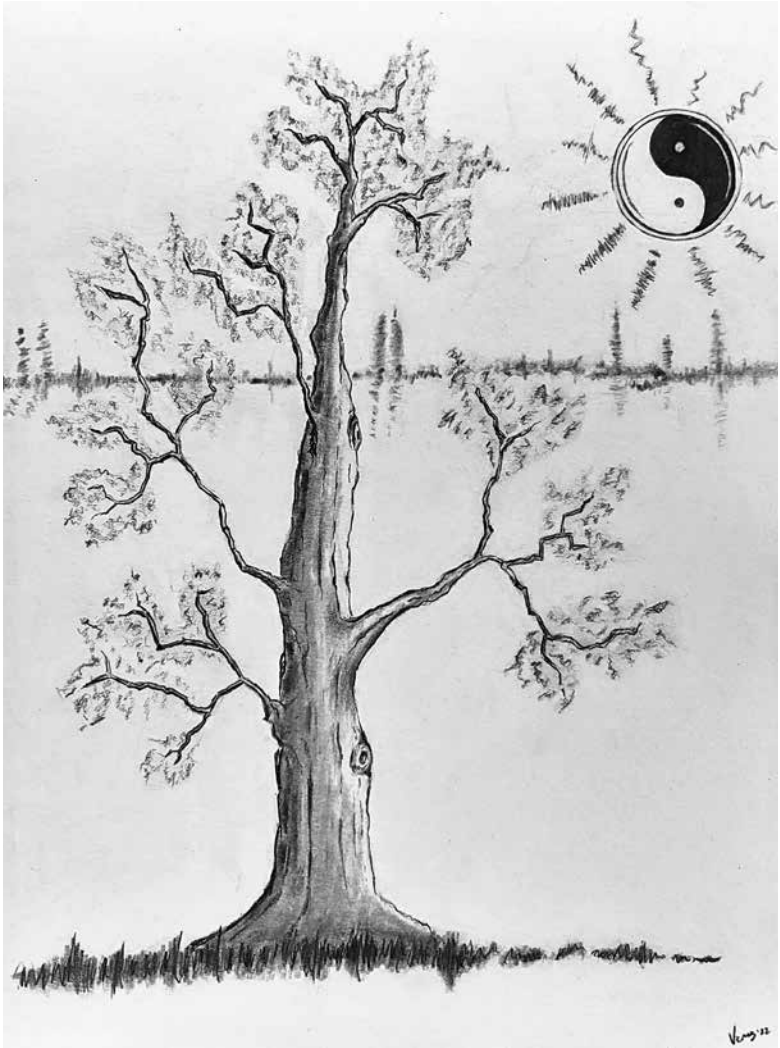
and if one stands out more than any of the others, it's this one. The realization released so much negative energy, and it was replaced with self-love—easy peasy.

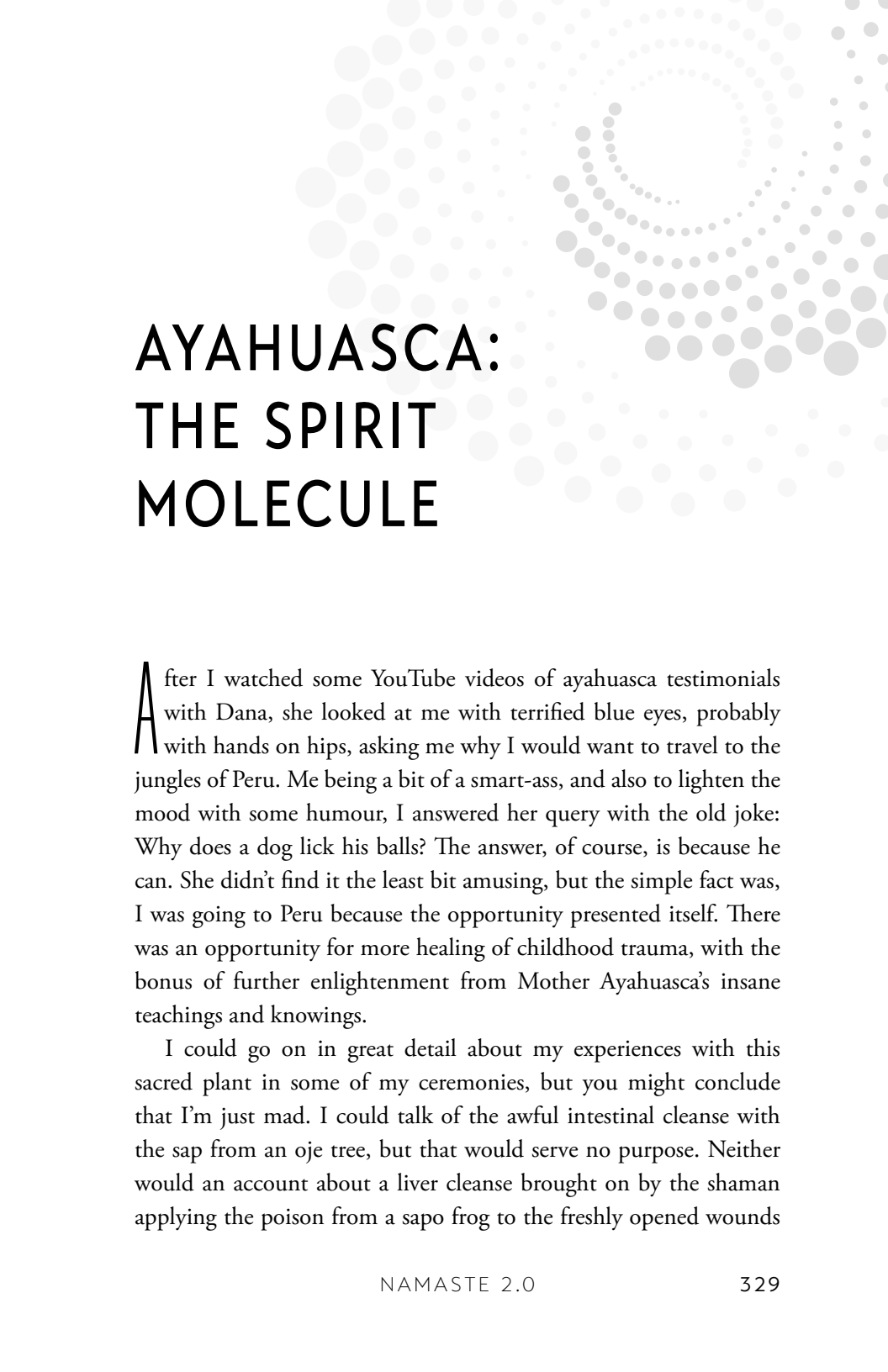
Recent acts of random unkindness remind me of the days with the fragile mind, but the cup half full has made me a survivor. Vipassana has made me wise enough to know that each experience should be viewed and lived as an opportunity to thrive instead of wallowing in self-pity. This past lesson, for lack of a better word, has shown me that I'll not only continue to survive, but I'll also continue to thrive. With this understanding, and to bring my namaste to the next level, I need to keep a diligent watch on the fence erected around my foundation for personal growth and enlightenment and not let the actions of others find weaknesses that aren't there. People in my circle may find this harsh, writing about my family in this manner, but sometimes you have to call people out on their bullshit. This is one of those times. Having endured enough, I refuse to accept any more of the gifts of negativity, especially from those in my own clan.

I hope that my written words are reflected upon by those who have endured a similar past, providing them with courage to overcome these moments of suffering and misery. This moment in time is an opportunity to stand up and say, "Enough is enough."

Like I mentioned, I'm no sales associate. It's not my job to sell you on participating in a course. When the time is right, Vipassana will come knocking on your front door. There is, however, something extraordinary waiting for us kindred souls on the other side of this life, as long as we live it properly, and that is to say, with a decent moral compass full of love and kindness. How do I know this is true? The spirit molecule has shown me in ceremonies when I've dared to travel to the jungle in my quest for unburdening my mind from the trauma of an insanely dysfunctional upbringing—furthering my progress on the path to personal enlightenment. Read on about the fabulous Mother Teacher Plant known as ayahuasca.

Control
YOUR Mind





AYAHUASCA: THE SPIRIT MOLECULE

After I watched some YouTube videos of ayahuasca testimonials with Dana, she looked at me with terrified blue eyes, probably with hands on hips, asking me why I would want to travel to the jungles of Peru. Me being a bit of a smart-ass, and also to lighten the mood with some humour, I answered her query with the old joke: Why does a dog lick his balls? The answer, of course, is because he can. She didn't find it the least bit amusing, but the simple fact was, I was going to Peru because the opportunity presented itself. There was an opportunity for more healing of childhood trauma, with the bonus of further enlightenment from Mother Ayahuasca's insane teachings and knowings.

I could go on in great detail about my experiences with this sacred plant in some of my ceremonies, but you might conclude that I'm just mad. I could talk of the awful intestinal cleanse with the sap from an oje tree, but that would serve no purpose. Neither would an account about a liver cleanse brought on by the shaman applying the poison from a sapo frog to the freshly opened wounds

on my forearm from the red-hot ember of an incense stick. Talk of fourteen hours as if I was holding onto reality by my fingertips from the effects of ingesting a bowl of freshly cut blue cactus (mescaline) would probably have you erupting with queries like Dana's.

None of that is significant. What is of importance is what these journeys to Peru say about my ever-present desire to heal, learn, and reach a higher echelon of consciousness. Bringing my "the good in me sees the good in you" namaste 2.0 game to another level to try to be better today than I was yesterday. If you allow me, I would like to convey what *aya* has done for me on an intellectual level and also in regard to my mental health.

One afternoon on the job site, my good friend Gary, his son Robert (Guns), and I were knee deep in one of our intellectual conversations when Gary imparted some words for us to ponder. He said that instead of looking at all the books he's read as if they were on a shelf, he views them as a collection, stacked one on top of one another. Looking down at them in this fashion, he reckons he can extrapolate better intel from their interconnectedness. Guns and I looked at each other with a smile and a wink. It conjured up a saying from the 1970s: "Far out, man." The book metaphor on how we can tap into knowledge is the best way to describe what my many ayahuasca ceremonies have done for my thinking pattern. Now I synthesize data from *all* my experiences to come up with sound, informed decisions and to rationalize my emotions instead of them going south in what was before in my life, moments of deep depression. Going one step further in the extrapolation of intel from experience is a metaphor from Sarah Powers' book, *Insight Yoga*. Sarah writes about knowledge derived from multi-transparent maps of life laying over top of one another. That's such a groovy thought process, well worthy of a "Far out, man." In this case, a "Far out, Sarah." When I think of these two analogies of maximizing the intelligence quotient in any particular situation, I can't help but justify that this rationalizing is the blueprint for N2.0. Groovy, man. One may say that pooling all the intel from experience isn't a pioneering breakthrough; however, ayahuasca is

seemingly rewiring my brain without me thinking about it. Dare I say, in self-teaching mode once again.

Sitting on the tarmac, awaiting takeoff from my first trip to the jungle, I reflected on what I thought was the defining moment of the twelve-day workshop. It was undoubtedly the blue cactus experience on day eight or nine. What was supposed to be a “hippie love” afternoon with the others was anything but for me. The experience started out great with a group walk and then things went south . . . and dark. Every negative experience of my entire life appeared in visions brought on by the mescaline. Some of the visions I was unfamiliar with, so I reckon those were from past lives.

It was so full on and incredibly vivid. I’m not much of a crier, but I’ve been known to shed a tear. I have no shame. That night, though, after almost fourteen hours inside the worst nightmare ever, I cried. I cried like a **** (**** denotes expletive). When the big cry ended after about an hour, when the last teardrop fell, I felt something akin to mild euphoria wash over me. I walked back to my place on the hill and slept for ten hours straight. I think all the memories that appeared in my visions came to the surface so that the negative energy could leave my body. I remember saying to myself at the climax of the experience, “*I’m never eating the blue cactus again.*”

Funny thing #1: I was first in line when I went back to the jungle with Little Miss S. Why would I put myself in a position to have to endure such an ordeal once again? The answer comes from the wisdom of direct experience that these ancient medicines truly are nothing short of miraculous. Organic healing has us having to do the work. While in the throes of my first sapo experience, I also said, “*I’m never doing this again.*”

Funny thing #2: I have a wooden stick from Iquitos saturated with the frog poison in my cupboard here in Toronto. I’ve taken to administering it to myself every six months. I’m not permitted to talk to Dana about the lone wolf exploits of ayahuasca or sapo poison until the next day, so she can sleep. Dana does a lot of wondering aloud, wondering why the hell I do what I do.

When I first started doing ceremonies with ayahuasca, aside from the teachings of the day, I had a distinct feeling of being healed: mind and body. Now when I take part, I have an unmistakable feeling of being prepared for something. There is a sense in my ceremonies that there is something on the other side of a door. I'm just waiting for it to bust open. I promise I'm not going mad; I've never felt better in my life. My eyes, though, are wide open to the possibilities. I'm super curious and excited about what's on the other side, so I'll keep Dana wondering aloud and keep doing what I do. The ayahuasca vine, she's known as the Mother Teacher Plant. When Dana asks questions with wonder, one of my now-famous retorts goes something like: "Why are these ancient medicines on Earth if we're not meant to take them?" I say it with a *take that* vibe. Dana probably still has her hands on her hips.

I would be doing you a disservice if I didn't enlighten you quickly about the *only* place to ever go for an ayahuasca retreat: El Purguero in Iquitos, Peru. There you will be exposed to Don Ron Wheelock, the Gringo Shaman. He's the most authentic and knowledgeable person I've ever met. There is a vision that I've experienced many times while in an aya ceremony. It is of me, as a part of a tribe, around a fire, and Don Ron is always present. It's evident in these visions that he is the medicine man of our clan. Trippy . . . not mad. The Gringo Shaman—a great nickname for a friend who feels more like a brother. I think the best testimony for El Purguero is that I'll be going back for a fourth time—it has "epic journey" written all over it.

This time I may have my brother Christian in tow as well as two friends: Gary, whom you met at the top of the chapter, and our good friend Jimi. And this is testimony in and of itself because they wouldn't be going if they didn't believe in the power of ayahuasca. They see and hear what it has done for me. I didn't completely scare them off with tales of the blue cactus or the frog secretion. I told them what I'm going to say to you. El Purguero, it's not a retreat. One goes to the jungles of Iquitos to do the work. It's not for the squeamish, but if you have the fortitude to venture into the realm of organic healing and

teaching, you may one day meet the Gringo Shaman. Along the way, you may finally find some inner peace. Did I mention what a great nickname he has? Ha . . . love you, Don Ron.

HONOURABLE MENTION

When I was in Peru with Stephanie, CNN was there doing a piece on soldiers with PTSD for their series, *Life with Lisa Ling*. I got a chance to talk to Lisa about ayahuasca, but mostly we spoke of parenting as she, like Steph, was raised by her father. While Lisa was giving us the props for coming to the jungle, I busied myself applauding her work endeavouring to shed the spotlight on a vast array of topics. She's a fantastic person, genuine and authentic, and no, she didn't partake in the ayahuasca.





ENHANCING WITH CANNABIS

Cannabis sure has its share of nicknames, but my hands-down favourite is Mary Jane. I've always thought of this beautiful plant as a good friend. So, referring to her as "stank bud" wouldn't be too classy, would it? I'd be in the doghouse, and I don't need that. I much rather prefer the comforts of MJ. She's comforting when she's around but has a tendency to take off for long periods of time. I don't know where she goes, and I don't ask questions. It can't be far, though; she sits on some nearby perch to keep an eye on me. Mary Jane knows when to come back for some motivation, possibly to inspire artistically or help me with those Monday blues. As the years pass, with more steps taken on the path, the longer it seems MJ is content to view from afar. She left after the first photo shoot and didn't come back until the second. It was such a beautiful reward for all the hard work. She's an intelligent woman; she realized I wouldn't need her while training. I was super motivated and inspired, and as each Monday passed without those blue hues, I'm sure Mary Jane had a nice warm smile for me.

The Yin yoga simulated the calming effect on the mind/body that cannabis enhancement produces. Uh-oh, I just realized that the more

Yin yoga I practice, the less often MJ will be around. I can't allow that to happen. Not to fret; I have some tricks up my sleeve to bring her around. Talking about Mary Jane like she's an FWB (friend with benefits) . . . too funny. With my talk of little stoner studios and coming to the studio all glossy-eyed (and amped up on Red Bull), you may have concluded that I am a pothead stoner. You'd be partially correct. I've been known to be one, but I prefer MJ's solo vacations. Sometimes she's gone for days. Mostly it's weeks, but her absence in the past few years can be measured in months. Where does this leave the two of us now that Yin yoga has come into my life? MJ and I have a special relationship; she'll never be too far. She enjoys watching me cook, delights at my guitar playing, and loves riding a bike, and I appreciate her company: she motivates, educates, enhances, and inspires. Taking vacations from one another, well, they make the reunion exponentially more pleasant, especially if it involves playing that six-string.

MJ's finest quality is that of a nursemaid. Long before I added meditation, yoga, and ayahuasca to my arsenal before charging into the battle with my mental health, Mary Jane was the only coping mechanism I had at my disposal. Granted, she and I formed a bond decades ago based on experimentation, escapism, and the euphoria of getting high. Indeed, she provided the high, but more importantly, she taught me early that she could accommodate me with the necessary nurturing when misery and suffering awakened the blues. Feelings of not wanting to be around were more frequent back then, pre-Vipassana. When these sensations did arise, and I took comfort in MJ's arms, I knew I was in good hands. There's never been a time when she hasn't come to my emotional rescue. She gets my head on straight, allowing me to think clearly and proactively. I owe her a debt of gratitude for the positive experiences I've had because of our friendship over the years, helping me keep my shit together when it has hit the fan.

I know there is still a particular stigma among many people in society regarding enhancing with cannabis. Please know that I'm not naïve to the fact that puffing a blunt isn't everyone's pot of tea. My words merely reflect my relationship with this fabulous plant. I believe

it's worth noting that I'm keenly aware that enhancing with MJ isn't a rock 'n' roll cure all, but she's a better bandage in moments of despair than prescription drugs. Not that I would know. For the skeptics, the people on the fence, or even the naïve, there is an intelligent, well-written book called *Ganja Yoga*, written by Dee Dussault. It will educate and hopefully inspire exploration into the wonderful world of enhancing your practice with cannabis.





MENTAL WELLNESS CONCLUSION

Building this foundation has irrefutably transformed my mental health. It has me in possession of a well-cultivated mind, and a by-product of such is one of heightened consciousness. I feel connected to myself and others and the goings on, around me. With the white picket fence encompassing it, this foundation has me steadfastly walking the path because there will be more opportunities to learn and heal along the way.

The remarkable aspect of enhancing with cannabis, evolving with ayahuasca, and maturing in both my meditation and yoga practices is that with each new experience, I feel I am constantly dialing myself further into a lifestyle and mindset intent on awareness, love, and kindness. Each of these experiences brings an opportunity to work on my N2.0, and with this consciousness, I fortify my mental health daily.

The addition of Yin yoga to the equation for mental health is like doing a renovation on the foundation, trading in that white picket fence for rebar and cement. Yin yoga is already nurturing the growth

of each element, and that is fortifying the foundation as a whole. The shenanigans of life will always test my mental fortitude, so keen awareness of the entire compound is critical.

In conclusion, not only have these elements given me better mental health, they've also increased my desire to be better. I want to be a participant in a life that actively seeks positivity; as some say, "to be a better version of myself than that of yesterday."

Gratitude
2.0