

PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

An Interview with Jack Kornfield

Robert Forte

*"The goal, it cannot be stressed too often, is not religious experiences: it is the religious life. And with respect to the latter, psychedelic 'theophanies' can abort a quest as readily as, perhaps more readily than, they further it." —Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth*, 1976.*

ROBERT FORTE: *Jack, thanks very much for sharing your perspective. With so much said about psychedelic experience and spirituality it may help to look at psychedelics from within an extant spiritual discipline. There is a great deal in Buddhism that can illuminate psychedelic phenomena and help us to understand the curative effect – when there is a curative effect. Maybe a Buddhist perspective can help us to maximize the positive effects of psychedelic experiences and improve or reduce the negative ones.*

JACK KORNFIELD: There are a couple of things I want to start with, some thoughts I have had on the subject, and we can go on from there. The first is a statement in answer to your question which asks for a Buddhist point of view on psychedelics. It is important to say that there is no Buddhist point of view on psychedelics. They are rarely found in the Buddhist tradition, if at all, and generally would be lumped in the precepts under "intoxicants." In the Zen, Vajrayana, and Theravada traditions, the three largest living traditions, there is very little mention of them, very little written, and there is no traditional point of view about the use of them. It is important to understand that. What points of view we have come from our understanding of Buddhist masters and teachers based on contemporary experience. But there is a not traditional body

of knowledge in relationship to these substances that I know of.

A second point to make is that, unlike in Hinduism, which at least in its modern form uses a variety of mind-altering substances – particularly things like hashish that some *sadhus* use sitting by the river Ganges smoking a *chillum* – the fundamental relationship to psychedelics in Buddhist practice and tradition is as intoxicants.

The precept in *Theravadan* Buddhism for dealing with intoxicants is one of the five basic training precepts: not to kill, not to steal, not to speak falsely, not to engage in sexual misconduct, and lastly, to refrain from using intoxicants to the point of heedlessness, loss of mindfulness, or loss of awareness. It does not say not to use them and it is very explicit. It is interesting that it is worded that way: *to not use intoxicants to the point of loss of consciousness or awareness*. There is another translation of it which says *not to use intoxicants which remove that sense of attention or awareness*. Then it is left up to the individual, as are all of the precepts, to use as a guideline to become more genuinely conscious.

A third thought I have to start the conversation, and I think I mention this in *Living Buddhist Masters*, is that practice in the West has taken a reverse direction from spiritual practice in the Asias; particularly Buddhist practice, but Hindu as well.

In Asia the tradition has three parts. You begin with *sila* or virtue. This is the foundation upon which any spiritual life is built. People take care with those precepts. They do not harm. There is a development of *ahimsa*, a respectful, caring, and nonviolent relationship to the people and beings around. This allows the heart to open and the mind to quiet. Out of *sila* comes the various spiritual practices. They are built on that as a foundation.

The second step comes after you are living a moral and a harmonious life – without which you can not really have a quiet mind or an open heart. When your actions are in harmony, then you begin to train yourself through *yoga*, through concentration practices, through all different ways to begin to tame the wild and untamed monkey mind, and to use that training to open up the inner realms. This is *samadhi*, or concentration.

The third domain is the domain of wisdom, *prajna*, from which arise the kinds of insights and understandings of the play of consciousness in the realm of human experience, based on the foundation of a moral life and the training in various disciplines. When those insights arise and wisdom comes they are established on a base so they become available to you easily. They *already* have become integrated in your life by your discipline and your prior training – and you have a context to understand them in. What has happened in the West seems to be a reverse of that.

Many people who took LSD, mushrooms, or whatever it was, along with a

little spiritual reading of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or some Zen texts, had the gates of wisdom opened to a certain extent. They began to see that their limited consciousness was only one plane and one level and that there were a thousand new things to discover about the mind. There are many new realms, new perspectives on birth and death; on the nature of mind and consciousness as the field of creation, rather than the mechanical result of having a body, the biological result; and on the myth of separation and the truth of the oneness of things. Great kinds of wisdom opened up, and for some people, their hearts too. They began to see the dance in much greater perspective.

People's obvious experience was that in order to maintain this they had to keep taking the psychedelics over and over; generally speaking, that is what happened. Even though there were some transformations from these experiences, they tended to fade for a lot of people, at least aspects of them. We might want to discuss this further.

Anyway, this is a kind of simplistic analogy to the East and West but I think there might be some crucial points to it. Following that people said, "If we can't maintain the highs of consciousness that come through the psychedelics, let's see if there is some other way." And so people undertook various kinds of spiritual disciplines. They did *kundalini yoga* and *bastrika* breathing, or they did serious *hatha yoga* as a *sadhana*, *raja yoga*, light and concentration exercises, visualizations, or Buddhist practices as a way to get back to those profound and compelling states that had come through psychedelics.

Are you saying that it instilled in people a thirst for experiences?

A thirst, that is correct.

Is this the same thirst considered to be the cause of suffering in terms of the Buddha's second noble truth? Buddha taught that we suffer because of our desire or thirst for sensual or mental experience. Suffering is inevitable because everything is transitory, yet the thirst goes on. Even the highest mystical experiences can lead to suffering because of our tendency to become attached. In other words, I wonder if these experiences can actually inflate the ego or tempt it with the possibility that even "God" is within its grasp.

Well, the thirst has two sides to it. There is a useful thirst as well. When it is involved with a lot of grasping and attachment – to the extent that there is grasping and attachment – there is suffering. But psychedelics awakened in people not just a thirst, but a sense of the possibilities in exploring the mind and body, and living in a different way. Then they began to have those sensitivities and those visions without repeatedly taking psychedelics, by undertaking some spiritual discipline, *yoga*, or meditation. People began to see that what was necessary was to take care with their speech, with their relationships, with their family, with their actions in the social community

and the political world, in a way that was non-harming and that was conscious. So we have gone backwards in a way to discover that the roots of fundamental change has to do with our physical body, with our behavior, and with all those things that are called "virtue," followed by a systematic discipline. Those are the supports for long lasting or genuine access to these transformative experiences.

I would not say this is true for everyone. There may be people who actually have used psychedelics as a *sadhana*, as a practice. But I have been around a lot and it is really rare.

LSD may be one of the most important causes for the importation of Eastern spiritual practices into this country during the 1960s. Because of LSD, as you are saying, young people sought out those maps and practices which could enable them to understand their experiences.

They certainly were powerful for me. I took LSD and other psychedelics at Dartmouth though I was studying Eastern thought even before then, but they came hand-in-hand as they did for many people. It is true for the majority of American Buddhist teachers that they had experience with psychedelics either right after they started their spiritual practice or prior to it.

I even know of cases where people were genuinely transformed by their experience in the way that one would be from an enlightenment experience. They are rare. Of the many hundreds of people I know who took psychedelics I know of a few cases where people had radically transformative experiences. These were as much as an "enlightenment" as any other kind of "initial enlightenment," using the terminology of a system that has a few major *satoris* and then finally full enlightenment. This is something you are welcome to print. However, along with it print that I am reluctant to say it because it may be misleading. It is like winning the lottery. There are not a lot of people that win. A lot of people play and not so many people win. But the potential is there. I am not sure if it is helpful for people to hear that.

There is a story about a Buddhist master who was asked if you could use drugs to attain enlightenment. He paused and said, "I sure hope so." When Zen Master Soeng Sahn was asked what he thought about using drugs to help in the quest for self knowledge he said: "Yes, there are special medicines, which, if taken with the proper attitude, can facilitate self-realization." Then he added: "But if you have the proper attitude, you can take anything – take a walk, or a bath."

Could you say more about sadhana? What is the right attitude? What are those qualities of mind and action that are basic to the Buddhist path?

Okay, I am thinking if there is some linking question that comes in between these two. There is really. I will mention it briefly and then I will go into the development of *sadhana*.

First of all, I have the utmost respect for the power of psychedelics. They are enormously powerful. They have inspired and opened and awakened possibilities in a lot of people in really deep ways. They have provided transformative experiences. In taking a tempered view of them it does not mean that I do not have a lot of respect for them, and for the work that researchers like Stan Grof and others have done.

My sense from my own Buddhist practice and from the tradition as a teacher for many years is that people underestimate the kind of effort that is required to transform oneself in a spiritual practice. It requires a very great perspective called "a long enduring mind" by one Zen master; which means it can be days, weeks, months, years, and lifetimes. The propensities or conditioned habits which we have are so powerfully and deeply ingrained that even enormously compelling visions do not change them very much. Therefore, the system of liberation taught by the Buddha, and other great masters, draws on several different aspects or elements of life to help empower such a deep transformation. The Buddha said at one point, *Not good deeds, nor good karma, nor merit, nor rapture, nor visions, nor concentration, nor insight. None of these are the reasons I teach; but the sure heart's release, this and this alone.* The possibility of human liberation is the center of his teachings. The liberation from greed, hatred, delusion, and the liberation from the sense of separateness and selfishness. This is a very compelling possibility for humans and it is quite profound.

To come to this level of illumination, first one has to discover the power of those forces in the heart and mind that bind us. In the beginning it may sound like the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion are a little dislike of this and wanting of that, and not being so clear about things, being confused, or not seeing so deeply. But when you have undertaken a deep spiritual practice of whatever kind, and I will include psychedelic experiences as part of that, you begin to realize that what is meant is Greed with a capital G, the most primal kinds of grasping; and Hatred meaning Hitler and Attila the Hun in the mind; and Delusion meaning the deepest dark night. The forces are tremendously powerful. So then how does one encounter these forces and transform them in a way that leads to genuine liberation?

First, you have to have a lot of respect for them. And a lot of people use psychedelics in very misguided ways, with wrong understanding. Some modern researchers like Stan Grof have a much greater sense for set and setting and of the power of the forces that one can deal with. Similarly in spiritual practice one needs to respect the depth of these experiences. Secondly, one has to make a conscious commitment to the journey of spiritual change – through whatever inspiration: meeting an inspiring person, inspiring reading, faith, or through psychedelic experience.

Lama Chögyam Trungpa once spoke to a group in Berkeley and when he began he said: *My advise to you is not to undertake the spiritual path. It is too difficult, too long, and it is too demanding. What I would suggest, if you haven't already begun, is to go to the door, ask for your money back, and go home now.* He said, *This is not a picnic. It is really going to ask everything of you and you should understand that from the beginning. So it is best not to begin. However, he said, if you do begin, it is best to finish.*

For those who through some vision, faith, or reason have started, the next thing that is required, after seeing the power of these unconscious forces and of suffering in the world, is to make a commitment to the path of liberation, the path of the Bodhisattva, the path of the transformation of our being. To make that commitment wisely one has to realize that it encompasses every domain of life. This is the ground of spiritual discipline.

Spiritual discipline is based on our actions, our speech, and our relationship to people, animals, and plants in the environment. It is related to our inner thoughts; to whether our minds are filled with hatred, jealousy, and greed, or of kindness, tenderness, and compassion. It has to do with our intimate relations to our families, lovers, friends, and to the people we work with. All of this is a fundamental part of spiritual practice.

So there is seeing the forces, making a commitment to transformation, and seeing that the path is really a deep and fundamental one. There is realizing that the work of transformation takes place on all the levels of body, speech, and mind. Then there is the beginning of a spiritual *sadhana*.

Now your question comes in: What are the kinds of disciplines, what are the parts to it? Again, this is a kind of elaboration of what I started on.

The ground for systematic spiritual practice is virtue. Virtue doesn't mean commandments and/or moralistic teachings, it is an understanding that one have the proper – John Lilly would call it the “launching pad,” or to have the earth base covered. And so one begins here.

Sadhana means to keep the five basic precepts in mind: not killing or harming living beings; not stealing, not taking that which isn't given – not being piggy basically in a world of limited resources. To use proper speech, that is, words which are both true and helpful – not brutal honesty – but to see that one's speech is both true and useful. Speech is very powerful. Words can heal. Many people have been healed by a word from their estranged father, a great teacher, even from a stranger in certain circumstances. And words have the power to create tremendous harm and to start wars. To refrain from sexual misconduct means to take care with the great power of sexual energy. Sexual energy can be associated with greed, compulsion, lust, denigration, exploitation, or it can be associated with intimacy, care, communion, attention, and love. So make sure that energy is used in a non-harming way. Finally

for intoxicants: not to use intoxicants to the point of heedlessness, which means not use them to escape, to cover over one's pain or difficulty, or in a regular or addicted way in which one *has* to use them. There has been tremendous suffering in the lives of many million alcoholics, drug abusers, and great suffering for their families. The unnecessary pain, misuse, and widespread addiction to substances generally has been a concern of legitimate spiritual traditions for thousands of years.

Even among the relatively conscious explorers of contemporary psychedelics, addiction and attachment has sometimes been a problem. Even more critical is the overly positive message about both the spiritual and the casual use of these drugs that has been adopted by quite a few people who could not handle them well at all. As many of us who have used psychedelics have discovered, it is not an easy path. What matters from the point of view of this precept is to make their use non-habitual (which probably means occasional). If one uses these substances, whether it is a glass of wine, a joint of marijuana, LSD, or mushrooms, this precept says to make that a conscious and careful part of your life. Without these precepts, if one even begins the journey, they will get lost or go off the track. You can not complete the journey until you get the basics right. This is really a very simple message.

Almost every system in the world that is assisted by substances, including the wide range of shamanism, it is in a context of purification.

The purifications are first of action, which we talked about, that is, *sila*. Then based on that, there are the purifications of the body through *hatha yoga*, exercise, or practices that allow your body to feel and to be open enough to touch these deeper levels and to integrate them. You can take a very powerful substance and even if you are physically a wreck, you can touch those places, but there will be a high physical price in the course of it. There will be the burning of the *kundalini* from the *nadis* opening much too quickly. When your body is in tune and open you can go to those places with much less of that burning and overwhelming physical disharmony that can come from it. Secondly, it allows the experience to be integrated. Without preparing the body one can not hold those understandings. These are physical purifications of the body through diet, *yoga*, breathing, etc.

Then there are the purifications of the heart and mind; that is, emotions and thoughts. The purifications at the beginning are to train oneself to have thoughts of loving kindness and compassion. To begin, in a systematic way, to open up places that are constricted and extend forgiveness. This is the purification of forgiveness. There is an emotional transformation which takes place by extending forgiveness and opening the heart, seeing the fears, angers, and memories that have been locked in and releasing them.

There is the purification of generosity, of actions, words, and thoughts of

caring. There is the purification in the realm of thought: taking the crazed monkey mind and nonstop inner dialogue and beginning to train the element of *samadhi*, or stability of mind. In this way, the mind becomes steadier and can focus on light, visualization, the heart, or some other aspect of being, instead of wandering all the time, or being lost in the past and future.

It is necessary to begin to overcome the powerful conditioning of reacting with aversion to pain, and with greed to pleasure, therefore getting lost all the time in past and future. This involves working with mindfulness and concentration in a specific systematic way. Then comes the mind; but first you stabilize the mind through concentration. Most people find that happens with a long regular practice of sitting meditation, with *mantra*, visualization, or a hundred other ways.

Once the mind is concentrated, you apply that one-pointedness to discover the laws of the mind, or the laws of consciousness.

First you start on the level of greed, desire, fear, anger, laziness, or restlessness. These are the hindrances to transformation. You learn how to overcome them through your attention so that you do not become caught up or lost in them. You learn liberation in a very grounded way. As your concentration builds, and your body becomes more open and purified, you take that ability to be balanced and less caught by these energies, to where you have access to other domains of consciousness, and you use that same ability in those other domains.

Now when you enter the domain of pure light filled with love and kindness, you have learned how to do that without getting too attached. You can see that too as part of the passing show. With the same attitude you go into the hell realms which arise through you. Not only is there greed or anger, but there is the deepest fear of dissolution in the realms of birth, death, and rebirth. You learn how to pay attention to those without so much grasping and attachment. This is where you learn not just the content of the various realms of consciousness, which the psychedelics can take you to, but how to relate to all of those wisely. If I were to put any sentence in the interview in capitals it would be to emphasize TO NOT JUST SEE THE CONTENT OF THE MANY REALMS OF HEART, MIND, AND BODY, BUT LEARN HOW TO RELATE TO THEIR CONTENT WISELY, COMPASSIONATELY, AND FREELY.

Most of the *sadhanas* require years of discipline. They require training under a competent master, because one is entering realms where it is almost a given that you will become attached, afraid, or go off course. You need a good guide and a systematic training in how to relate to pleasure and pain skillfully. One of the deepest roots of our conditioning that causes bondage is the fear and aversion of what is painful and the grasping and attachment to what is pleasant. And so we go through the rounds of *samsara*, which is re-

peating experience, over and over and over again.

Lama Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche described it as a monkey jumping from window to window of a house. The windows being the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, sense of touch, and the mind – the six sense doors. From this one to that, liking this, disliking that, hopping from one window to another. Someone raised their hand and asked, “What happens if the monkey takes LSD?” Rinpoche said, “The monkey has already taken LSD. So he experienced some new sights, sounds, tastes and smells as a result of it – very powerful, compelling ones. He is still jumping around from window to window of the house because he hasn’t learned to relate to those powerful and compelling visions in a wise way.” He has not necessarily learned that from the visions alone, and as I said there may be a few exceptions. This is the point of view from systematic practice.

Suffering is caused by delusion and attachment, by grasping at anything that creates a sense of separation, or sense of separate self. The fundamental liberation that is available is not some particular state, but is the liberation of not being caught by the different lights, by the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows which arise through the senses.

It takes sitting down and hanging out with difficult or blissful states over and over again; with pains in the body, fear, rapture, light, darkness, and learning how to bring a balanced attention, a steadiness of heart, and a greatness of heart, to all of them. In this way it is possible to open to pain as the sorrow of the mother of the world, and open to joy as the light of the sun. See both of them as our birthright and our inheritance and that neither of them is really who we are. This is an elaboration on your question of *sadhana*.

How can we understand the healing effect of psychedelic experience from the perspective of Buddhist psychology and meditation?

Healing takes place in a number of ways but the most fundamental healing in Buddhist practice comes by bringing awareness to that which was twisted, knotted, or held in darkness in the body, feelings, thoughts; or in the domain of the views of mind. Through systematic meditation practice one brings the power of concentration and mindfulness to the knots and the deepest patterns of tension open up. Without even doing a physical yoga, through sitting meditation, the deepest kinds of body work release occur. The places of emotional fear and holding from this life or any past lives will arise. The kinds of thoughts where we get attached, the opinions and views, and finally, the very deepest kind of holding onto our sense of self being separate, better, equal, or worse than someone else.

Healing with psychedelics is much the same. Healing comes when you have a suitable and careful situation, and one’s unconscious is opened by the psychedelics. Maybe they will relive a past trauma, or experience the pain that

is held in the physical body from an accident, or an operation, or the tension from all their stored up anger comes into consciousness and begins to release. The healing effects come through the power of bringing into consciousness that which has been below the threshold of consciousness. Part of the difficulty with psychedelics, and even with meditation at some points, is that it comes too quickly and people get overwhelmed. The danger is then they may shut down immediately afterward. They will touch a place that is too fearful or too difficult. But there are healings that take place in that way on all those levels of body, feelings, and mind.

They can be initiatory agents as well.

They can open the heart and show that we are not separate, that we can touch the realms of the universal, the *brahmavihara*, of universal loving kindness and universal compassion. They open the mind and reveal that consciousness and mind create the world, that the physical reality is created out of consciousness and not the opposite. They show that reality can be filled with light and humor. They can show that there are realms of tremendous transcendent understanding, that there are realms of many different time scales, eternally slow or eternally rapid. There are also realms of the *avici* hells where there is extraordinary pain and seemingly no way out.

Especially today in the West, where we have developed such mastery over the material world, something very powerful is required to show that this level is not the only one.

That is what Ram Dass says in part. He thought it was fitting that in such a materialistic era the expression of holiness should come in the form of a pill, in a materialistic form. I see them as definitely having been useful as an initial opening for people, and at certain stages it may be possible to use them wisely, again within the constraints of *sila*. They can be easily abused if one is not careful about the set and setting. This is something we are just experimenting with.

Maybe we could shift a little and discuss psychedelic substances in the history of Buddhism. What do you think of Gordon Wasson's article about the last meal of the Buddha being mushrooms (Wasson 1982)?

I have never read or heard of that in any of the main line Buddhist traditions. In the *Pali Canon* Buddha ate not mushrooms but pork that had gone bad. In the *Mahayana Canon*, it was mushrooms because they are vegetarians. In the *Pali Canon* the Buddha took whatever was put in his begging bowl, whether it was meat or vegetable, as long as it was not killed for him. That statement that Wasson quotes from the *Digha Nikaya*, Buddha's last words before his meal:

*I see no one, Cunda, on earth nor in Mara's heaven,
nor in Brahma's heaven, among gods, and among men,
whom, when he has eaten it, that food could be properly assimilated,
save by a Tatagatha.*

This beautiful phrase is also said at other times in other sutras, not just when the food is bad. For example, there is a sutra where someone offers the Buddha a bowl of rice in a denigrated way and the Buddha says "no thank you." He will not receive it, and then he gives this exquisite sermon about what it means to be enlightened and that he does not need anything. The man's faith is fully restored and he says to Buddha, "I give it to you now with tremendous good heart and faith." And the Buddha takes the bowl and he says there is no one on earth who could eat this at this moment without it overwhelming them. So it really may be a symbolic statement.

It was a smith who served Buddha his last meal. This is an element that Wasson did not explore. In The Forge and the Crucible, Eliade (1978:89) points out the connection between blacksmiths, alchemists, and shamans in India and elsewhere. He writes: "This relation between shamans, heroes, and smiths is strongly supported in the epic poetry of central Asia. Metalworkers almost everywhere form groups apart. They are mysterious beings who must be isolated from the rest of the community. Smiths were thought to be masters of initiation, magical healers, shape shifters and so on throughout the ancient world."

It is interesting to look at Buddhist texts from the point of view of world mythologies. I have not looked at that *sutra* in that way. Anyway, in a simple way, there is not a lot that I have heard in any of the classic traditions that speak to the use of psychedelic substances.

I wonder if they might be part of a body of secret teachings.

Like *soma* or other substances? Honestly, my guess is not. Not to say that there might not be *lamas* in some corner of Tibet that have some substance they use. Most likely it would be in the Tantric tradition, which is also more recent and more closely connected to Hindu tantra which does use substances, at least modern Hindu tantra does. But having been around a lot of the Buddhist world, it is not in my experience yet, or in my knowledge. If it is secret, it is real secret. Most of the *lamas* do not know about them either.

I have come across a couple possible psychedelic references in the Buddhist tradition. One that interests me I found quite accidentally while looking for the Wasson article on Buddha's last meal. This article is "Brewing and Drinking the Beer of Enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism," by John Ardussi (1977) of Australian National University. It is a report on the ritual consumption of a beverage derived from grain which inspired spiritual songs (doha) and deep mystical insight. Milarepa was

an initiate of this tradition. Although they repeatedly say "beer" in the article, it must be an especially powerful beer to give rise to such experience. The songs indicate that this beer was different from the usual chang in Tibet. There may be an ergot fungus at work here.

Less psychedelic in terms of effects, but curiously related to the subject, is one of the incidents around the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. After the thirteenth Dalai Lama died his body was seated on a throne facing south while lamas awaited signs for the arrival of his successor. The first sign was that the head mysteriously turned to face east. The second sign was the appearance of a large star-shaped fungus on a pillar also to the east, indicating the direction where the fourteenth Dalai Lama would take birth. This story is told by the Dalai Lama in his autobiography *My Land and My People* (1962). There is nothing to say that this fungus was psychedelic but it is another auspicious association of fungi with worlds beyond the body.

Could you say something about past lives?

Past lives are a fundamental part of all the great eastern teachings. There is a misunderstanding if one feels they are the owner of them, that it is "I" who lives this life and "I" who will live the next life. That is not correct. It is not reincarnation, but rebirth. It is like an apple seed being planted, turning into an apple tree, a blossom, a fruit, and then a new apple seed. This seed is not the same as the previous apple seed, but it is conditioned by it. It is like a match lighting a candle which lights a lantern. Each flame is conditioned by the previous one, yet each completely different in other ways.

Past lives are a basic part of the Buddhist teachings and most significantly are included in the description of the Buddha's own enlightenment. He had three visions called "the three watches of the night." In the first, he saw his own past lives and he saw that it was a much bigger dance than he had ever imagined. In the second watch of the night he saw the birth and death of many beings according to the laws of karma; and how ignorant they were of the laws which govern the process of death and rebirth. If they acted kindly, they were reborn in favorable circumstances; acting in hellish ways, they were reborn in hellish circumstances. In the third watch of the night he saw what binds beings to the wheel of birth and death in an unconscious way. It operates between lives, but also operates from day to day and from moment to moment in our lives. This is the law of dependent origination. Based on the senses and consciousness coming together and creating experience there is unskillful grasping at the pleasant, trying to hold onto ever-changing experiences, a resistance to the painful ones, and a sense of self through that.

Then he said, "I see a way out" – which is the way of equilibrium of heart and mind in which one takes the arising experiences and sees them as not self, and does not grasp or resist them. Then he gave a whole systematic train-

ing that leads to human liberation and freedom.

So past and future lives are a big part of the Buddhist teaching, and all the realms that have come to light through psychedelic research are part of the Buddhist tradition. The archetypal realms, the heaven realms, the hell realms, the realm of the hungry ghosts, and so forth. There is nothing that I have seen in the realms that Grof and other modern psychedelic researchers describe that has not been charted by the breadth of Buddhist psychology. At the same time, Grof's cartography is comprehensive. It covers the research of modern psychedelics and describes most of the experiences that are traditionally written about in the context of Buddhist practices and attentional meditations. There is a great deal of overlap.

Why is it important to have rebirth as part of the Buddhist system?

It is not important. One can get liberated and come to great compassion and wisdom with no belief in past and future lives and no understanding of it. Birth and death actually takes place moment to moment in this very life. You can experience the actual death and rebirth of the body and mind moment after moment in the deeper states of meditation, as you can through other ways, psychedelics included. It comes as a flashing out of nothing, into being, and then disappearance.

The closest modern analogy is of single pictures on a movie screen that appear to make a continuous living action but in fact are one moment after another of the arising of consciousness, the experience of the object with it, and then the passing away. You can come to see that all of life is a process of birth and death, moment to moment through powerful training of the mind in concentration and intention.

Do you think it is possible to guide someone with psychedelics into that insight?

I am not sure that you can structure the psychedelic state so easily. It has its own laws of opening from what I have seen, and from descriptions – as this meditation practice does. There are ways you can support it. In meditation you can tell people not to be attached or not to resist things, to sit quite still. Similarly for people who want to use psychedelics you could train them in meditation so they would learn not to be as identified, which gives them a certain power. You could create the proper set and setting and you could remind them of it during the experience. But in terms of what material comes up, I do not think you have a lot of say about that in meditation or with psychedelics.

At a meeting held at the Harvard Divinity School in 1983, Dan Brown brought up the distinction between ecstasy and enstasis in a discussion about psychedelics. Ecstasy would be the flight of the soul from the body, "the soul's ecstatic journey through

the various cosmic regions, whereas Yoga pursues enstasis, final concentration of the spirit, and escape from the cosmos" (Eliade 1964:417). What do you think about this distinction with regard to psychedelic experience and meditation?

There is a very good article that Roland Fischer (1971) wrote while he was doing research at Johns Hopkins, on the spectrum of ways of altering consciousness, from high stimulation to low stimulation. Buddhist meditation goes the route of enstasy to ecstasy. There exist ecstatic practices in Buddhist meditation, but primarily they work not so much by turning up the volume, as by tuning the receiver – so you can receive what is going on in the unconscious and sensory level that is actually happening all the time. All these realms are available through more powerfully tuned awareness and concentration. Then you can get to realms where the body fills with light, you experience tremendous rapture and ecstasy, and are catapulted through all the realms of the heavens and hells.

I see psychedelics as one of the most fruitful areas of modern consciousness research. I would not be surprised if at some point there comes to be a useful marriage between some of these drugs and a systematic training or practice that I have described. That marriage will have to be based on an understanding of the ancient teachings, the laws of *karma*, responsibility, action, virtue, training the heart and the mind, and the laws of liberation.

One of the maps that is quite interesting from the *Vipassana* tradition is the *Progress of Insight* (Sayadaw 1978). One gains access to the progress of insight through the level of what is called *access concentration*, where thinking is pretty much stopped or slowed down. The mind can be steady on the object, the breath, or wherever it is placed, through systematic training. I am not talking about years to do this, although to stabilize it in one's life it takes years. Some people can reach access concentration in ten days or two weeks in intensive meditation practice. Most others will take a year or so, but lots of people can reach it in ten days or two weeks. From access concentration you go through a process based on a finer and finer awareness and more and more precise looking into the body and mind. Here you begin to see parallels to Stan Grof's death-rebirth sequence of the four stages.

First there is simply a recognition of the interaction of body and mind, a seeing of its conditioned mechanical nature. This arises and that follows, sight arises and consciousness comes with it. Then feeling arises, then liking or disliking. You see the very mechanical workings of all which we take to be our self-experience. Following that, you begin to see how non-self it is. How, in fact, by being mechanical, our experience is all conditional and impermanent. Whatever our experience, it arises for a moment and passes away. None of it is graspable. There comes a deep insight into the characteristics of impermanence, ungraspability, insubstantiality, and *dukkha*, the unsatisfactory

nature of it all. Then there comes a level of pseudo-nirvana which Dan Goleman (1977) describes succinctly in his book, *Varieties of Meditation Experience* – the arising of dangerous states of rapture, awareness, equanimity, and light. It requires training to not become attached to these states. None of these are it. They are simply the beginning openings of the light of consciousness.

In *The Progress of Insight*, Mahasi Sayadaw lists these states under “corruptions of insight.”

That is the translation, the corruptions of insight. Most people who have used psychedelics on their own have gotten lost at this place. It is a stick point, even in meditation with a good guide, and much more so in exploration with psychedelics. When one comes to the realization that none of those states are it (which is a profound insight), that you cannot attach to any of these as bringing liberation, then you start to observe these with detachment. That is the entry point into the deep process of death and rebirth that comes in the *Vipassana* tradition. The next stage is to see dissolution. Only after you have released those states of the mind and body filled with light, rapture, and equanimity, you see that everything, including those states, dissolves, and everywhere you look you see dissolution.

Based on that dissolution there arises tremendous fear. You look out the window and the window is scary. You look at someone and you see they could die any minute. You look at your body and there arise visions where pieces of the body fall off like hunks of meat. There are visions of many past lives that come at this stage, and all the ways that you have died before. There are visions of charlgrounds. The whole insecurity of life is revealed to you. Following this, based on dissolution and fear, there comes terror and misery and you say “I don’t want any part of it, it is too scary.” And you get caught for a moment, plopped into a new life, and forget all about it. And then some other dangerous thing happens, or you die again and want out.

Then there comes desire for deliverance, but it is so scary and so hard that at that point you say “I can’t do it. It is impossible. It is beyond me to let go that deeply. I want to go home.” This is called the “roll up the mat stage,” because you want to roll up your meditation mat and head home.

If you stay with it, finally there comes a full stabilization or balance of equanimity. It really requires a good guide because at the “roll up the mat” stage you do not believe you can go any further; it just seems impossible. Your teacher says, “stay with it, just observe that, be aware with equanimity and balance.” And finally, if you can observe even your desire for deliverance, and you let go, there comes this state of tremendous detachment and presentness combined. This would parallel Grof’s fourth stage. It is not a detachment of

not caring. It is a perfect equanimity in the middle of experience which sees it all as empty, and none of it as I, me, or mine. You see just arising and passing; and out of that the deepest kinds of insights and enlightenment can come.

Do the Vipassana stages include visions of planetary annihilation?

The annihilation initially tends to be quite personal and then it becomes as I said, universal. You see lifetime after lifetime. They could be planetary. I could imagine that arising.

I wanted to ask you about your feelings about where we are in the world, in terms of global ecology, politics?

I think about it often and I talk about it to a lot of people. We should do everything we know how to educate people and transform our own hearts so that we learn to overcome the forces of greed, prejudice, and fear that start wars. If we can not do it, how can we expect someone else to? We must use all the tools and disciplines, including the beneficial powers that may come through researching psychedelics. Certainly *spiritual sadhana* bears on the question of our planet. From the Buddhist point of view, one tries as best as possible, compassionately passionately, to save all beings, plants, and animals – even though it is taught, and one can touch the realms in meditation where this is true, that there are world systems that come into being and pass away. Our *dharma* and our work is to bring as much of our heart and as much of our consciousness to this earth as we can. Whether it lasts or not, I do not know, and we will not know until we see, but the earth too is impermanent. All these things are impermanent.

Is there any mention of life on other planets in Buddhist teachings?

There is not much talk in terms of the meditation but there are definitely writings on what are called world systems. It is said that the Buddha's mind was able to affect beings on tens of thousands of world systems.

Meaning actually physical places far, far away, as opposed to other-dimensional worlds?

Yes, physical places, and yes, that is in addition to all the realms of heaven and *Brahma* (which are different than heaven realms), hungry ghosts, *asuras*, and hell realms. There is as extensive a cosmology in Buddhism as anywhere that I have seen. There are equally extensive cosmologies – Egyptian, Sumerian, and shamanistic – but they are not quite as systematic.

Thank you for a most interesting talk.

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