

PSYCHEDELIC USE AND CONTEMPORARY BUDDHIST PRACTICE: PERSONAL INSIGHTS AND A PUBLIC DIALOGUE¹

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Kokyo: Let's start with a silent meditation. Maybe the most basic instruction that would be beneficial for any Buddhist meditation, or any psychedelic journey, would be to be very present and open and aware of what's happening to you in your body and mind. For a few minutes, we'll just sit. (Gong ends the meditation)

My name is Kokyo. I've been a Zen Buddhist priest for eighteen years in the tradition of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and San Francisco Zen Center, mostly living in monasteries or similar environments over the course of that time. Around the same time as I was beginning Zen practice, some psychedelic experiences were really formative for me. I have heard this is true of many people who end up getting into long-term Buddhist practice, that they begin their practice with a whole new way of seeing the world through such an experience. Often then they will put the experience aside, or they will integrate it into their practice in some way. For me, psychedelic experience is something that I really honor as an important part of my life and formation as a Buddhist practitioner. I think it was a significant condition for giving my whole life over to Buddhist practice.

Jim: I'm Jim and in 1961 I started working with psychedelics with Richard Alpert, now Ram Dass, and then with the International Foundation for Advanced Study in Menlo Park while I was earning a PhD in Psychology from Stanford.² Until I first

experienced the effects of psychedelics, I had no interest in Buddhist practice. Since then, I have become incredibly fond of Buddhist practical wisdom about consciousness in all of its manifestations. That we had to change rooms three times to fit in the larger than expected number of people who asked to attend suggests that we were right to focus on the interface between Buddhist practice and psychedelic experience. We are able to record and make the event available with support from MAPS.

Early explorers in the psychedelic realm, doing formal or informal research, became aware early on that there were experiences that apparently overlapped the core mystical experiences of many spiritual traditions. I recognized that my central concern is helping establish the proper place of altered states of consciousness in contemporary society. One arena where this is open for discussion is here, within Buddhism. Our intention this evening is to look at some basic practices of Buddhism and how those relate to psychedelic use.

Let me share some pertinent news. A group at Johns Hopkins has been doing a series of research studies, including several looking at the interaction of spiritual experience and psychedelics. The senior investigator, Roland Griffiths, writes, "We have a study in active planning stages to investigate the subjective, behavioral, and other enduring effects of psilocybin in long term meditators. We expect to start enrolling during the first quarter of 2013. Because of the many study visits over the course of four months, participants will be restricted to those who live within easy commuting distance of Johns Hopkins." That is the level of serious work that is going on. They're looking at it within the scientific paradigm, while we are looking at it within a Buddhist paradigm.

Kokyo: Let me set the stage a little from the Buddhist perspective. First of all Buddhism is, foremost, about kindness and care for each other. There's room for debate, of course; we want to challenge each other, but let's do it really kindly with loving speech tonight. Let's start this conversation with one of the major issues that people have in Buddhism around this topic, which is what we call the fifth precept. For those who don't know Buddhism, from the earliest days of the Buddha up to the present day, all Buddhist traditions have what we call ethical precepts. These are the foundations that Buddha taught for all other practices, practices of meditative absorption and wisdom of non-duality. Of all these practices, ethical precepts always come first. That

seems appropriate to me, and wonderful. This comes first and it comes last as well, because, in the end, a realization of non-duality is for the purpose of meeting others with love and compassion and non-separation.

The fifth precept goes back to early Buddhism. Lay people and monastics all agree on these precepts, as does the Zen tradition I'm a part of, as well as Vajrayana and Theravada; everyone agrees on these basic five precepts. They're about ethical conduct, about how we refrain from harming each other. They include not killing living beings, not taking what's not given, not misusing sexuality, and not lying or speaking falsely. The fifth one, as originally worded in the Pali and the Sanskrit, is "not to consume alcoholic beverages that lead to heedlessness or carelessness." I think it is interesting that the first four precepts are not explained. It's obvious why these actions are harmful to others, so in the original language they are very short. But the fifth precept is longer and it includes the reason for it. These precepts are ethical, the Buddha originally taught them as ways to avoid harming others. The Buddha could see, even 2500 years ago, that alcohol use can lead to breaking all the other precepts, that heedlessness or carelessness, leads to harming others. He just saw that pattern again and again. I think that in the Buddha's time, cannabis was being used in India. It's interesting that he didn't include that; he specifically says alcohol.

Now in modern America, we often say that it's much more complicated, we have all these other so-called intoxicants. We often interpret the fifth precept as not intoxicating body and mind, or not taking intoxicants. The main issue here is: does psychedelic use lead to harming others? Does it lead to carelessness and heedlessness? Do we start disrespecting others through having altered our mind in this way? So if we do use psychedelics, this would be the bottom line: Is it harmful to others or harmful to ourselves?

In early Buddhism, and in what we call the Theravada School, they interpret precepts very literally. If the Buddha taught it, then we do not drink a drop of alcohol. In Thailand, for example, many people follow this literally. In what we call Mahayana Buddhism, of which Zen is a part and Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhism is a part, there's a slightly different take on the precepts. They're more about skillful means and compassion. They are not necessarily followed completely literally. This is not just a modern thing; this goes back to ancient India and teachings on

the bodhisattva path where compassion is foremost. A common example is how we look at lying. In the Theravada tradition, no matter what, you just never lie. In the Mahayana bodhisattva tradition of skillful means, you say whatever is beneficial to people. For example, if an innocent person is hidden in your house and someone comes looking for them to kill them, and they ask, "is that person in your house?" you say, "no, they're not." You lie. The bodhisattva's vow, in this case, includes breaking the literal precept to help that person. That's the Mahayana spirit of precepts.

However, if we go against the literal meaning of the fifth precept regarding alcohol, or other kinds of drugs, or anything that alters the mind in any way, if we violate that on the grounds of compassion because we think this would be beneficial to others and to ourselves, we have to be very, very careful. It's quite easy to fool ourselves. That's one reason why the Mahayana, the Great Vehicle, is very challenging. It's more profound and difficult than literally following rules. We really have to ask deeply and honestly, check with ourselves, do we really feel this is beneficial? I think that's a good context to look at use of different substances. Do we think that it would be beneficial to yourself and—from a bodhisattva perspective, being beneficial to yourself is not the foremost thing—is it beneficial to our deeper unfolding of realization so that we can help others more fully? The bodhisattva's motivation to do anything is ideally based on compassion and helping others.

For example, some people might go into solitary retreat for years and years, and it might not look like that's compassionate work to help others. But, if they're doing it with a bodhisattva spirit, then they're doing that work on themselves in order to eventually benefit others—particularly to benefit others by the realization that we're really not separate. Anything that helps unfold this radical realization that we are not separate seems very beneficial. That's one way of thinking about this fifth precept as a bodhisattva. It's not license to do "whatever," it's more like a challenge to look really deeply; if we go against the literal meaning of a precept, we have to scrutinize ourselves about our intention. Basically, all the precepts are about intention: is this a beneficial intention for ourselves and others?

Jim: The serious question seems to be: Does having psychedelic experiences improve or degrade my practice? This isn't yet looking at the inner framework, or the life situation of the person.

This question, "What does it do to my practice," is still internal. I'd like to share some stories that have helped my understanding. This is an Alan Watts story that I heard this afternoon. He was one of the first great popularizers of American Buddhism. Within the Buddhist community there are two points of view about being too well known. Too much popularization dilutes and distorts; however, the spread of Buddhist ideas and a better understanding of practices allows more people to discover, taste and perhaps start a more serious practice. Near the end of his life Alan was asked by a young man, "Is it worthwhile to take LSD?" After pondering a bit, Alan replied, "That's like asking me if life is worthwhile." He continued, "For God's sake, don't take any street acid." (laughter) In his answer I see a level of Bodhisattvaism and a level of extreme practicality.

Next is a quote from the website DMT-Nexus: "I can say this after a lifetime of meditating and only two trips on. . . . done in the last ten days. Psychedelics are not just a trip. They don't disappear when the trip is over. The lasting effects are huge. They're bigger than the trips. The changes in me have been profound and seem substantially permanent. I agree with others. It is best to work on yourself using all available methods."

A comment from a gifted filmmaker friend: "I personally know a Zen monk, the holder of a lineage, who's practiced Zen for over thirty years. His one experience with MDMA was the only experience, as he reported it, that allowed a full opening of his heart."

And finally this from a professor, who never mentioned until he'd retired that he'd had a vast number of high dose LSD experiences. He wrote, "After the collective purification ended, I was spun into the radiance of what, using Buddhist vocabulary, I perceived to be the domain of diamond luminosity. I've known light many times before, but this was an exceptionally pure light. The domain captivated me so completely that it completely extinguished any interest I had in exploring the various subtle dimensions of our typical reality that had previously fascinated me. This was a different order of reality altogether. Its clarity was so overwhelming, its energy so pure, that returning to it quickly became my deepest agenda for future sessions. After my first initiation into this reality, it took five sessions of intense purification and surrender before the doors were opened again and I was returned to the diamond light, now experienced at a slightly deeper and even purer form."

For me, these reports bring up very practical questions: Are psychedelics beneficial in the sense of moving you towards living a life more like a Bodhisattva? Are they good for you right now?

Kokyo: One place we can go is to talk about what qualities of psychedelic experience could be in accord with Buddhism? Because, there are lots of things that happen in a psychedelic experience that, as you mentioned, have nothing to do with Buddhism. This might be a useful framework. A lot of people have written about this, trying to define different qualities. The one that is my favorite so far, which is pretty old, is Walter Pahnke and his so-called Good Friday Experiment.⁵ Jim probably knows some of the people involved in this. (Jim: I did.) It was in 1966 in a Christian setting. These were theological students, in a seminary school, on a Good Friday service; some were given psilocybin, some a placebo. Beforehand, the experimenters came up with a nine category typology of mystical states of consciousness, a list of qualities of mystical experience—all of which ended up happening for many of the students.

We usually don't use those words in Buddhism—"mystical experience" sounds a little too far out. But when I looked up "mystical" in the dictionary, it says: "having the nature of an individual and direct subjective communion with either God or with alternate reality." If we say, "direct communion with alternate reality" (not our usual conceptualized version of the world) that's very much in accord with Buddha-Dharma. In Buddhism, especially from the Mahayana bodhisattva perspective, practice is not about mystical experience or communion with alternate reality for its own sake. Even though that might be really wonderful, that's not the whole point in and of itself. The point of realizing non-duality, or communion with ultimate truth, is in part for personal liberation from one's own bondage, suffering and discontent. A basic Buddhist teaching is that the root of all our problems is the belief that things are separate, outside us, and things substantially exist in and of themselves. So the profound insight that those are actually illusions can release one from all kinds of suffering, if it's deeply realized and integrated into one's life. But going beyond this, in Mahayana Buddhism the purpose of that very insight is not even for our own liberation from suffering, it's so that we can really help others, and really meet others with complete openness and a sense of non-separation. That's the bodhisattva path.

So, there can be realization of non-duality, of non-separation, that people aren't who we think they are. And to realize that people aren't who we think they are is very beneficial to those people who we meet. So, with that in mind as the overarching goal of Mahayana Buddhism, here's some categories of some so-called mystical states of consciousness.

One is unity, both internal and external unity. Internal unity is defined as the "loss of usual sense impressions (relating to the external world) and a loss of self without becoming unconscious." In a way we lose our self when we go to sleep at night, but here we are talking about remaining fully conscious with no sense of "me" as a separate individual. "In the most complete experience, this consciousness is a pure awareness beyond empirical content, with no external or internal distinctions." And the awareness of oneness or unity or non-duality is experienced and remembered afterwards. That's internal unity. External unity finds unity with the external world perceived outwardly with the physical senses. "A sense of underlying oneness is felt behind the multiplicity." There is still an apparent external world but there's no sense of separation between our self and the objects of the world, even though we are perceiving objects; that is the external unity. All objects are part of the same undifferentiated unity.

Some other qualities are: Transcendence of time and space, both clock time and our own sense of personal past and future history: this quality may not be as important in Buddhism, but we do find Buddhist teachings about this.

Deeply felt positive mood, joy, blessedness or peace: again, Buddhism doesn't emphasize this so much unless it's the peace and joy of complete non-grasping. If a psychedelic experience is blissful, in and of itself, it may not be Dharma bliss. Any kind of joy or bliss that's conditioned in any way is not really the bliss of Nirvana. Buddha does say, "nirvana is bliss" though.

Sense of sacredness, non-rational intuitive experience of awe and wonder: we may not find this in the sutras exactly but that is definitely a quality of the experience of Buddha-Dharma.

Besides unity, another important quality is what Pahnke called objectivity and relativity. This is defined as "insightful knowledge or illumination felt at an intuitive, non-rational level and gained by direct experience" and "the certainty that such knowledge is truly real, in contrast to the feeling that the experience is a subjective delusion." Many people, including myself,

have felt this with psychedelics. Knowing that this experience is due to the influence of a chemical, one nevertheless knows that the realization of how things are at that time is not just a chemically induced illusion. The deep conviction that we aren't separate can be known in one's very bones, even though there might be a lot of other mental distortions happening. On the deepest level we are convinced of this, beyond any rational or conceptual thought.

Paradoxicality is another quality of mystical experience. For example, in Buddhism there are teachings like, "Form itself is emptiness; emptiness is form." It's paradoxical. It doesn't really make sense rationally, but during and after a mystical experience, it can make complete sense.

Related to that is ineffability, meaning the experience is beyond words. So if someone were to ask, "can you explain how this form really is emptiness?" in the end we have to say "no."

Transiency is the temporary nature of mystical experience. We do return to our usual experience of the world; maybe the Buddha never did, but for the most part it's a temporary experience.

There may be—lastly, and maybe most importantly—persisting positive changes in attitude and behavior after the experience is over: positive changes in attitude towards oneself, towards others, towards life and toward the mystical experience itself. Positive changes in relation to oneself could include becoming aware of personality traits that we haven't really noticed, unconscious problems, issues with yourself, or karmic tendencies as we would say in Buddhism; these are faced, seen directly, and dealt with. There are the "ultimate" realizations that could happen in a mystical experience, while this is more of a "conventional" realization, insight into our mundane karmic stuff—a very important part of Buddhist practice. Deep meditation practice and psychedelics can both bring up all this unconscious sludge of our karmic patterns and enable us to really look at it in a caring and therapeutic way.

Change relating to others is very important too: "more sensitivity, more tolerance, more real love, and more authenticity as a person by virtue of being more open and more one's true self with others." In both these cases, there can be lasting changes in a person, long after the experience fades. Changes towards life itself are particularly related to a deeper understanding of the meaning of life. Vocational commitment and appreciation of all life are strengthened. Finally there are the changes related

toward mystical experience itself. It's regarded as valuable and useful. It's easier to appreciate and understand others' mystical experiences and their "crazy talk" about mystical experience if we can say, "Oh, I understand; your experience may be somewhat different than mine but I relate to that and deeply honor how it was for you." So there is a framework to discuss what we're talking about here.

Jim: As I was listening to that wonderful list, I was going back into my own past, and making little check marks, and not making little check marks. Was that true for some of you? (Audience: Yes!) Were you checking off psychedelic experiences or times of Buddhist practice? Or, both? The question here is: Are these overlapping worlds for you?

We don't know why you're here, but one of the possibilities is that you have a question. The chances of getting an answer are slim. The problem with an answer is that it ends the discussion. What we will probably have is questions that will spark comments. Does someone have a question?

Audience: Either with psychedelics or practice, how do we get past the problem that, once we've seen something, we want to get back there, and we're grasping, and we're looking for it, and it's hard to get there because it's a state of innocence? Right? That's been my personal experience.

Kokyo: That's a great question. We have a wonderful experience that we feel is really beneficial, and then we wonder how do we get back there? It's a state of innocence, so any movement or wish to get back to that state of innocence is already not innocent. This is a major issue in Buddhist practice, maybe not talked about so much in psychedelic practice, but I think should be. That's what we call grasping or attachment, saying, "I gotta get that again." That is the definition of discontent in Buddhism.

Jim: It's not talked about in psychedelics enough. It is that wonderful paradox of, "I just did this and then this incredible wonderful thing happened. And, I want it again." The question all too often is: "What drug should I take, and do you have any?" instead of the questions we are asking.

I have a book out, *The Psychedelic Explorers Guide*. In an early chapter I say: After you have a major experience, if within the first six weeks after it you feel you have the need to get back there, what you are doing is avoiding working with something in yourself that has come up. (Sigh from the

audience) The advice is to wait another six weeks. Or even six months if you're serious. There's a tendency to say, it was fine out there; it's crummy here, so obviously the solution is to go back there. There may be a similar problem in Buddhism. If things aren't going well, meditate more. Let us say you have had an experience of bliss. What we now know is, at least with psychedelics, is that the first actually genuinely interesting and new research in decades discovered that blood flow to the parts of the brain that identify you as you diminishes.⁴ So literally, as we know from the meditative traditions, if you get out of the way, the universe brightens. Here is what interests me: if "I", Jim Fadiman, want that experience, and the I that wants it is going to be diminished, then if I get it, "I" can't get it. The me that needs to get out of the way can never get it. But maybe, of course, if I had the right psychedelic (laughter) or the new ones maybe (laughter), it would be different. You see the problem.

Kokyo: A quote that comes to mind from Dogen Zenji, the founder of our Japanese Zen tradition, says, "Buddha-Dharma cannot be realized by a person . . . Only a Buddha can realize Buddha-Dharma."

Jim: The question has to remain as a question. And again: What's the purpose of practice if that practice is psychedelic or Buddhist? Another question is, most people are probably not going to have this highest and best experience as Buddha did. Even if they do, they probably can't retain it all. Let me ask a question: Whatever that highest and most amazing experience is, let's call it unity, where there is no division between you and the universe, and that you understand that there's no distinctions of time and space, and that while your personality and body are mortal, you're not. How many people have actually experienced that? (looking around, many raised hands) So, here we are, everybody came back. Many of the people I have guided have this question when they come back. "Why did I come back into this body, with all of its neurotic problems? When I was out there, it was clear that I was not necessarily attached to it."

I recalled being appalled when I returned from just such an experience, and found that I was a graduate student in psychology at Stanford, of all places. It seemed clear to me then, that this could not be the best place to work out my particular karmic destiny. It is useful to keep it as a question. It

leads to asking: What is the motivation for what I'm doing? A deeper question is: Who is it that has such motivation? And perhaps below that: What is it that propels me to ask these questions? And we can keep going down.

Kokyo:

Particularly in Mahayana Buddhism, we talk about the realization of a Buddha, and the mode of life that we want to keep in mind, as the integration of what we call the ultimate truth and the conventional truth. They are not separate. In ultimate truth there is no division, just complete unity; there's no self and no other. Emptiness. The conventional truth is where there is the appearance of self and other, the appearance of landing at Stanford, and being me with a certain name and all that. Those two truths are not separate: the conventional and the ultimate truth. If you get stuck in wanting to live just in the ultimate, that's not the way. You can't actually relate to anybody there, because there isn't anybody. (laughter) Of course, most of us live in the conventional truth, the conventional world, almost all the time. We need to realize the ultimate truth but as Nagarjuna, one of the great Indian ancestors, says, "in order to realize the ultimate truth you must be completely grounded in the conventional truth" which means the precepts of ethical conduct, and so on. If we neglect how we are taking care of ourselves and other people, then it is actually impossible to realize the ultimate truth, at least in the view of Buddhism. Now, in the psychedelic world, some of us might say, "let's bypass the conventional and go straight to the ultimate." This can be a problem.

Jim:

There is a wonderful term called "spiritual bypass." That's when you realize you're God, and you're still screwed up. (laughter) From the psychedelic point of view, that seems unnecessary. It's the desire to see the view from the mountain's peak. Many people say it's necessary to climb it gradually. Other people have said, well, I'd like to take a helicopter to the top and look around and see if it's worth that entire climb. Alan Watts had a great book called "This Is It." Then he wrote another book, because that wasn't it, after all. (laughter) And so, there we are.

Audience:

I wanted to ask about the practice. In your experience and the experience of people in the room, how can psychedelics be used as a practice, as an on-going process of spiritual maturation?

Jim: His question was also addressed to the room. Let's do instant research: How many of you would say that, over the years, you have used psychedelics as a practice of spiritual maturation? (Over half)

Kokyo: Maybe part of that question is implying that there are two different types of psychedelic use especially related to Buddhism. I think we could look at an initial opening, like you have an insight into non-separation for example, and then you pick up a meditation practice or some other method to sustain and develop that insight. As Jim was saying, you take the helicopter to the top of the mountain and you see what's possible. You see things really aren't the way they seem and then you come back to the bottom. Then you can work on the climb with these traditional practices of meditation and so on. Another use would be to use psychedelics as an ongoing path of practice.

Audience: Could be. Also, if anyone has had the experience of using psychedelics in a more methodical way, could they share how they've kept themselves honest?

Kokyo: That's interesting. Psychedelics as a spiritual path in and of itself with no other meditation or anything.

Audience: This question fits so well with everything that has been said in the first part. Every time you take a psychedelic, you experience something. It's mostly not boring. You talk about it with your friends. It was good or bad or horrific, whatever. You have something that you grasp with your conscious mind. But you mentioned Dogen. And if I understand him right, you are stuck when you think that something you can grasp with the conscious mind is something important. It is a problem if you think that by searching for insight on a spiritual path in the external, by taking a substance or even accumulating experience, can work.

Kokyo: So the question is with an initial experience, you "see" a certain realm of reality—you "see" it; just that very language implies there may be a subtle duality there, that you're seeing "something." It might be very, very subtle but the emphasis is on seeing a realm. In my tradition of Soto Zen, Dogen Zenji criticized the term "kensho," which means seeing the nature of reality, seeing nature, seeing Buddha Nature. This is usually said to be the goal in Rinzai Zen, seeing your nature.

Dogen, in his subtly non-dual way, was critical of that term for the very reason you are talking about. It's putting

something out there. Dogen is always talking about manifestation or becoming. So you might say that it is not a matter of seeing your true nature. It's about becoming that, and manifesting your true nature, which you might not even realize is happening as some objective thing.

It may be possible with psychedelic use that it's less about "seeing" something and more that you realize you are "manifesting." In fact, as I understand it, the word "psychedelic" literally means "mind manifesting." And it may be with psychedelics that you want to see something again, but you might instead want to manifest again—which relates to this issue of wanting to repeat something again. Did that address your question some?

Audience: One short comment. A teacher once said: "All this talk about enlightenment. It's as if someone would fall asleep and then scream out 'Oh, I'm asleep.'" It's not going to happen. (laughter) You're just asleep without knowing it.

Kokyo: It's easy to make enlightenment into something and then try to get it.

Jim: You mean it's not a thing? It's not a destination? It's not a realization that colors the rest of your life? It's not a sense of awareness that pervades more and more of your life?

Many years ago, shortly after the Pahnke study, there was a wonderful commentary in a Quaker magazine that made the case that only someone who had done a lot of spiritual work, and a lot of preparation and had mostly obeyed the precepts, would benefit from a psychedelic experiences. For the spiritually developed person, it could accelerate the direction that you were already going, and that it was best in the well-prepared mind. And then he said, "Of course, maybe God is actually not limited by that. It may be that I am just making this all up because that is what a good Quaker would say. And maybe, people can actually become spiritually developed totally without any of the things that I 'know' to be necessary." His conclusion was that these experiences were not easily put into the pigeonholes of spiritual or psychological development and, of course, the wide variety of other uses. We are focusing on transpersonal use, to pass through and beyond the personality. When you realize that "you" are larger than your personality. In fact, your identity, as we usually use the term, is actually only a subsystem of self. To the extent that is real for you, its turmoil becomes less fascinating and less

important. If you listen to Ram Dass, he's saying in many different ways, that his personality is just as neurotic as ever, but it really doesn't bother him. (laughter)

We're asking what's the purpose of psychedelic experience? When is it appropriate? When is the correct time in one's life to do such and such? Those questions must occur in Buddhist practice as well, since most of the time, even the most serious meditators are not meditating, and even the most determined users I know are not taking psychedelics on a daily basis.

There is something about timing, what the Sufis call, "a sense of occasion," and what therapists call, "a teachable moment." The psychedelic world lacks enough people whose work is helping others, such as (turning to Kokyo) in the Zen tradition. You have devoted your life, not to work on yourself, but to working on yourself in the service of others. Most people who take psychedelics don't say that. They do say that they are working on themselves, and want to make the world a better place. But there is still a lot of self that is primary, and that may be a difference.

Kokyo: I was just thinking, maybe this is another angle here, about the function of both of these—what can we call them? Traditions? Disciplines?—What's a word that we can use for psychedelic "practice" and Buddhist practices?

Audience: Awakening technologies. (laughter)

Audience: A hybrid shamanic experience.

Jim: Hybrid Shamanic Experience. Very nice.

Kokyo: Myron Stolaroff in his article "Are Psychedelics Useful in Buddhism?"⁶ said that another thing they both do is dissolve mindsets. Any kind of fixed mind set, cultural and societal assumptions—a lot of things we just take for granted—one can see through, with both of these awakening technologies. And that's part of the reason, some people have theorized, why most of these substances are illegal, because they threaten the very fabric of society as we know it.

There were times in the Buddhist tradition where it was seen that Buddhist practice was a threat to society because it was undermining the status quo, the way things are set up. The Buddha himself sort of dropped out of society, right? He came up with this whole other way of living that, from a certain point of view, is dangerous to society.

Jim:

Kathy Speeth, a gifted teacher, had a wonderful saying, "Enlightenment is always a crime." What she was saying is that every culture wants to remain stable, and wants its institutions to be supported and believed in. Enlightenment, from any tradition, cuts through that. What she was pointing out is that it is culturally correct to define enlightenment as a crime.

However, if you play it right and you say: "Well, we don't really get enlightened until after a really long time, and we are harmless" (laughter), you are left alone. In the sixties we did not understand that. We'd say: "We're getting enlightened over the weekend and we'll get back to you." (laughter) When we came back, we'd say, we don't like any of your institutions. (laughter) We don't like war anymore, because killing people is like taking a hammer to your thumb. And, we've been looking at education too. (laughter) And, don't even bring up banks. And what we found, at least in the sixties, is everyone reacted as expected, which amazed us. The culture said that you're attacking what makes my life work. I don't like whatever it is you're doing and I intend to stop it! We said, it is not us, it is what we learned from the mushrooms. The culture then made those mushrooms illegal. At which point there was a snicker in the plant world. Psilocybin mushrooms responded by growing everywhere, for example, between the runways at the Vancouver International Airport.

A question that has come up is, to what extent is psychedelic use not necessarily a practice or recreational, but is presenting an agenda that is different from the agenda of personal or even societal transformation?

Next week I will be presenting at a Spirit-Plant-Medicine Conference in Canada. I feel that people become very, very attached to a single plant, the way one is attached to one's lineage or one's faith. What they say is that the plant itself is a teacher and has strong views on how people should behave. This is the opposite of some of my bio-chemically hip friends who say, "If it is 2c.-anything, I'll try it." (laughter) We are seeing some differentiation between user groups that we have never seen before. I'm wondering whether Buddhism is going to now have to deal with this new phenomenon as well—whether people who have plant-based experiences are being attracted to more methodical and gradual practices.

Kokyo: Another thought that comes to mind, shifting again a little bit, is that I want to honor the people who have spoken against psychedelics, to play the devil's advocate, since the Buddhist path is to be open to all points of view. We might not have anybody in this category in this room, because they weren't interested in this discussion, but there were people via Facebook, and so on, who implied that they used psychedelics quite a bit, and they never had these positive transformative insightful experiences. Or, if they did, they blocked them out at some point.

I want to honor that that may be the case. That the effects may be, like one person said, no more than "watching cartoons in the mind." Maybe that's all there is to it. If so, we can ask, if one is venturing into this kind of experiment, how can it be a positive transformational event? It may have to do a lot with the mindset, which in Buddhist terms we'd call "intention," and second, the setting or circumstances. Even in the sixties, those were the main factors. It doesn't necessarily have to do with what kind of drug, and what size dose, but set and setting very much determine the experience. Jim, in your book, you talk about what makes it more likely to be a positive experience.

Jim: While my book includes ways to minimize negative outcomes and increase the likelihood of positive ones, I am most vocal in recommending the use of a skilled guide. The purpose of a guide is not to "direct you," but when you need help, to assist you. It as if you were in Africa on a safari and the guide takes you to a place where you are more likely to see animals. And he may say, "You see that rhinoceros coming towards us? You do whatever you want but I recommend standing behind this tree." (laughter)

Guides aid you in entering spaces you wouldn't go to on your own.

In the sixties we talked a lot about set and setting, or intention and ambiance. We now add to that list: What's the substance? What's the dosage? Who is the sitter or the guide? And also, what is the post situation? The final question is about integration. Even very wonderful experiences, if not successfully integrated, may not be of any lasting value.

I've a friend whose life was not working at all. Now and then, he would drink alcohol until he was unconscious. He did not drink to be more social. It was not for fun. It was his

way to get as close to oblivion as possible. Yet I knew he'd used psychedelics. I asked, "What happens when you take psychedelics?" He said, "I had wonderful experiences. They were so happy and blissful." He went on: "When I'd come down, the world was as stinking as ever." I thought but did not say, Gee! When I come down the world is better than ever. There was a gap we couldn't get across.

I try not to talk about "psychedelics." I try not to talk about "drugs." I try to talk about psychedelic experiences because that includes set and setting and substance and dosage and sitter and situation. That seems critical in understanding any given experience. Kokyo, you're pointing out that within meditation there are many of the same issues.

Kokyo: Guide, set, and setting—all of those are important in Buddhist practice.

Audience: My question is this: What we've been skirting around, it seems to me, is the idea of a ritual based on ingested psychedelics, a structured ritual with a leader and a set and setting with integration afterwards. But we haven't really talked about that.

Jim: Ritual use is also increasing. There are several churches in the U.S. that have Ayahuasca as a central sacrament, in spite of enormous hassling from the federal government. They have rituals as clear as any rituals you'll find in an Episcopal church. These churches promote mental and spiritual health. People have researched church members versus a matched population. Results? Church members are healthier, smarter and saner than the control groups.

I know a local group, who have stayed under the radar and worked ritually with psychedelics for thirty years. They are now into the second generation as members' children have joined. One may choose to use psychedelics, not at all in the terms we have been discussing. It may just be to become healthier and smarter or kinder. It may be other things. What we are seeing in this proliferation of uses and possibilities, including accelerating Buddhist practice, are that we have moved beyond the sixties. Then, it was often wide-eyed exploration, now it is becoming more and more focused.

Kokyo: To add to the discussion about ritual setting for psychedelics, and to bring Buddhism and psychedelics together, you might be surprised that there's an experiment scheduled for next summer by a friend of mine. Vanja Palmers is the senior

Dharma heir of Kobun Chino Roshi, who taught at Santa Cruz Zen Center many years ago. Vanja is a long-time very serious Zen practitioner and priest. He lives in Switzerland most of the time, and he got permission from the Swiss government to do an experiment during a sesshin. "Sesshin" means to collect the mind, to gather the mind. It's the Zen name for an intensive meditation retreat. In a 5-day sesshin, you're meditating basically all day, completely in silence; from 4 or 5 am until 9 pm there is sitting meditation, interspersed with walking meditation. The experiment will be that on the fourth day of sesshin, twenty people will take a medium dose of psilocybin, and twenty won't, in a double-blind experiment, and basically see what happens—particularly around mystical experience. Vanja is hand selecting the people, inviting particular long-time experienced meditators, who ideally also have some experience with psychedelics. He's doing interviews with them beforehand and following up afterwards for at least six months, and maybe longer. In the "Good Friday Experiment" in the Christian tradition that I mentioned earlier, they followed up with the subjects six months later, to see how many of the changes had lasted.⁶ And they admitted that six months is not very long. So in this case they may check after six months, maybe longer, to interview people regarding the lasting effects of the experience.

This may be the furthest that this kind of experiment has gone, integrating serious intensive Buddhist meditation with psychedelics. Part of this particular experiment is a medium dose. People often have mystical non-dual experiences with a high dose but without meditation. So part of the proposal of the experiment is to see if after four days of all-day meditation, can a similar thing happen with a smaller dose? Stay tuned for the results!

Jim:

This approved Swiss study is important, not because it is creative and smartly done, but because it's breaking a scientific boundary. So much of the current research, the current, "psychedelic renaissance" is about medical uses, repairing damaged people. Researchers are picking areas where modern medicine has not been successful. These include Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, cluster headaches, anxiety while dying of cancer, conditions the medical profession doesn't like because there are no good conventional treatments. That's painful for everybody, so when psychedelic people

move into those areas, nobody minds. But when you cross the boundary between medical into spiritual, you're making a huge cultural leap because now a secular government is supporting spiritual development.

We really haven't had that. In this country, as even the spiritual studies are kept quasi-medical, even when they do these experiments, like those at Johns Hopkins on spiritual breakthroughs, it doesn't get submitted to religion journals, but to journals like Psychopharmacology, still dressed as medical science.

The Swiss study, by comparison, cuts right across what we're doing tonight, looking at to what extent does a spiritual tradition interact favorably or unfavorably with psychedelic experience? I recommend a book, "The Secret Drugs of Buddhism" by Michael Crowley, a Sanskrit and Tibetan scholar. It is not about contemporary secret zendos in Boulder or Aspen. His research describes how early Vajrayana was rooted in rituals using psychedelics. It may be that one of the major branches of Buddhism arose from a psychedelic base, adding a historical dimension to our considerations.

Another friend, Frederick Dunnaway, a botanist and a Sufi scholar, has several long articles on psychedelic use within Sufism, another tradition that has its equivalent of the fifth precept, no drinking. We are re-discovering the interaction within religious traditions, in this case, with early Islam and early Buddhism, and psychedelic plants. Psychedelic anthropologists say it is hard to find a culture that didn't eventually make use of the psychedelic plants and mushrooms that grew in their area. We are still doing that. The largest *amanita muscaria* mushroom I've ever seen grew in back of a swimming pool in Santa Cruz. (laughter) There are no simple answers to any of the things we are talking about. Kokyo and I are in agreement: It is about set and setting; it is about intention; it is about teachers. And it is about being aware that one can make mistakes, and that one should take care of oneself. It is about being responsible.

Audience: I have a question about Buddhism. Could you compare something like the jhana states with the psychedelic experience?

Kokyo: The jhanas are different levels of concentration, or states of absorption, particularly emphasized in Theravada Buddhism. They are deepening levels of withdrawal from the external world, or more simply, becoming more and more absorbed

in non-dual concentration. These jhanic states were taught by the Buddha, not as enlightenment itself, not as insight, but actually as concentration practices to develop a stable body and mind in order for insight to arrive. The jhanas are not the main point. They are part of the path, and many traditions don't practice them methodically. The practice of withdrawal from the external sensory world is one way to develop these jhanas.

That's often the case with psychedelics as well. Part of the setting, with psychedelics, is whether the eyes are opened or closed—what Pahnke called internal unity versus external unity. With eyes closed, there can be an internal unity experience, a whole internal world going on, where one is not really relating to objects. With eyes open, one is still visually relating to the apparently external world. Then there's the unity of self and sensory objects, an experience that happens in a so-called mystical experience. Jhana is maybe more related to the inner unity as opposed to the external unity.

Jim: Several people suggested that Kokyo and I might argue tonight. That is the wrong paradigm. The question we'd come up with was: How can we support each other? And how can we (motioning to everyone in the audience) support each other?

Audience: Can you talk about the role of satsang in Buddhism and how community can be used in the integration process in the psychedelic experience?

Kokyo: In Buddhism, sangha is the spiritual community and it's very important, one of the refuges to rely on. We rely on the spiritual community to help sustain our practice and encourage us. So practice is not just an individual thing; we do it together. Especially in the Zen tradition, meditation practice and retreats are very much a group thing. We're in silence, but in very close quarters, sitting right together, and it's very interactive, with lots of rituals. We serve food to each other in very particular ways in the silence.

The spiritual community in Buddhism is very important, because part of what we're realizing through practice is non-separation and intimacy. The realization is that we're all completely intimate beyond our imagination. Psychedelic work tends to be more individual. There's a way in which, even if people are tripping together, it tends to be more individual. On the other hand, I have had experiences with psychedelics that were excruciatingly intimate; for example,

at a Grateful Dead Concert. (laughter) We are one being! (laughter) That is one example of a communal ritual that has been commonly used in the tradition. (laughter)

Jim:

There are communities that help their members with integration. The one that is most developed is the Burner community. Burning Man is one of the closest replacements we have to Grateful Dead concerts, and it lasts for a week, not an evening. There are also small spontaneous groups. I'm thinking of a group of undergraduates I know who formed a community and helped one of their friends kick a bad drug habit. The Santo Daime and the Native American Church are spiritually based communities. There are human communities building out from the plant communities. That seems to be a healthy development.

If you look at this stage of development, and compare it to Buddhism in the first fifty years after Buddha's death, which is where we are with psychedelics in this country, we may be doing all right. Buddhists have had a lot more time to work out some of the problems.

It's not easy to go beyond the invisible boundaries of one's culture. One of the wonderful things about meditation is that it's not about anything and thus neither for nor against anything either. Done well, it is culture-free; done better, it is personality-free.

We began this evening not knowing where we were going, but we got there. We arrived partly, because we were in harmony, but even more so because of the calm and clarity and non-judgmental attention that we gave one another. That almost all of you have used psychedelics and worked with Buddhist practices is a large part of why this went so well.

Kokyo:

May we all stay connected and realize our intimacy. As we often do at the end of Dharma events, let's dedicate the merit, any positive energy that was generated by this discussion, to the benefit of all beings, to the awakening and freedom of all beings.

I'd like to finish with a classic quote from Dogen Zenji, the Japanese founder of Soto Zen: "To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind, as well as the body and minds of others, drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no trace continues endlessly."

Note: The best (and only) book devoted to these issues is Badiner, Allan Hunt and Grey, Alex (editors), *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*. Chronicle Books, 2002. A new expanded edition is being prepared.

NOTES

1. The chapter is an edited version of a public event; the full evening was videoed and is available on YouTube. Part 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYn-heKnpmGs>, Part 2 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyeYH4xKoaY>, Part 3 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcmwZdHA-iE>.

2. A description of these early experiences and early research can be found in *Higher Wisdom: Elders Explore the Continuing Impact of Psychedelics*. Eds., Roger Walsh & Charles Grob, Albany, State of New York University Press, 2005, pp. 24–45 and an edited version in *The Psychedelic Explorer's Guide: Safe, Therapeutic and Sacred Journeys*, Rochester VT, Park/Street Press, 2011, pp. 228–240.

3. Pahnke, Walter N. Drugs and Mysticism. *The International Journal of Parapsychology*, Vol. VIII, No. 2, Spring 1966, pp. 295–313.

4. Carhart-Harris, R. L. Fielding, A., Nutt, D. J. et al., Neural Correlates of the Psychedelic State as Determined by fMRI Studies with Psilocybin. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA*, Vol. 109, No. 6, 2012, pp. 2138.

5. Stolaroff, Myron J. Are Psychedelics Useful in the Practice of Buddhism? *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 39, No. 1, Winter 1999, pp. 60–80.

6. There was also a 25-year follow-up study with most of the participants. Doblin, R. "Good Friday Experiment": A Long-Term Follow-Up and Methodological Critique. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1991, pp. 1–25.