I've written two other [essays](http://www.stephengrayvision.com/2012/07/22/meeting-iboga/)\* on my website about [iboga](http://www.stephengrayvision.com/2011/04/03/iboga-the-holy-wood-which-cares-for-us/), [one of them](http://www.stephengrayvision.com/2011/04/03/iboga-the-holy-wood-which-cares-for-us/) my personal experience as a participant. There's also a very informative interview in [audio](http://www.stephengrayvision.com/2011/05/11/iboga-interview-in-three-parts/) and [text](http://www.stephengrayvision.com/2011/05/11/iboga-interview-text-version/) versions with Sean and Steve, the two iboga ceremony leaders I've been coordinating events for during the past couple of years. Since writing the essay on my own experience with the ceremony, I've now been an assistant at another half dozen and have seen close to eighty people go through the weekend. It feels like it's time for an update.

The core issue I've learned more about in these past couple of years has to do with the challenge of understanding how to work with and benefit from the iboga plant in this context. On Sunday, the last day of each ceremony, participants share their feelings with the group. Sean and Steve encourage them to listen to the others as the talking stick is passed around the circle, without thinking ahead to what they'll say. Then they're asked to keep it simple, spontaneous, and from the heart. From mentally correlating those reports, along with later email exchanges and conversations with people who have gone through the ceremony, a clearer picture is beginning to take shape.

I can imagine that my understanding of the mysterious and wonderful ways this medicine interacts with us and promotes psychospiritual growth may evolve if I continue in these roles. At this point I want to share my current understanding because I've observed that it often isn't easy to make sense of how the medicine is doing its work. Although there's a core functioning principle, the particular way it plays out varies widely from individual to individual. With some people it's very clear. With others it's occluded and enigmatic.

With entheogens such as [ayahuasca](http://www.stephengrayvision.com/category/ayahuasca/), [peyote](http://www.stephengrayvision.com/2012/01/07/a-good-way-to-teach/), psilocybe mushrooms, cannabis and others, the descriptor "nonspecific amplifier" is appropriate. The medicines can open up the channels that already exist as unrecognized potential or in muted form. When set and setting are optimal, the amplification function powerfully clarifies and in that way promotes healing and awakening. But unlike some of the other medicines, iboga appears to have a very narrow—you could even say disciplined—intention and focus. Ayahuasca for example, according to experienced journeyers, can show you just about anything under the sun and beyond. Iboga, again as I understand it, is like a psychotherapist or clear-mirroring spiritual master. You tell the doctor what's going on and the doctor goes to work.

And now here's the nub of the issue and the reason it can be tricky to understand and learn from an encounter with iboga. Most people come to it looking for solutions to their discomfort, their unhappiness, anxiety, confusion and so on. [Buddhist teachings](http://www.stephengrayvision.com/category/buddhist-wisdom/) sometimes round these various descriptors into one Sanskrit word: "dukkha."  Dukkha is sometimes translated as suffering but maybe a more user-friendly description would be to think of it as a basic, ongoing, root dissatisfaction.  The Buddha is reported to have said, "I have taught one thing and one thing only: dukkha and the cessation of dukkha."1

Coming to an iboga ceremony with hopes for solutions to core issues is well and good. However, and this comes from repeated observation that includes my own self-reflection, these core issues are often very hard to recognize. There's a reason we are where we are. We're driven by patterns that go way back, very possibly even prior to this particular incarnation, but certainly to the very beginnings of this life. The legendary Czech psychiatrist Stanislav Grof supervised over five thousand LSD therapy sessions and found that a great many of his patients, uninfluenced by him, went directly to traumas that developed in the womb and during the birth process. This of course is psychic material that gets embedded long before the child has any cognitive grasp of the source of his or her discomfort and alienation.

We arrive at the ceremony carrying these buried, unrecognized wounds, or imprints. Some readers may balk at the suggestion that their wounds are unconscious. You may think you know what you're working on and you very well may be correct. First off, I'm speaking generally here. Second, I think most of us have at best a partial picture of old material that's getting in our way. Sometimes we see our behavior clearly but we don't know why we keep repeating the same behavior patterns when triggered by certain situations. We haven't penetrated to the roots.

Tell me if you think this next statement is on the mark. If we knew the insides and outsides of our obstacles, if we were very clear about them and able to articulate them, if we had released the blocked, troubling emotions surrounding them, they would no longer be issues of any major concern. Put the other way around, the unrecognized and unreleased energetic imprints and stories we haven't been ready to look at determine our current degree of freedom from confusion and suffering. Expressed in yet another way, we have blind spots. If we could see them they wouldn't cause problems, or they would at the least be well on their way to losing their hold on us.

So generalizing again, we may come to the ceremony with a sense that all is not right, we may think we've narrowed down the investigation, but we're not quite sure. A key component of it is that we've formed a narrative about ourselves, and it often includes some idea of what we think we're working on. But iboga knows the truth and can pinpoint exactly where the problem lies. When we come with this often unconscious material, *and* we think we have some idea of where to look or how the insights and healing will appear, we don't see what's in the polished mirror that iboga holds up to us.

I've seen this phenomenon repeatedly. It often manifests during the ceremony. Someone hauls herself up off the mattress and shuffles over to the ceremony leaders. "I'm sure it's not working for me. It seems to be working for everyone else but me."  Sean and Steve never answer that concern with rational arguments. They just gently tell the person that it's happening even if they can't see it. You just have to relax, pay attention, and not judge. During the Sunday morning sharing session it's common for people to say they have no idea what just happened. They might have been expecting something very dramatic. They might have been expecting iboga to show them a movie reel of their past traumas or whisper a clear solution in their ear.

But there's nothing going on except ourselves and our relationship with stillness. Again, there are reasons we haven't been ready to see the obscuring material, and just having it amplified and mirrored back to us isn't necessarily going to bring change. It's no new-age cliché to say we are completely responsible for ourselves. We're always choosing our state of mind, our degree of realization. With iboga we really have to release all expectations and concepts, embrace beginner's mind, the don't know mind, and be willing to be changed.

Then there is the time following the weekend ceremony. Sean and Steve refer to the whole situation as a thirty-three day ceremony—three days at the ceremony itself and another thirty days where reflection is still very heightened and sharpened. The good news, I should point out, is that regardless of whether or not we have any conscious recognition of what we were shown, iboga *is* doing its work. The say it pulls up the roots of the core obstacles. These pulled-up roots will present themselves to us as we go about our lives. It's very similar to how basic bare-attention type meditation functions. You hope to learn to recognize the mindstuff that arises, see it as phenomena in some essential sense separate from who you are, and let it go, dissolving out with the breath, repeatedly if necessary.

But again, recognizing this is a challenge for most of us. Along with my observations and post-ceremony exchanges with participants, I watched myself get caught into "going solid" on the material. The main issue for me, I have finally come to see over time, has something to do with getting caught up in mental speed and busyness and creating some tightness around all that. As with the great majority of us, there has been a compelling fear of emptiness, of no self, egolessness. Instead of catching the root material as it rose up in the weeks after the ceremony, I took the bait and took on some new responsibilities. There was nothing "wrong" with that per se, but I did eventually come to see how those were unconscious attempts to fill the space and avoid the stillness that Sean and Steve speak of often.

This essay is directed in part at those who have been through an iboga ceremony, although the main points are applicable to anyone working with similar amplifying medicines or are on healing/awakening paths altogether. Those first few weeks after the ceremony are often crucial. People sometimes write or call me during that period with a concerned narrative that things aren't going well. I've learned to recognize that that's exactly what is supposed to happen for those people. As Sean and Steve like to say, the ceremony didn't happen, it's happening. The fortress has been shaken up. The old unhealthy patterns are amplified and manifest as what Buddhist teachings call "heightened neurosis."

Again, there are reasons . . . We really didn't want to surrender those patterns that were natural reactions to the forces unleashed upon us and once protected us but now no longer serve us. There's a struggle going on. Something in us is being pulled toward the light and something is resisting. That creates turmoil. The only advice, surprise surprise, is not to judge, not to fix the story, and to practice nurturing relaxation and stillness of thought as often as possible on the cushion, the yoga mat, and in the daily walk. Things will shift. Great Spirits, however defined (or not defined,) love us unconditionally and continually invite us to enter in.

Footnotes:

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dukkha

Post Script:

\* The first essay I wrote about iboga on the website was titled *Iboga: The Holy Wood Which Cares for Us.* This phrase was borrowed from a book called *Iboga: The Visionary Root of African Shamanism.* When I was collecting talk titles for the 2013 Spirit Plant Medicine Conference, I sent requests to the presenters for titles. When Sean and Steve didn't reply for quite a while I used that title. Later they took a look at the conference website, saw the title and told me it didn't fit their view of iboga. They said it works so powerfully because in some key sense it *doesn't* care. It just mirrors impeccably. When I thanked them at the end of their presentation at the conference I got a big laugh out of them by saying, "Thank you for that brilliant explication of the Holy Wood which doesn't give a shit."