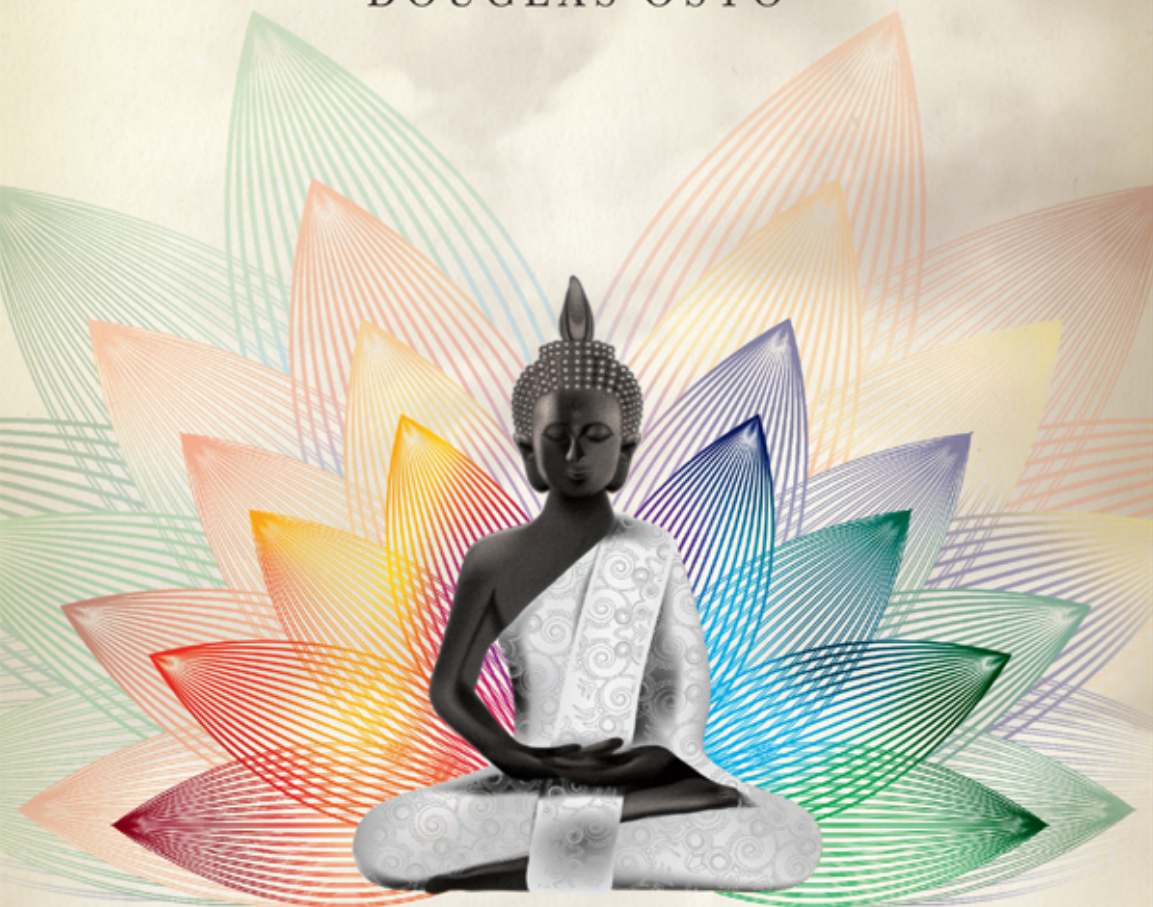


DOUGLAS OSTO



# ALTERED STATES



*Buddhism and Psychedelic  
Spirituality in America*

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midnight onward flowers in high noon





*For my children.*

Pounded as it is between  
the Hammer of Fate and the Anvil of Time,  
May my life be forged into a work of art  
worthy of my descendants' memory.

*Amor Fati!*





Then the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra put forth his right hand and placed it upon the head of Sudhana, the merchant's son. . . . In the very next moment . . . Sudhana realized gateways into trance equal in number to the atoms in all Buddha lands. Through every single trance he penetrated oceans of world realms equal in number to the atoms in all Buddha lands and accumulated previously unseen requisites for omniscience equal in number to the atoms in all Buddha lands. . . .

Then the Great Being, the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, said this to Sudhana, the merchant's son: "O Son of Good Family, did you see my miracle?"

Sudhana said, "I saw, Noble One."

—*The Supreme Array Scripture*

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## PREFACE

*Man's greatest dread is the expansion of consciousness.*

—Henry Miller, *Time of the Assassins: A Study of Rimbaud*

**T**HIS BOOK does not promote breaking the law of any land; nor does it demonize, denigrate, or dismiss anyone's religious/spiritual beliefs or practices. As an American born and bred, I have a strong conviction in the individual's right to freedom of religion. As far as my political views concerning the use of psychoactive substances, I describe myself as libertarian. I believe every adult individual's body is her own sovereign domain; thus every rational person has a right to do whatever she wants to her body without the interference of a paternalistic government legislating what is in her best interests. Also, in regard to morality, my Catholic upbringing has convinced me of the supremacy of one's individual conscience. And legality and morality are clearly different things. For example, many today (myself included) would regard the persecution of someone for his sexual orientation or possession of another human being as someone's property to be immoral acts. However, in the United Kingdom, for example, homosexuality was punishable as a crime until 1967, and slavery was legal in parts of the Empire until 1843.

It should be clear from the above comments that I am not against the use of psychoactive substances for religious/spiritual purposes, regardless of whether such use is deemed "illegal" by some governments. Since I believe an individual's freedom to religion, absolute

sovereignty of her own body, and individual conscience each trump any current laws of the land, I find arguments against the religious use of psychoactives based on the legal status of these substances unconvincing. Moreover, claims that someone should not practice his religion because it could be “dangerous” to his health are equally unconvincing. First, the real health risks of the classic psychedelics appear minimal when compared to the risks of using legal drugs such as alcohol and tobacco. Second, legislating against a person’s or group’s religion out of concern for their health is paternalistic in the extreme. Early Christianity was both illegal and hazardous to your health if you lived in the Roman Empire. And yet, as Tertullian wrote, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.” In other words, without the outlawed and dangerous activities of the early Christians, Christianity would not be a world religion today.

World religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, as well as new religious movements, commonly begin with charismatic leaders, who undergo nonordinary experiences through altered states of consciousness and induce those states in others. These altered states by their very nature exceed the bounds of reason and challenge existing paradigms. We as human beings tend to fear the novel, strange, weird, and extraordinary. Thus it is not surprising that the status quo often is highly suspect of new religious movements, or “cults,” and generally attempts to suppress them, often with extreme prejudice. However, fear is not our only instinct, and hopefully not our strongest. We are also naturally curious animals and seem to have an innate drive to transcend our human condition. Religion, I would maintain, has always played the handmaid to this transcendence.

In the mid-twentieth century within the United States of America a new chemical mysticism emerged, catalyzed by powerful psychoactive substances such as LSD-25, psilocybin, and mescaline. At the same time, Buddhism, a new religion imported from “the East,” was gaining converts and transforming in the process into new, modern Western forms. These two new religions, one homegrown and one imported, took root, bringing along their own leaders and means to achieve new altered states of consciousness. This book is the story of how Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality coemerged, mutually influenced each other, and forever changed the religious landscape of America.

We Americans have always prided ourselves on our freedom, and religious freedom is a cornerstone upon which this great nation was founded. It behooves all Americans to overcome our fears and prejudices of other people's religions so that the integrity of the principle of religious freedom is maintained. To outlaw anyone's religion, which is not a proven threat to the well-being and common good of the nation, is to threaten the freedom of any of us to practice our religion. And if you believe, as Thomas Jefferson did, "that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship,"<sup>1</sup> then we must protect this freedom at all costs, even if it means protecting the rights of someone to practice a religion we do not necessarily like or agree with, or perhaps even fear.



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Without the generosity of the individuals who participated in my research, who often shared the most intimate details of their personal spiritual journeys, this study would not have been possible. I feel both a deep gratitude toward all the research participants who gave their



## XVI ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

time and energy to helping make this book possible, and a strong sense of responsibility to share their stories in the following pages in a respectful and empathic manner.

Finally, my deepest gratitude and love go out to the special women in my life: Krystal, Ayya, Marie, Joanne, and Doreen.

# INTRODUCTION

*Are you experienced?*

—Jimi Hendrix

**I**N THE following pages I investigate the intersection of two modern modes of religious expression in the United States: convert Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality. In the popular imagination, at least, the practice of Buddhism and the use of psychedelics have something in common. The origins of this perceived connection can be traced back to the American counterculture of the 1960s. Although part of the folklore about the origins of American Buddhism and an important aspect of American Buddhist convert culture, psychedelic use has not been addressed to date in a serious and scholarly fashion. Doubtlessly some of the reasons for this have to do with cultural and social prejudices against investigating the nonmedical use of drugs. In a recent article, Sarah Shortall offers an insightful comment on the origins of this bias: “If psychedelic drug culture has been deemed relatively insignificant, this suggests that historians have tended to accept dominant cultural narratives defining non-medical drug use as escapist or artificial, and therefore as historically and politically irrelevant.”<sup>1</sup>

In a similar fashion, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, in “Entheogenic Esotericism,” investigates the cultural prejudices against the study of the religious use of psychoactive substances. He astutely observes that

the very notion of entheogenic<sup>2</sup> religion as a category in scholarly research finds itself at a strategic disadvantage from the outset. It is simply very difficult for us to look at the relevant religious beliefs and practices from a neutral and non-judgemental point of view, for in the very act of being observed—that is, even prior to any conscious attempt on our part to apply any theoretical perspective—they already appear to us pre-categorized in the terms of our own cultural conditioning. Almost inevitably, they are perceived as pertaining to a negative “waste-basket category” of otherness associated with a strange assortment of “magical,” “pagan,” “superstitious” or “irrational” beliefs; and as such, they are automatically seen as different from “genuine” or “serious” forms of religion. The “drugs” category further causes them to be associated with hedonistic, manipulative, irresponsible, or downright criminal attitudes, so that claims of religious legitimacy are weakened even further.<sup>3</sup>

By investigating the origins and interactions of convert Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality within the United States, this book aims in part to undermine the prejudicial outlook of the hegemonic cultural discourse on the nonmedical use of drugs, and to shed light on new forms of alternative American spirituality.

A significant portion of this study involves information obtained through formal interviews with twenty-nine individuals in person, through the Internet via Skype software, and through e-mail exchanges from September 2010 to December 2011. Additional data were collected from an online survey titled “Attitudes Toward Psychoactive Substances Among American Buddhists” through the SurveyMonkey website. The survey was open from July 19, 2010, to July 26, 2011, and 196 people responded to it. While a number of individuals I interviewed are well-known figures in the American Buddhist subculture and/or the American psychedelic subculture, many are not and have chosen to remain anonymous. Both types of interviewees provided information I found valuable and illuminating. The experiences, opinions, and beliefs of well-known or public figures no doubt play an important role in defining a subculture’s identity, values, and ethos, while the anonymous respondents were at liberty to share intimate details of their personal experiences and understandings concerning Buddhism, psyche-

delics, and the relations they see between the two. My sampling for the survey and the interviews was “purposive” or “selective” in the sense that individuals and groups were not chosen randomly from among American Buddhists, but rather were targeted because they have or have had an interest and/or involvement with Buddhism and use or have used psychedelics, particularly for spiritual/religious purposes. Thus, this book is not about American Buddhism in general, but is primarily concerned with a selective group within American Buddhism that represents the intersection and crossover of American convert Buddhists and psychedelic spiritualists.

I view American Buddhists and Americans interested in the spiritual use of psychedelics as subcultures within broader American culture. Needless to say, it would be impossible to precisely define either “American culture” or these two subcultures; however, fuzzy boundaries and loose definitions based on family resemblances have heuristic value and provide useful means of interpretation. I have chosen the United States of America as the geographical/national/cultural/historical boundary for this study for a number of reasons: having been born and raised there, I am a native English speaker and have an intimate familiarity with American culture; the United States as the global superpower has had a disproportional impact on the rest of the world’s cultures; and the United States, with its constitutionally sanctioned freedom of religion and strict laws prohibiting most psychedelic substances, provides an intriguing context for investigating the overlap between the modern practice of Buddhism and the spiritual use of certain psychoactives.

Even within the parameters of American Buddhists and American psychedelic spiritualists, the possible field of inquiry is daunting. For instance, what is American Buddhism anyway? A number of important studies have been done<sup>4</sup> that demonstrate the tremendous diversity of groups, organizations, practices, and doctrines among American Buddhists. Likewise, numerous studies have been done on psychedelic use in America<sup>5</sup> indicating the wide variety of substances, motivations, and orientations of users. Therefore, in order to further delimit this study, I have restricted my investigation primarily to the intersection of convert Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality. Statistical data (to be discussed in chapter 1) seem to suggest that a high

percentage of American converts to Buddhism have at least tried some type of psychedelic substance. Moreover, some of these people claim to have derived spiritual insight or benefit from having ingested a psychoactive substance, and some self-identified Buddhists continue to use psychoactive substances as part of their religious practice. Factors such as the type of substance used, the way it is used, the frequency of use, the benefits thought to be derived from its use, and how the use of certain substances is thought to be compatible with or an aid to the practice of Buddhism all vary from person to person. Also, while some individuals strongly identify with a Buddhist community and Buddhist practice and have used or occasionally use psychedelics, others strongly identify with a psychedelic community and occasionally are involved in Buddhist practice, with Buddhist organizations or sometimes on their own. Thus this group represents a wide spectrum of beliefs, practices, substances, communities, and identities, all with the shared characteristics of some interest and/or involvement with both Buddhism and psychedelics.

Although there has been quite substantial research in recent decades on both American Buddhism and psychedelic drug use, much less research has been produced on the intersection of Buddhism and the use of psychedelics. Two substantial publications on the topic are the 1996 issue of the popular Buddhist magazine *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (volume 6, no. 1, fall 1996) devoted to Buddhism and psychedelics, edited by Allan Hunt Badiner, and a collection of essays published in 2002 as a book titled *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, edited by Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey.<sup>6</sup> Noteworthy in *Zig Zag Zen* are contributions from prominent American Buddhists such as Jack Kornfield, Lama Surya Das, and Joan Halifax Roshi, who admit having ingested psychoactive chemicals in the 1960s and who also recognize to varying degrees an influence of these substances on their spiritual development. However, a common narrative trope employed among baby boomer-generation American Buddhists concerning psychedelics runs something like, “Yes, that is what we did back in the sixties, but then we got serious about our Buddhist practice and stopped.” According to essayist Erik Davis in his contribution to *Zig Zag Zen*, this “established narrative of psychedelics as an historical door-opener . . . inevitably marginalizes, if not denies, the crazy wisdom of psyc-

delia.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Davis suggests that there is a current American Buddhist subculture that continues to use psychedelics as part of their religious practice. A primary goal of this study is to better understand this subculture within a subculture.

I refer to this new psychedelically enhanced or augmented Buddhism as “psychedelic Buddhism.”<sup>8</sup> Psychedelic Buddhism is a movement without a central authority or systematic ideology. It is similar to a new religious movement, not in the sense of being a “cult,” but in a broader sense that encapsulates a new religious ethos possessing cultural, sociological, philosophical, and theological aspects. The demographics of this cohort appear to conform largely to the demographics of “convert” or “elite”<sup>9</sup> Buddhists in America: predominately white, middle-class or upper-class, college educated, and politically liberal. Thus my study focuses primarily on this social demographic. This is not to say that other forms of American Buddhism are less important or less worthy of scholarly attention. That is definitely not my view. And while recognizing the enormous influence and importance of Asian American Buddhists and Buddhist communities, this study does not investigate that cohort in any detail for the simple reason that as a group, they seem much less interested in psychedelics and psychedelic spirituality. Also, from my research, it appears that white male converts to Buddhism are generally more optimistic about the possible union of psychedelics and Buddhism than white female converts to Buddhism. In chapter 1, I discuss some of the possible reasons for this gendered aspect of psychedelic Buddhism.

Outside of a small but important group of outspoken advocates, most psychedelic Buddhists are elusive creatures, and for good reasons. Psychedelics use is often considered transgressive by modern Buddhists because more “orthodox” or traditional practitioners commonly view their ingestion as a violation of the Buddhist fifth precept to abstain from intoxicants. Moreover, from the point of view of wider American society’s hegemonic discourse, the nonmedical use of drugs is generally considered morally wrong or degenerate. Thus, under U.S. federal law, most of the psychedelics (such as LSD, psilocybin, and mescaline) are currently listed as “Schedule I” drugs, considered to have no medical value, and are illegal to use or possess for any reason. Moreover, America’s infamous “War on Drugs” has led to the incarceration

of tens of thousands of Americans and encouraged lengthy jail sentences for nonviolent offenders found in possession of these illegal psychoactive substances. Thus, psychedelic Buddhists I have interviewed often keep their use of psychoactive substances a secret, not only from the legal authorities and the wider community but also from their Buddhist communities. Given this secrecy, it is impossible to obtain accurate data concerning the number of people engaged in this hybridized and esoteric form of alternative spirituality. It is likely that my limited research has only sampled a very small segment of a much larger religious phenomenon in America.

Given the outlaw nature of psychedelic Buddhism and the socially taboo nature of the subject, I found it necessary to approach my investigation with a certain cultural, social, and procedural sensitivity. Because my method is inextricably bound to my motivations, interests, and personal history, I here include a brief autobiographical note. A primary presupposition of mine is a belief that all narratives are fundamentally co-constructed.<sup>10</sup> In other words, my own background, assumptions, expectations, social and economic location, etc. have inextricably affected how my interviewees have told their own stories to me. My own personal history, or life story and self-identity, position me to a significant extent as a “cultural insider” to my field of research. In other words, as an American white male convert to Buddhism who has some experience with meditation and psychoactive substances, I share a certain knowledge and experience base with many of the individuals who took part in my survey, and whom I researched and interviewed. Like many of them, I learned about Buddhism first through books, and my experience of Buddhism is eclectic and primarily focused on meditation.<sup>11</sup> This insider perspective no doubt helped to create rapport between myself and interviewees.

As will be made clear in the following pages, both American Buddhists and psychedelic spiritualists place a premium on “experience,” and therefore the effect of my own background as an “experienced insider” on the co-creation of my interviewees’ narratives (even as it might have been unconscious, through subtle verbal and nonverbal behavior) should not be underestimated. Also, my status as an academic researcher with credentials and formal university affiliation

doubtlessly influenced interviewees' attitudes, their responses to my questions, and the means and content of their narration.

Many of the motivations, drives, and agendas that led to the creation of the present study doubtlessly remain unconscious to me. I leave it to future readers to theorize what they might be. For those interested, I have included a more detailed autobiographical sketch in the postscript of this book. Here, I merely provide a short outline of my conscious motivations. I have studied Buddhism and practiced meditation for my entire adult life, and as a scholar-practitioner I have read about and met numerous people who claim to have been "turned on" to Buddhism through some psychedelic experience. Moreover, I have read a number of references to the "psychedelic" or "hallucinogenic" nature of certain visionary accounts in Mahāyāna sūtras such as *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* and *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, which have led me to inquire into the supposed similarity between drug-induced experiences and the visions described. This inquiry has driven my research in two primary directions: to investigate the possible role of altered states of consciousness (ASCs) in the origins of the early Mahāyāna movement<sup>12</sup> and to investigate the cultural and social significance of psychoactive substances such as LSD on the introduction and continued development of contemporary American Buddhism. The following book is the result of this second research interest.

#### CHAPTER OUTLINE

In chapter 1, I first discuss some demographic data collected on the practice of Buddhism and the use of psychedelics. Previous surveys have been conducted on this topic by *Tricycle* magazine, James Coleman, and Charles Tart. The results appear to indicate a real connection between the use of psychedelics and the practice of and/or interest in Buddhism among American converts. I then further examine data about the gender, race, income, education, and political views of American convert Buddhists, who are the cohort predominately interested in Buddhist meditation and the use of psychoactive substances. Following this, I discuss the only two English-language publications specifically devoted to Buddhism and psychedelics—the 1996 *Tricycle* special edition and the book *Zig Zag Zen* (2002).



Chapter 2, “The Psychedelic Revolution,” outlines the history of psychedelic use and culture in the United States from the 1950s to the present. After discussing early forefathers such as Aldous Huxley and Gordon Wasson, the majority of the chapter focuses on the “psychedelic sixties.” During this decade, seminal figures and groups such as Timothy Leary and the Harvard group and Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters emerged; San Francisco became the Mecca of the psychedelic revolution; and the “flower power” of the counterculture was at its zenith. The seventies and the eighties witnessed the War on Drugs, the rise in popularity of MDMA (ecstasy), rave culture, and the beginnings of a new religious praxis of psychoactive substance use called “entheology.” The religious use of psychedelics in the nineties and noughties (2000–2009) was greatly influenced by a surge of interest in indigenous shamanism (“neoshamanism”) and the growth of “ayahuasca tourism” (ayahuasca, or yagé, is a psychoactive brew in which DMT is the active ingredient, traditionally used in Amazonian basin shamanism). The nineties, dubbed the “decade of the brain,” witnessed the explosive increase in the use of antidepressant drugs such as Prozac and a renaissance in official FDA-approved psychedelic research. In the last twenty years psychedelic drug use also has been shaped by new alternative venues such as the Burning Man festival and the international psychedelic trance (psytrance) and techno dance music scenes.

Chapter 3, “The Buddhist Revolution,” looks at the rapid growth of convert Buddhism in the United States since the 1950s. Much of the interest in Buddhism in the fifties was intellectual and philosophical; the sixties witnessed the rapid spread of Zen Buddhist meditation centers throughout America. In the seventies, Tibetan Buddhism and the Vipassanā meditation movement both emerged as major forces in the growth of American convert Buddhism. In the 1980s numerous fledgling Buddhist organizations were racked by scandals relating to sex, money, and the abuse of power. Having survived those growing pains, many of the early Buddhist institutions reorganized themselves and recovered in the 1990s. Also in that decade, themes specific to this new American Buddhism began to develop, such as gender equality, democratic organization, integration of Buddhism with lay life and Western psychology, socially engaged Buddhism, ecologically concerned Buddhism, queer Buddhism, and “mindfulness.” Moreover, a new gener-

ation of American Buddhists had come of age and begun to take on leadership roles, and new and influential Buddhist organizations were established. By the nineties and noughties, convert Buddhism clearly had “arrived” in the United States and become more mainstream and more accepted by wider society as a legitimate religious option.

In the next three chapters (4, 5 and 6), I examine a range of different views among American convert Buddhists concerning psychedelics. In chapter 4, we see that a “door opening” metaphor appears repeatedly in individuals’ personal accounts of their experiences with psychedelics and Buddhism. I argue that this metaphor may both have a cultural origin and be rooted in humans’ psycho-physiological response to altered states of consciousness. In chapter 5, I investigate a cohort of individuals who had some experience with psychedelics but then gave them up; in other words, they “opened” the psychedelic door at some point, but then chose to “close” it. Often this choice was related to their practice of Buddhism; however, in responses to the survey and in interviews, participants rarely stated that they gave up substance use because of an explicit precept or rule, such as the Buddhist fifth precept to abstain from intoxicants. Much more common were statements that individuals had made a rational choice not to use psychedelics as their Buddhist practice matured. In Joan Halifax’s terms, these people could be said to have “graduated” from their psychedelic drug use.

In chapter 6, I investigate those American Buddhists who keep the “psychedelic door open”—i.e., who continue to practice Buddhism and use psychedelics as a spiritual or religious adjunct to it. These individuals view such substances as beneficial for breaking habitual patterns in the mind; as portals or doorways to higher states of consciousness; and for realizing certain Buddhist truths and values such as interdependence, emptiness, equanimity, and compassion. In the second part of the chapter, I look at the spiritual life narratives of five “psychedelic Buddhists”: Allan, Tom, Gary, Shane, and Ryan. Each has a unique story, and each explains how he sees psychedelics and Buddhism as working together in his chosen spiritual path. Nevertheless, certain themes do emerge: that psychedelics are tools or a technology to train the mind and develop insight into Buddhist truths; that psychedelics can act as spiritual medicine or as plant teachers; and that

the correct context and intention are needed to ensure that psychedelic use will be spiritually efficacious.

Chapter 7 inquires into the debates, presuppositions, and philosophical issues in American Buddhism concerning the use of psychedelics, drug-induced mysticism, and altered states of consciousness, and investigates some of the “scientific” studies on psychedelics and spirituality related to these issues. Given the entanglement of interpretation and description, the inaccessibility of private experience to discourse, and the crucial role of mental “set” in the drug experience, no definitive answers can be given. In my own ethnographic research, I have taken participants’ statements about experiences as “religious,” “mystical,” or “spiritual” to mean that those experiences were deeply significant to them and refrained from making ontological, philosophical, or theological judgments. Whether people choose to use psychedelics as an adjunct to their religious practice seems to depend more on their personal beliefs, philosophy, theology, or deeply held convictions about the world than on rational arguments.

In my concluding remarks, I provide some explanatory models for how Buddhism and psychedelics may be related and offer some reasons why I think Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality will continue to develop and interact into the foreseeable future. Certain social and cultural factors such as reenchantment, the development of alternative spiritualities and occulture, and the mainstreaming of Buddhist ideas through detraditionalization and psychologization continue to shape the American spiritual landscape. The drive to transcend the limits of rationality through altered states of consciousness, I suggest, could be a human universal; in that case, both psychologized forms of Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality will continue to develop, interact, and appeal to certain individuals and groups in the United States. Following my conclusions, I offer a postscript outlining my own religious views and experiences in relation to altered states of consciousness and my practice of an eclectic and nonsectarian Mahāyāna Buddhism.

# ALTERED STATES



# 1

## BUDDHISM AND THE PSYCHEDELIC CONNECTION

**I**N 1996, the popular Buddhist magazine *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* published a special edition devoted to the topic of Buddhism and psychedelics.<sup>1</sup> It included the results of a poll of readers titled, “Psychedelics: Help or Hindrance?”<sup>2</sup> The findings from the 1,454 responses (63% from the magazine and 37% from the web) were summarized as follows:

- 89% said they were engaged in Buddhist practice.
- 83% said that they had taken psychedelics.
- Over 40% said that their interest in Buddhism was sparked by psychedelics, with percentages considerably higher for boomers than for twentysomethings.
- 24% said that they were currently taking psychedelics, with the highest percentages for people over 50 and under 30.
- 41% said that psychedelics and Buddhism do not mix *or* 59% said that psychedelics and Buddhism do mix.
- The age group that expressed the most confidence that they do mix was under 20.
- 71% believe that “psychedelics are not a path, but they can provide a glimpse of the reality to which Buddhist practice points.”

- 58% said they would consider taking psychedelics in a sacred context. (In the “under 20” category, it was 90%.)

Rather striking in this data is the high percentage of those who have taken psychedelics (83%). Also worth noting is the age grouping: the older baby boomers and younger “twentysomethings” and “under 20” group seem to be more involved, interested, and confident in the religious/sacred use of psychedelics. These figures appear to support the editor, Allan Badiner’s, claim that (at least in the mid-nineties) “psychedelic use is on the rise again.”<sup>3</sup> I will revisit this issue below. For now, let us look at some more of the data that have been collected.

In his study of Western Buddhists,<sup>4</sup> James Coleman found similarly high percentages of psychedelic drug use among the membership of seven different Buddhist centers in North America:

- Over 62% of Western Buddhists he surveyed said that they had used psychedelics;
- Of those, half said their use of psychedelics played some role in attracting them to Buddhism;<sup>5</sup> and
- 80% of Western practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism said that they had used psychedelics.<sup>6</sup>

These figures are in stark contrast to the estimated 8% of the U.S. population thought to have experimented with psychedelic drugs, based on government surveys.<sup>7</sup>

Charles Tart, in his survey of members of the Rigpa Fellowship,<sup>8</sup> an organization led by the Tibetan Nyingma lama Sogyal Rinpoche, found that among the 64 respondents:

- 77% reported previous experience with a major psychedelic, and of those:
- 49% had 1–10 experiences,
- 18% had 11–50 experiences, and
- 10% had 50 or more experiences.

Tart also found that “90% of the respondents report that they no longer use major psychedelics, 10% that they use them at least once per

year but less than once per month. 19% indicate they expect to use major psychedelics in the future and 32% that they might.”<sup>9</sup> Tart’s data seem to show that for members of this organization, psychedelic use largely dropped off as they became more involved in traditional Buddhist practice.

My online survey (conducted July 19, 2010, to July 26, 2011) had the following results from 196 respondents:

- 85.1% considered themselves Buddhist.
- 61.6% had tried LSD at least once.
- 33.3% continued to use psychedelic substances.
- 61.4% of those who continued to use psychedelics said their use of these substances was for spiritual/religious purposes.
- 49.3% said that Buddhism and psychoactive substance use are compatible.

Here I need to make an important caveat: these surveys are not from random samples; nor are the sample sizes large. They give no indication of how widespread the spiritual use of psychedelics might be within American Buddhism. At best, they offer some anecdotal evidence concerning this heterodox and often outlawed practice among American convert Buddhists. However, the surveys do suggest some correlation between the practice of convert Buddhism and the use of psychedelics, and demonstrate that at least some American Buddhists not only have tried psychedelics but also continue to use them. In the *Tricycle* survey, respondents were largely from the regular readership of the magazine, and it is probable that those with some previous psychedelic drug experience were more likely to express their opinions on the matter. Likewise, Coleman’s survey was a “purposive sample” of two Zen groups (Berkeley and Rochester Zen Centers), two Tibetan groups (Karma Dzong in Boulder, Colorado, and Dzogchen Foundation in Boston, Massachusetts), two Vipassanā groups from the San Francisco Bay area (one led by Gils Fronsdal and other by James Baraz), and one nonaffiliated Buddhist group (the Heron Sangha of San Luis Obispo, California).<sup>10</sup> As mentioned, Tart’s survey was from a single Tibetan organization, the Rigpa Fellowship.



My survey, which I attempted to give a neutral title—"Attitudes Toward Psychoactive Substances Among American Buddhists"—was compiled through the SurveyMonkey website. To promote the survey, I e-mailed both individuals and Buddhist organizations in the United States, sending a URL link to the survey, and asked them to pass it on to anyone they thought might be interested. I also developed a Squidoo website providing information on and a link to the survey, and asked people to post the link online.<sup>11</sup> My sampling was "purposeful" or "selective," rather than random. The primary goal was to acquire qualitative data concerning a cohort of American Buddhists who use or have used psychedelics and to understand their views on the relationships they see between the practice of Buddhism and the use of psychedelics. I was particularly interested in uncovering the views of "psychedelic Buddhists," people whose practice of Buddhism is augmented or supplemented with the use of (a) psychoactive substance(s) for spiritual/religious purposes. Additionally, I contacted various contributors to the *Tricycle* edition on Buddhism and psychedelics and *Zig Zag Zen*, and asked if they would like to complete the survey and/or be interviewed. I also asked that they forward my e-mail to anyone whom they thought might be interested in the survey or in being interviewed. Most (but not all) of my interviews were conducted with people who completed the survey.

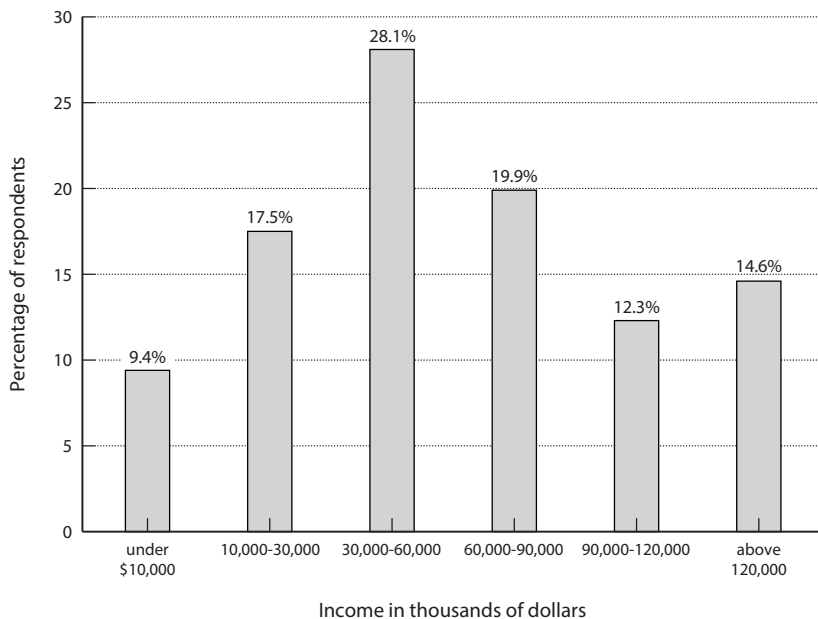
Significantly, most of the survey responses were obtained shortly after I e-mailed the link to the academic H-Buddhism list of scholars. Thus the results of my survey may over-represent what Charles Prebish calls "A Silent Sangha in America"—academics studying Buddhism who also have a personal interest in the religion.<sup>12</sup> Further evidence of this possibility is provided by the 177 who answered the question, "What is your highest level of education?": 57.6% had attended graduate school.

What other demographic data do we have on American convert Buddhists? Coleman's survey of Buddhist groups found that 58% of the respondents were female and 42% were male.<sup>13</sup> The sample was overwhelmingly Caucasian/white (about 90%), and those of Catholic or Jewish background were over-represented compared to national averages. While the age range was from 19 to 78, the mean age was 46. Coleman also found that most of those surveyed were from the middle

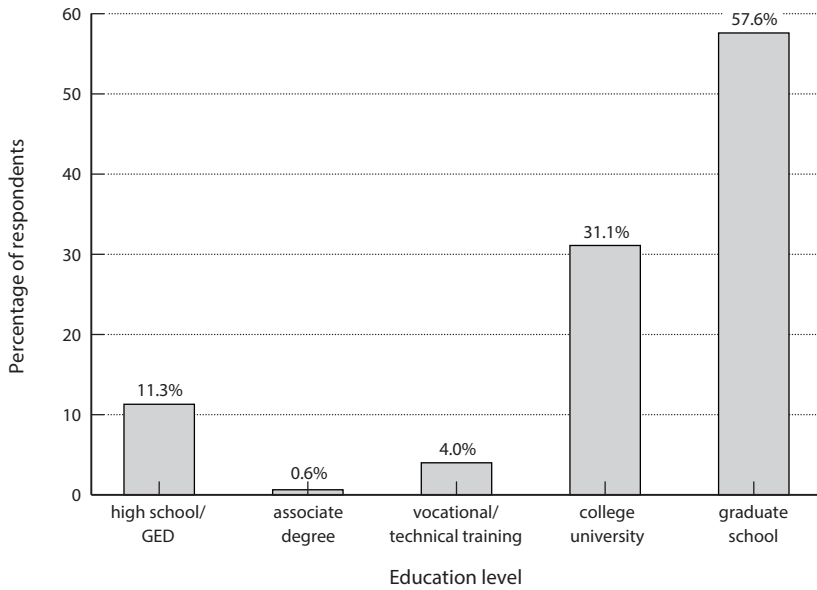
and upper-middle classes, were far more educated than average Americans, and were more politically liberal. The results from my survey largely corroborate Coleman's findings. The age range of respondents was 18 to 74, with a mean age of 42. Over 95% of the respondents indicated that they were "Caucasian" or "white." Like Coleman's sample, respondents tended to be middle to upper-middle class, highly educated, and politically liberal (see figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3). However, unlike Coleman's results, male respondents outnumbered females in a ratio of 65% to 35%. As some of Coleman's data suggest, this may indicate a stronger interest in psychedelics among male convert Buddhists than female converts.<sup>14</sup>

There are a number of possible reasons for this gendered aspect of psychedelic Buddhism. One is that the use of psychedelics (especially potent substances in high doses) may appeal more to males than females, in the same manner that extreme sports and dangerous

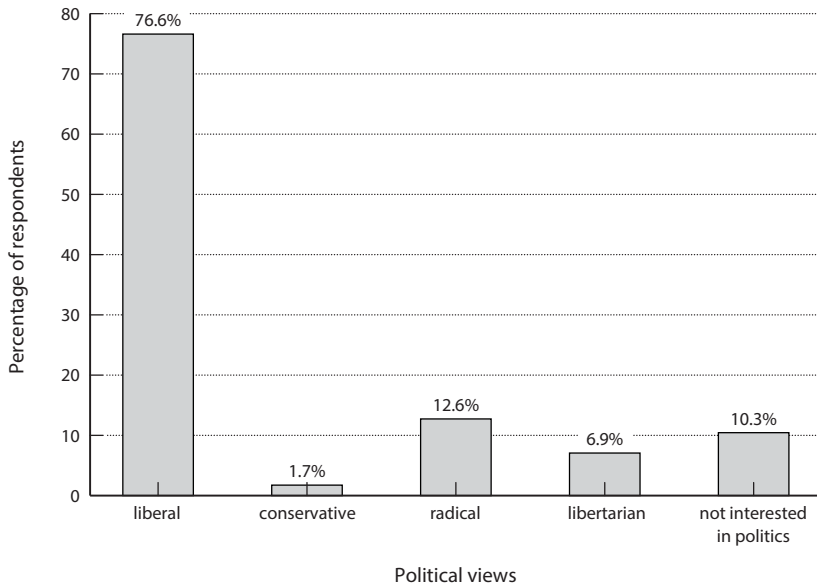
**FIGURE 1.1** What is your total gross family income per year?



**FIGURE 1.2** What is your highest level of education?



**FIGURE 1.3** How would you describe your political views?



occupations such as law enforcement, the military, and firefighting generally appeal more to men than women. Another reason might be that males are simply more vocal about their interest in and use of psychedelics than females (and there is no substantial gendered divide in interest or use). Sarah Shortall has pointed out the lack of counterculture discourse on “the way gender mediated and differentiated the drug experience,” and how writing on drug exploration in the 1950s and 1960s rarely portrayed women in an active role.<sup>15</sup> A number of publications in recent decades have begun to recover some of women’s experiences in the counterculture, and I recommend these to the interested reader.<sup>16</sup> In an online survey about gender and sexuality in the psychedelic community (148 respondents; 96 male), Joseph Gelfer found that:

When asked if they felt there was equality within the community, 61 percent of people answered positively. Most stated that the community was more welcoming to diversity than mainstream society. However, a vocal minority felt the community was “a bit of a boy’s club” and women were “often sidelined as just ‘the girlfriends.’” A difference emerges here between the opinions of men and women, inasmuch as women were more likely to identify inequality.<sup>17</sup>

Gelfer’s results appear to support the results from my survey and interviews. Again, this may mean that white, middle-class men are more interested in psychedelics than white, middle-class women, or that men are more likely to share their experiences. Finally, a possibility that cannot be discounted is researcher bias. As a white male convert to Buddhism, I may have gained a greater rapport with male participants during interviews, and I was able to network better with and solicit more information from men than women. Because my sample size was limited, there is no way of knowing with any degree of certainty if males are in fact more highly represented than females among psychedelic Buddhists. However, given my data, men seem to be more interested in mixing Buddhism and psychedelics, and therefore I have focused more attention on men’s religious narratives. There is no valuation here of men’s stories above women’s.

There is no extensive discussion of sexual orientation in this book. However, I did not assume a heteronormative outlook when writing it; nor do I identify as a heterosexual. Both Allen Ginsberg and Ram Dass were prominent gay figures in the psychedelic revolution, although Ram Dass for many decades did not speak openly about his homosexuality. Timothy Leary, on the other hand, told *Playboy* magazine that LSD could “cure” someone of homosexuality, and thus seems to have held a heteronormative view.<sup>18</sup> In his online survey of psychedelic spiritualists, Joseph Gelfer found that “only 76 percent of people ticked the straight box. Further still, from the remaining respondents, most identified as bi-sexual, not gay.”<sup>19</sup> He maintains that this result is “really quite extraordinary, and supports the community’s claim to being progressive and inclusive.”<sup>20</sup> Further research in this area is definitely a desideratum.

### THE *TRICYCLE* SPECIAL EDITION

The mere fact that one of the most popular Buddhist magazines in the United States<sup>21</sup> would print in the mid-nineties a special issue devoted to the topic of Buddhism and psychedelics is culturally significant. It suggests that in the popular imagination, at least, there is some real connection between the two. In the “Editor’s View” section of this issue titled “Just Say Maybe,” Editor-in-Chief Helen Tworokov writes, “To celebrate our fifth anniversary, we have chosen to focus on a controversial issue that claims both a complex history and contemporary revival: Buddhism and psychedelics.”<sup>22</sup> This idea of revival is reiterated later on the same page: “And psychedelics are back. Some claim that they never went away, but just went underground.” Although statistics from the *Tricycle* survey would seem to indicate a growing interest among younger people, the magazine makes no attempt to substantiate the claim of either revival or continued underground psychedelic use by American Buddhists. However, the very fact that *Tricycle* published this edition seems to indicate popular discourse on the issue of Buddhism and psychedelics had become at least more acceptable in the United States. Farther on in the same section, Tworokov states the magazine’s position:

Some people argue that psychedelics are a hindrance; others argue that they are—or can be—a help. Our editorial position is neither. Rather we encourage the reader to just say maybe; that is to suspend preconceptions and biases to consider the other side—whichever side that may be.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast, Allan Hunt Badiner, the guest editor of this issue, begins his introduction with the following statement:

Psychedelic use is on the rise again, yet there are unanswered questions from the periods of heavy use in the sixties and seventies. The conversation wasn't even possible in the political climate of the eighties and now, in the nineties, we hope to do some truth telling. Buddhism and psychedelics share a concern with the same problem: finding that which frees the mind.<sup>24</sup>

Badiner's use of language here bears some consideration. I would like to suggest (and demonstrate in the following pages) that Badiner's statements imply that he himself is a "Psychedelic Buddhist"; that the "truth" to be told is that, like him, others currently blend the practice of Buddhism with the use of psychedelics; and that a unifying feature among these individuals is that they employ both Buddhist practice and psychedelics as a means to "free the mind."<sup>25</sup>

Following Badiner's introduction, *Tricycle's* lead-in article on Buddhism and psychedelics is an interview with the Vipassanā teacher Jack Kornfield.<sup>26</sup> The content and positioning of this interview are significant. Kornfield is one of the leading Buddhist teachers in America. In the seventies, following his term as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand, Kornfield ordained for a time as a Buddhist monk and studied with such eminent Buddhist meditation masters as Ajahn Chah and Mahasi Sayadaw. After returning to the States, he cofounded the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, and later founded the Spirit Rock Center in Woodacre, California. Kornfield also holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, has authored and coauthored numerous popular books on Buddhism and meditation, and has taught at Buddhist centers and universities around the world.<sup>27</sup> His status as an authentic and committed Buddhist is beyond dispute; therefore, his opinions on

the topic are likely to be taken seriously by American Buddhist readers, rather than disregarded as “lunatic fringe.” Thus we may view Badiner’s choice to begin with the Kornfield interview as a rhetorical strategy to legitimate the discourse on the relationship between Buddhism and psychedelics in contemporary America.

Early in the interview, Kornfield states, “Many people who took LSD, mushrooms, and other psychedelics, often along with readings from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* or some Zen texts, had the gates of wisdom opened to some extent.”<sup>28</sup> This is an explicit (if qualified) connection: he maintains that many people who took psychedelics had an authentic Buddhist experience. Kornfield’s connection of this psychedelic “opening” with *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is likely related to *The Psychedelic Experience*, a guidebook by Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert for psychedelic drug users, based on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (see chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of this text). Kornfield then states that following this opening experience, some people who realized that they could not maintain the high from the drugs began spiritual disciplines like yoga, mantra recitation, visualizations, or Buddhist meditation.<sup>29</sup> When asked, “How important was LSD for the importation of Eastern spiritual practices into the U.S. during the sixties?”<sup>30</sup> Kornfield replies,

They were certainly powerful for me. I took LSD and other psychedelics at Dartmouth after I started studying Eastern religions. They came hand in hand, as they did for many people. In fact, the majority of Western Buddhist teachers used psychedelics at the start of their practice. A number still do on occasion. But of the many hundreds of people I know who took psychedelics, only a few had radically transformative experiences. Many others were greatly inspired, and a few were damaged. It’s like winning the lottery. A lot of people play, and while not so many people win big, the potential is there.<sup>31</sup>

Here Kornfield not only admits his psychedelic use and its connection with his interest in Buddhism but also makes the claim that the majority of Western Buddhist teachers used psychedelics at the start of their practice (and that some still do). The rest of the interview follows this generally pro-psychedelic stance. For example, Kornfield states, “I see

psychedelics as having been enormously useful as an initial opening for people, and at certain stages it may be possible to use them again wisely, but with the constraints of *shila* [Buddhist moral discipline].”<sup>32</sup> He concludes,

I see psychedelics as one of the most promising 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 sacred materials and a systematic training or practice that I have described. That marriage will have to be based on an understanding and respect for the ancient laws of karma, grounded in compassion, virtue, an open heart and a trained mind, and the laws of liberation. Given those, there might be some very fruitful combination.<sup>33</sup>

Kornfield raises three topics that appear throughout the *Tricycle* issue. The first is the claim that the interest in and practice of Buddhism for most American Buddhist teachers began with some psychedelic use; the second is that psychedelic use can lead to an initial opening experience (to exactly what is unclear); and the third is that there may be a beneficial way to integrate the use of psychedelics within a Buddhist framework. While Kornfield is careful in his use of language and qualifies his positive statements, the reference to psychedelics as “sacred materials” reveals the positive evaluation of these substances. In short, Kornfield provides here an outline of what an appropriate psychedelic Buddhism would look like: a type of spirituality that considers psychedelics as “sacred materials” to be used in a context that is grounded in the worldview and ethical framework of traditional Buddhism.

The fact that such an American Buddhist luminary would make such public statements about the relationship between Buddhism and psychedelics is indicative of a strong psychedelic orientation among some American converts to Buddhism. Moreover, by using this interview as the lead article, Badiner (contrary to Tworokov’s claims of neutrality) sets the generally pro-psychedelic tone of this *Tricycle* issue.

The next article is “A High History of Buddhism,” by the late Buddhist scholar Rick Fields (1942–1999).<sup>34</sup> This is a valuable overview of the historical relationship between Buddhism in America and some



of the seminal figures involved in the psychedelic movement. Following Fields's article is a short piece titled "Entheogens: A Brief History of Their Spiritual Use" by Robert Jesse.<sup>35</sup> Jesse is the first contributor who falls squarely into the camp of those I refer to as the "psychedelic intelligentsia," i.e., intellectuals who study, write, research, and often promote the use of psychedelic substances. Trained as an engineer, Jesse was at one time the vice-president of Oracle, the second largest independent software company in the world.<sup>36</sup> In 1993, he founded the Council on Spiritual Practices, a nonprofit organization of scholars and researchers "dedicated to making direct experience of the sacred more available to people."<sup>37</sup> Since then, he has been active as a promoter, writer, researcher, and publisher on the religious use of certain psychoactive substances. He is also the cofounder of a spiritual organization known as the Rhythm Society, and most recently has been a seminal figure in the Johns Hopkins psilocybin studies.<sup>38</sup> Here Jesse introduces *Tricycle* readers to the term "entheogen" ("becoming divine within") to refer to psychoactive substances that are or have been used "for spiritual purposes."<sup>39</sup>

The rest of this issue includes accounts of Badiner's own experience with yagé and psychiatrist Rick Strassman's experiments with DMT. However, since I conducted my own interviews with both Strassman and Badiner (see chapters 4 and 6), I would now like to look briefly at Badiner's interview with the late Terence McKenna (1946–2000).<sup>40</sup> McKenna was a leading figure among the psychedelic intelligentsia and something of a psychedelic celebrity. A charismatic person and hypnotic speaker, he spent over thirty years studying shamanism and ethnopharmacology in Asia and the Amazon Basin. An active promoter of plant and fungal hallucinogens (particularly psilocybin mushrooms and ayahuasca), McKenna authored and coauthored a number of books on the subject, including *The Invisible Landscape* (1975), *Food of the Gods* (1992), *The Archaic Revival* (1992), and *True Hallucinations* (1993). In the interview for *Tricycle*, McKenna presents an unqualified pro-psychedelic stance, but his enthusiasm for Buddhism is somewhat lukewarm.

Toward the beginning of the interview Badiner asks McKenna, "How would Buddhism fit into your notion of the psychedelic society that you often talk about?"<sup>41</sup> McKenna responds, "Well, compassion is the

central moral teaching of Buddhism and, hopefully, the central moral intuition of the psychedelic experience. So at the ethical level I think these things are mutually reinforcing and very good for each other.”<sup>42</sup> However, McKenna is quick to point out what he sees as the difference between Buddhism and the traditional use of plant and fungal hallucinogens: “To my mind, the real difference between Buddhism and psychedelic shamanism is that one is a theory out of which experiences can be teased and the other is an experience out of which theory can be teased.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, for McKenna Buddhism is primarily about theory, while shamanism is fundamentally about experience, and he definitely places more value on the latter. He makes this point clear when he claims that Buddhism is less of a remedy for Western society’s obsession with ego and materialism than psychedelics, because Buddhism is an “argument, not an experience.”<sup>44</sup> When Badiner asks, “Are you anticipating the emergence of a Buddhist psychedelic culture?” McKenna replies, “No, it’s a Buddhist, psychedelic, green, feminist culture!” Thus he sees Buddhism as only part of the solution to contemporary society’s ills, and largely a theoretical part, rather than a practical part. This attitude comes out most strongly in the conclusion of the interview when McKenna states,

I would almost say, “How can you be a serious Buddhist if you’re not exploring psychedelics?” Then you’re sort of an arm-chair Buddhist, a Buddhist from theory, a Buddhist from practice, but it is sort of training wheels practice. I mean, the real thing is, take the old boat out and give it a spin.<sup>45</sup>

To this comment, Badiner replies, “Maybe you should try taking out the old zafu [Zen meditation cushion] for a spin!”<sup>46</sup> And so as not to miss out on the last word, McKenna responds, “Or try both!”<sup>47</sup>

It is clear from this interview that Badiner holds a lot of respect for McKenna. However, these final remarks seem to offend Badiner, as if McKenna has disrespected Buddhist practice by claiming that Buddhism without psychedelics is something of a “training wheels practice,” infantile when compared to real psychedelic experience. Badiner’s comment about “taking the old zafu for a spin” is his defense of serious Buddhist meditation practice as “the real thing.” From his

questions and responses in these interviews, Badiner appears to hold a midway position, which we might refer to as “a psychedelic Buddhist moderate stance.”

The final piece I would like to consider from *Tricycle* is a roundtable discussion with Ram Dass, Joan Halifax, Robert Aitken, and Richard Baker that concludes the issue.<sup>48</sup> Ram Dass (formerly Richard Alpert) is one of the “founding fathers” of the psychedelic movement in America. Although he coauthored *The Psychedelic Experience*, the psychedelic manual based on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, since his conversion experience and transformation into “Ram Dass” in the late sixties, his primary religious orientation has been toward Hinduism, not Buddhism. However, his authority to discuss anything psychedelic related is beyond dispute. Joan Halifax is an American Zen teacher and founder of the Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. During the seventies she participated in a number of important psychedelic studies with her former husband, Stanislav Grof,<sup>49</sup> and also conducted extensive anthropological fieldwork with indigenous shamans. At the time of this interview, the late Robert Aitken Roshi (d. 2010) was the head teacher at Maui Zendo in Hawai‘i and a highly regarded Buddhist teacher in America. Richard Baker is the former abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center and now leads the Dharma Sangha, a Buddhist community, from his center in Crestone, Colorado.

Unsurprisingly, Ram Dass appears in this interview to have the most positive view of psychedelics, while the three Buddhist teachers are less enthusiastic. Halifax seems more open to the positive possibilities of psychedelics, especially in their indigenous and shamanistic uses; while Baker and Aitken take the dimmest view of a possible marriage between Buddhism and psychedelics. Halifax expresses her attitude nicely in the following statement:

Meditation and this medicine [plant hallucinogens used in indigenous shamanic rituals] are both powerful contexts for shifting our assemblage point out of the habitual mind of culture and into a new frame of reference. . . . After I stopped taking psychedelics, my tendency toward dispersion has definitely ceased, and my reactivity has definitely diminished. I am relieved to have committed myself to the path of meditation. . . . I feel like I graduated from psychedelics, but

that they were a definite part of the evolution of my own psychological or developmental maturation.

Halifax's claim to have "graduated from psychedelics" repeats a recurring theme among a certain cohort of American converts to Buddhism, which I explore in more detail in chapter 5.

Although the three Buddhist teachers in this roundtable interview had experimented with psychedelics at some point, none continued to use them, or recommended psychedelic use as part of a Buddhist practice. Thus *Tricycle's* special edition on Buddhism and psychedelics starts with a bang (Kornfield's guarded but positive position) but ends with a whimper. While Halifax recognizes the value of her previous drug experiences, she feels she has "graduated." Aitken and Baker, however, found their psychedelic experiences lacking in value and see no merit in using drugs for the Buddhist path. Thus this concluding article runs somewhat against the generally pro-psychedelic stance of Badiner and the *Tricycle* issue. As if aware of this, Badiner concludes the roundtable with a final statement from Ram Dass: "I feel sad when society rejects something that can help it understand itself and deepen its values and its wisdom. Just like the church ruling out mystical experience. It's not a purification of Buddhism. It's trying to hold on to what you've got rather than growing."<sup>50</sup>

We can interpret Ram Dass's "society" as a polite reference to "the Buddhist teachers sitting here with me in this roundtable discussion." In the nicest possible way, Ram Dass rejects the conservative Buddhist positions of Halifax, Baker, and Aitken as a type of psychological attachment ("trying to hold on to what you've got rather than growing"). Given Buddhism's emphasis on nonattachment, this remark is hitting the Buddhists where it hurts.

### **ZIG ZAG ZEN**

The only book thus far devoted solely to the issue of Buddhism and psychedelics is *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, edited by Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey (with preface by Huston Smith and foreword by Stephen Bachelor).<sup>51</sup> In this edited volume Badiner teams up

with the well-known psychedelic artist Alex Grey (as art editor). *Zig Zag Zen* reproduces much of the content of the 1996 *Tricycle* special issue,<sup>52</sup> with some important additional material. Gone is any pretense of neutrality—*Zig Zag Zen*'s content, structure, and style are overwhelmingly pro-psychedelics.<sup>53</sup> With contributions from fifty different authors, artists, Buddhist teachers, and psychedelicists, *Zig Zag Zen* is a visually impressive book that offers an eclectic array of opinions, personal experiences, and philosophical reflections on psychedelics and Buddhism. Essays from well-known psychedelic intelligentsia such as Alex Grey, Charles Tart, and Myron Stolaroff reinforce the pro-psychedelic stance of the book.<sup>54</sup>

After reading *Zig Zag Zen*, I was fortunate to interview six contributors to the book: Allan Badiner, Alex Grey, Rick Strassman, Charles Tart, Lama Surya Das, and Erik Davis. For now, I will defer my discussion of these contributors to the chapters where I recount our interviews, with one exception. Since Erik Davis's essay, "The Paisley Gate,"<sup>55</sup> raises some interesting historical and sociological issues in relation to Buddhism and psychedelics and was instrumental in my decision to undertake the current study, I feel that a closer look at this piece would be appropriate before continuing.

In this essay, Davis claims that psychedelic culture in the context of American Buddhism "is best described as a kind of tantra—a coarse and scandalous one perhaps, but homegrown at least, arising from our 'native' tradition of counterculture craziness."<sup>56</sup> Davis then develops this analogy by suggesting three parallels between American psychedelic Buddhism and Indian Buddhist Tantra: secrecy, ingestion of transgressive substances (psychedelics in America and the "five Ms" in India),<sup>57</sup> and a shared esoteric perception of a liminal realm generated through the imagination.<sup>58</sup>

In Davis's analogy, the first two parallels mentioned are sociological: secrecy and transgression are common to any number of esoteric subcultures. In this regard, it would be hard to dispute the similarities between the American psychedelic Buddhist subculture and the more transgressive, Śaivite-influenced esoteric tantric Buddhist groups that must have existed in ancient India. The sociology of psychedelic Buddhism in America will be explored in the following chapters. Now, I will briefly focus more on the third aspect—the shared perception of

a liminal realm generated through the imagination. Davis elaborates his view:

Put simply psychedelics present the imagination. And by imagination I don't simply mean the source of our daydreams or visionary flights, but the synthetic power Kant posited as the [generally] unconscious mechanism through which our basic conceptual faculties construct the world of space-time.<sup>59</sup>

Here Davis points out the ambivalence in the Buddhist tradition toward imagination. While early Buddhist sources seem to see imagination as a problem to be overcome, Mahāyāna sūtras are filled with fantastic imaginative material. Davis writes, “Indeed, I have not come across a canonical text that can approach the psychedelic majesty of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, whose infinite details and ceaseless lists capture both the admantine excess and fractal multiplicity of deep psychedelia.”<sup>60</sup>

Davis's reference to the psychedelic nature of the *Avatamsaka* intrigued me for a number of reasons. In a recent publication,<sup>61</sup> I elaborate a number of proto-tantric features in the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*, which constitutes the final and longest “chapter” of the immense *Avatamsaka*. Moreover, a number of other scholars have discussed the seemingly close connection between the *Avatamsaka* and certain tantric texts. The *Avatamsaka* and *Gaṇḍavyūha* depict a worldview that appears to have functioned as inspiration for a number of Buddhist tantras. For example, Anthony Tribe states that the Caryā Tantras, such as the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, “took the luminous, translucent, magical world of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* as the measure for how awakened cognition would perceive the world.”<sup>62</sup> However, to what extent can we consider these sūtras to be “psychedelic”? Is Davis simply projecting his own ideas onto the ancient Indian texts? If so, he is not alone—a prominent scholar of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Paul Williams, has described the visionary imagery of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* as “hallucinogenic.”<sup>63</sup>

Davis also is not the only person to refer to the *Avatamsaka-sūtra* in *Zig Zag Zen*; Alex Grey writes, “all through the *Avatamsaka Sutra* there are references to infinitely jeweled Buddha-fields. Many who have tripped have seen them. The subtle beings are alive. They are self-illuminating.”<sup>64</sup> Many Mahāyāna sūtras do indeed contain accounts of

visionary experiences, and some appear strikingly similar to accounts of drug-induced visions experienced by “trippers.” Is the similarity merely coincidental, or is there some underlying physiological process responsible for these visions’ phenomenological likeness? These were some of the questions that began to drive my research (see chapter 5 for more on this topic).

Davis concludes his essay with a statement that the baby boomers’ narrative of psychedelics as an historical door-opener “inevitably marginalizes, if not denies, the crazy wisdom of psychedelia.”<sup>65</sup> Moreover, he claims that this narrative also places the boomers in an awkward position in their role as the transmitters of American Buddhism to the younger generations, “because even if psychedelic spirituality is a youthful folly, such a folly may be necessary, at least for some of us.”<sup>66</sup> Thus, Davis suggests (and other essays in the *Tricycle* special edition and *Zig Zag Zen* support) that there is a current American Buddhist subculture of younger generations who continue to use psychedelics as part of their religious practice, and that the boomers’ historical narrative denies or at least marginalizes psychedelics. This inspired me to investigate the religious use of psychoactive substances among later-generation American convert Buddhists.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

*Tricycle’s* special edition on Buddhism and psychedelics and *Zig Zag Zen* give a strong impression that there exists a real tension in American Buddhism between a more traditional and conservative rejection of psychedelics and a more permissive attitude about the possible value of psychedelics as compatible with or a useful adjunct to Buddhist practice. It is not surprising that those individuals who are strongly invested in traditional Buddhism as teachers are less enthusiastic about mixing Buddhism and psychedelics. There appear to be two different subcultures represented in the *Tricycle* issue and *Zig Zag Zen*: the American Buddhist subculture and the American psychedelic subculture. If we conceptualize the intersection of these two subcultures as consisting of a continuum of positions, then to the far right we could place more traditional Buddhist practitioners like Robert Aitken

and Richard Baker, who have tried psychedelics but do not recognize any spiritual value to these experiences. Less far to the right are those Buddhists who have some experience with psychedelics and recognize some spiritual validity to their use, such as Jack Kornfield, Joan Halifax, and Lama Surya Das. On the opposite side of the spectrum are individuals who are primarily focused on psychedelic spirituality but see some value in the Buddhist path, such as Terence McKenna, Charles Tart, and Myron Stolaroff.

Both American Buddhists and American psychedelic spiritualists possess their own celebrities and spokespeople. These are the public personae whose views and opinions appear in popular magazines like *Tricycle* and help shape their subculture and its identity. Just as American Buddhists<sup>67</sup> have their lineages of Dharma teachers, who are authors, intellectuals, and pioneers, the psychedelic spiritualists have their lineage of “psychonauts” (explorers of inner space), who form an intellectual elite. However, this is only part of the story. The unknown people who occupy the overlapping social space of these two groups often remain in the shadows, choosing to remain anonymous lest they risk arrest for their illegal religious activities. We know from the little survey data collected that this group is highly likely to consist of middle to upper-middle class, white, educated men and women with a median age in their early forties. What we do not know are the reasons they do what they do, and the stories of their own personal spiritual journeys.

The overlap and cross-fertilization of these subcultures can be traced back to their historical origins in the sixties counterculture. The popular perception seems to be that many, if not most of the founding figures of American “convert” or “white” Buddhism began their spiritual journeys with some type of psychedelic experience. While some of these teachers are quite open about their previous drug use, many state that when they became serious about their Buddhist practice they quit taking psychedelics (as did Halifax, Aitken, and Baker). The historical narrative of the baby boomer Buddhists (“LSD opened our minds, and then we got serious about Buddhism”), however, fails to account for the experiences of those who continued to practice Buddhism and use psychedelics, and also for later-generation American Buddhists (generations X and Y) who also mix their practices.



Since the sixties, in terms of general knowledge, interest, and practice, Buddhism has grown exponentially in America. Currently there are hundreds of Buddhist centers located throughout the United States representing all the major Buddhist traditions, from highly conservative and traditional to extremely liberal and innovative. Academic scholarship on American Buddhism has only recently begun to grapple with this ever-growing complexity.<sup>68</sup>

The drug scenes have also changed since the heyday of the sixties. While the defining drug of the counterculture was LSD (and to a lesser extent, psilocybin mushrooms and mescaline), the eighties witnessed the growing popularity of MDMA (ecstasy) in the rave scene, and the nineties saw the emergence in the United States of “ayahuasca tourism.”<sup>69</sup> Moreover, since the psychedelic sixties aficionados have experimented with and developed an ever-increasing sophistication about a plethora of “designer drugs” that have emerged with exotic-sounding names such as 2C-B, 2C-T-2, and 2C-T-7.<sup>70</sup> Recent decades have witnessed the creation of new venues for psychedelic subcultures such as Burning Man,<sup>71</sup> the revival of traditional shamanic practices in a kind of Americanized neoshamanism,<sup>72</sup> and an increased interest among European Americans in the use of peyote within the Native American Church.<sup>73</sup> In the following pages, I hope to provide much-needed nuance to the historical ties and contemporary interweaving of Buddhism and psychedelics in America. I outline in the next two chapters brief histories of the psychedelic and Buddhist revolutions from the 1950s up to the present day, in order to provide the necessary historical context.

## 2

### THE PSYCHEDELIC REVOLUTION

*“You may be making Buddhas out of everyone,” Leary and Alpert were told when they were fired from Harvard, “but that’s not what we’re trying to do.”*

— *Life Magazine* (March 25, 1966)

**W**HILE MUCH has been written on psychedelics and Western Buddhism, perhaps the most insightful and succinct treatment of the subjects particularly devoted to the intersection of the two is Rick Fields’s essay, “A High History of Buddhism,” in *Tricycle’s* special edition on Buddhism and psychedelics,<sup>1</sup> which was subsequently reprinted in *Zig Zag Zen*.<sup>2</sup> Like most of the content in both the magazine and the book, Fields’s essay is pro-psychedelic. It begins:

The war on at least one variety of drugs—psychedelics—has been won, at least for a while. In place of the alchemicals that reigned supreme for a momentarily eternal moment, young would-be mind explorers now toke their way through a fractaled marketplace of pot, coke, weak acid, heroin, cocaine, ludes, Ecstasy, speed, crack. . . . The heady halcyon days and nights of psychedelia, which once led so many to Buddhist practice, have been inefficiently eliminated, reduced to retrofashion. The young now turn on in a world in which the sacred has been trivialized into the recreational.<sup>3</sup>

Fields laments the current situation (circa mid-nineties), but he isn’t entirely pessimistic: “But there is another sort of good news—for some

unreformed heads at least. There is something of a psychedelic revival going on these days—and more than a few Buddhists are taking part in it.”<sup>4</sup> Fields then claims that the “sacramentals” of ancient indigenous peoples (mushrooms, peyote, and ayahuasca) are the psychoactive substances that seem to hold the most promise for this future revival.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I outline the emergence of psychedelic spirituality in America beginning in the 1950s up to the present day.

### FIFTIES FOREFATHERS

After a brief mention of the seventies and eighties, Fields begins his history with a discussion of Aldous Huxley (1894–1963), a seminal figure in the psychedelic movement from the fifties. By the time Huxley was introduced to mescaline by the psychiatrist Humphrey Osmond (1917–2004) in the spring of 1953, he was already a celebrated author and longtime student of Advaita Vedānta.<sup>6</sup> For many years, Huxley had held a strong conviction in the underlying unity of the different mystical traditions and had written about it in his anthology of world mysticism, *The Perennial Philosophy*, in 1945.<sup>7</sup> Thus, according to Fields, “Huxley was well prepared”<sup>8</sup> for his mescaline experience. He subsequently recorded that experience and philosophical reflections based on it in two essays that were to become psychedelic classics: *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and *Heaven and Hell* (1956).

In *The Doors of Perception*,<sup>9</sup> Huxley compares the mescaline experience to (among other things) the direct perception of what Buddhists call not-self, suchness, and the Dharma body. Here is a representative passage inspired by Huxley’s observation of a vase containing a rose, a carnation, and an iris:

My eyes traveled from the rose to the carnation, and from that feathery incandescence to the smooth scrolls of sentient amethyst which were the iris. The Beatific Vision, *Sat Chit Ananda*, Being-Awareness-Bliss—for the first time I understood, not on the verbal level, not by inchoate hints or at a distance, but precisely and completely what those prodigious syllables referred to. And then I remembered a passage I had read in one of Suzuki’s essays. “What is the Dharma-Body

of the Buddha?” (“The Dharma-Body of the Buddha” is another way of saying Mind, Suchness, the Void, the Godhead.) The question is asked in a Zen monastery by an earnest and bewildered novice. And with the prompt irrelevance of one of the Marx Brothers, The Master answers, “the Hedge at the bottom of the garden.”<sup>10</sup>

Freely mixing terminology from Christian theology, Advaita Vedānta, and Mahāyāna Buddhism, Huxley simultaneously makes two claims: that his experience of the flowers while on mescaline reveals ultimate reality according to these traditions, and that all the terms for the ultimate in these traditions actually refer to the same reality.<sup>11</sup> Thus Huxley confirms his Perennial Philosophy that all mystical traditions are paths toward the same goal; moreover, he asserts that he has attained at least a glimpse of this goal by means of four hundred milligrams of mescaline. While he draws freely from Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist terminology throughout his essay, he seems particularly predisposed to appropriating Buddhist ideas. In addition to using the terms “Dharma-Body” (Sanskrit *dharmakāya*), “Suchness” (*tathātā*) and “Void” (*śūnyatā*; emptiness), Huxley often uses “Not-self” (for Pāli *anattā*; or Sanskrit *anātman*), and “Mind at Large.”

Although “Mind at Large” is not a direct translation of a Buddhist concept, Huxley’s terminology strongly resembles the Buddhist doctrine of “mind-only” (Sanskrit *citta-matrā*). This view was maintained by a Mahāyāna school of thought known as Yogācāra, which was generally interpreted in mid-twentieth-century scholarship as a form of Buddhist idealism. Huxley contrasts Mind at Large with the philosopher Henri Bergson’s (1859–1941) notion that the brain is a reducing valve for sensory perception needed for biological survival.<sup>12</sup> According to Huxley, each of us possesses Mind at Large, which has the ability to directly apprehend infinite reality; however, as moderns we have become bound to our reduced, finite, conceptual minds and have lost the ancient wisdom of the mystical traditions to connect us to this reality. Hence, Huxley chose the epigram and title of his essay from a line in William Blake’s poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.”<sup>13</sup>

Here is an idea that is repeated several times in *The Doors of Perception*—that through mescaline or other psychedelics, one gains access

to “direct experience,” which bypasses conceptual thought and allows one to apprehend directly things as they are. Huxley writes,

We must preserve and, if necessary, intensify our ability to look at the world directly and not through that half opaque medium of concepts, which distorts every given fact into the all too familiar likeness of some generic label or explanatory abstraction. . . .

Systematic reasoning is something we could not, as a species or as individuals, possibly do without. But neither, if we are to remain sane, can we possibly do without direct perception, the more unsystematic the better, of the inner and outer worlds into which we have been born. This given reality is an infinite which passes all understanding and yet admits of being directly and in some ways totally apprehended.<sup>14</sup>

For Huxley, to be enlightened is “to be aware, always, of total reality in its immanent otherness,” and “to discover that we have always been where we ought to be.”<sup>15</sup> In order to effect this transformation, he asserts that a more “realistic, less exclusively verbal system of education” would permit, urge, and “even if necessary” compel one “to take an occasional trip through some chemical Door in the Wall into the world of transcendental experience.”<sup>16</sup> Huxley even goes so far as to say that if such an experience were terrifying, “it would be unfortunate but probably salutary.”<sup>17</sup> This radical notion that under certain circumstances people should be forced to ingest a psychedelic as part of their education has often been overlooked in discussions of Huxley’s views.

Huxley’s introduction to mescaline “psychedelicized” the author to the extent that it began a fascination with these drugs that would last until his deathbed injection of LSD in 1963.<sup>18</sup> As an outspoken advocate of psychedelic spirituality and a shameless borrower of Buddhist and other Asian religious terminology in relation to drug experience, Huxley exerted a powerful intellectual influence on the psychedelic revolution in the following decade.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, as a highly intellectual and articulate proponent of the positive value of psychedelics, he was one of the first members of an American psychedelic intelligentsia. He has been rightly labeled by James Fadiman as one of the “first wave of psychedelic pioneers,”<sup>20</sup> and his *The Doors of Perception* “has justly been called ‘the founding text of psychedelia.’”<sup>21</sup>

Another founding father from the fifties was R. Gordon Wasson (1898–1986). In 1955, he and his wife, Valentina Wasson, were invited by María Sabina, a Mazatec *curandera* (shaman), to take part in an all-night mushroom ritual.<sup>22</sup> At the time, Wasson was a vice-president in the international banking firm J. P. Morgan & Company, and an amateur ethnomycologist.<sup>23</sup> For many years, he and Valentina had been studying mushrooms and their role in different cultures, culminating in the publication of their book *Mushrooms, Russia, and History* in 1957.<sup>24</sup> In the same year, *Life* magazine<sup>25</sup> published Gordon's account of his experience with "Eva Mendez" (Wasson's pseudonym for María Sabina). This article was read by the Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary (1920–1996). Intrigued, Leary traveled to Cuernavaca, Mexico, and tried the magic mushrooms in the summer of 1960.<sup>26</sup> Thus in a strange twist of fate, a New York investment banker became one of the pioneers of the psychedelic revolution.

## THE PSYCHEDELIC SIXTIES

Upon his return to Harvard in autumn 1960, Leary began the Harvard Psilocybin Project, for which he planned to recruit graduate students and faculty members from the Boston area and give them controlled doses of psilocybin.<sup>27</sup> Psilocybin, the main psychoactive chemical in magic mushrooms, had been extracted and synthesized in 1958 by Albert Hoffmann (1906–2008), the Swiss chemist famous for synthesizing LSD-25 twenty years earlier, in 1938. As the Harvard Psilocybin Project grew, its cast of characters expanded. Foremost among them was Richard Alpert (b. 1931), a psychology department colleague and good friend of Leary's, who would transform into Ram Dass in 1967. Also among the Harvard intelligentsia were graduate students Ralph Metzner (b. 1936) and James Fadiman (b. 1939), and the undergraduate Andrew Weil (b. 1942), who ended up playing Judas to Leary's role as psychedelic Jesus.<sup>28</sup> In his account of this group, *The Harvard Psychedelic Club*, Don Lattin assigns special designations to the starring cast of characters: he calls Leary "Trickster"; Huston Smith (b. 1919) "Teacher" (he had a long, successful career as professor of comparative religions); Richard Alpert "Seeker" (he traveled to India, became

Ram Dass, and returned as a convert to Hinduism); and Andrew Weil “Healer” (he went on to become a medical doctor and *the* New Age guru of alternative medicine). In referring to Leary as the Trickster, Lattin puts a rather generous and archetypal spin on Leary’s flamboyant and at times outrageous and confrontational advocacy of psychedelic drugs.<sup>29</sup> In fact, Lattin describes Leary’s attitude toward psychedelics as “*messianic*”—an approach that ultimately alienated him from other psychedelic intelligentsia like Osmond, Huxley, and Smith, who were in favor of a more cautious and elitist approach.<sup>30</sup>

Since the project members were mainly psychologists, their initial approach was scientific; however, current psychology and science seemed to lack the necessary tools and vocabulary to give an account of the cataclysmic psychic upheavals that were occurring among psilocybin users (including the experimenters!). The result was a growing interest in religious and mystical experience. After some initial experiments with prison inmates into psilocybin’s therapeutic and rehabilitative potential, the group’s new interest in psilocybin’s potential to induce mystical experience culminated in what has become known as the Good Friday Experiment:

In a now-famous double-blind experiment performed in 1962 on Good Friday in a chapel of the Boston University Cathedral, divinity students were given either psilocybin or a placebo. To no one’s surprise, only those had taken the psychedelic sacrament reported what appeared to be bona fide mystical experiences.<sup>31</sup>

The Good Friday Experiment was designed by the graduate student Walter Pahnke (1931–1971), under the supervision of Leary. Pahnke was a medical doctor and Protestant minister whose field of research was mystical experience. He designed this experiment as a part of his Ph.D. in Religion and Society at Harvard, to test whether psychedelic drugs could induce authentic mystical experience.<sup>32</sup> Pahnke carefully screened and selected twenty seminary students from Andover Newton Theological Seminary. They gathered in the small basement sanctuary of Marsh Chapel on the Boston University campus for the Good Friday service. The charismatic Reverend Howard Thurmond delivered his sermon to his congregation, who were unaware of the experiment

being conducted below. The sermon and organ music were broadcast to the seminary students in the basement. Ten of them received thirty milligrams of psilocybin, while the other ten received a placebo of nicotinic acid. Within a short time, as Fields mentions, it was clear to everyone who got the psilocybin pills and who did not.

Huston Smith was one of the preselected guides for the experiment who received the psilocybin.<sup>33</sup> Thirty-four years after the event, Smith said in an interview that the Good Friday Experiment left a “permanent mark” on his “experienced worldview,” and that before the experiment he had had no direct personal encounter with God.<sup>34</sup> In Smith’s words, the event “was the most powerful cosmic homecoming I ever experienced.”<sup>35</sup> Since the sixties, Smith has been a vocal proponent of the religious potential of psychedelics.

Immediately after the experiment, Pahnke had the students fill out questionnaires, and he administered a follow-up questionnaire six months later. In order to assess whether the psychedelic drug experience resembled mystical experience, Pahnke developed a phenomenological typology based on nine categories: unity; transcendence of time and space; deeply felt positive mood; sense of sacredness, objectivity, and reality; paradoxicality; alleged ineffability; transiency; and persisting positive changes in attitude and behavior.<sup>36</sup> Subjects given psilocybin scored significantly higher on this typology of mystical experience.

From the sixth month follow-up interviews, Pahnke claims he was “left with the impression that the experience had made a profound impact (especially in terms of religious feeling and thinking) on the lives of eight out of ten of the subjects who had been given psilocybin.”<sup>37</sup> Rick Doblin, in his own follow-up study conducted twenty years later, supports Pahnke’s general conclusion.<sup>38</sup> However, Doblin argues that Pahnke downplayed the difficult or negative effects of the psilocybin experience for some of his subjects.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, Doblin asserts that after twenty years the overall long-term psychological effects of the Good Friday Experiment for test subjects appears to be positive.

Although Pahnke’s study was the project’s most scientifically rigorous and promising academic study of psychoactive drugs and mysticism, the group’s Harvard days were numbered. In 1963, the year Leary and Alpert were introduced to LSD, they were also dismissed from



Harvard. Having been cut loose from the Ivy League, the psychologists began their journey as the new gurus of the psychedelic revolution.<sup>40</sup> Their most important contribution to what I am calling “psychedelic Buddhism” was *The Psychedelic Experience* (1964), which they coauthored with Ralph Metzner.

*The Psychedelic Experience* was greatly influenced by another foundational text for contemporary psychedelic spirituality.<sup>41</sup> In the 1950s, Alan Watts (1915–1973) was one of the most prominent converts to Buddhism in the San Francisco Bay area, and an important popularizer and interpreter of East Asian religions. In the early 1960s, he experimented with psychedelics and wrote about his experiences and views in a short piece titled *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness*.

The main text of *The Joyous Cosmology* is only fourteen pages; however, the additional material attached—foreword, preface, prologue, and epilogue—is in many ways just as, if not more important. The foreword was written by Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, who at the time (January 1962) were still employed by the psychology department at Harvard University. Leary’s and Alpert’s unconditional endorsement added the social prestige of the Harvard name to Watts’s text, and is explicit from their opening sentence: “*The Joyous Cosmology* is a brilliant arrangement of words describing experiences for which our language has no vocabulary.”<sup>42</sup> The psychologists continue, “We are dealing here with an issue that is not new, an issue that has been considered for centuries by mystics, by philosophers of religious experience, and by those great scientists who have been able to move in and then out beyond the limits of the science game.”<sup>43</sup> As an example of a great scientist, the authors cite a passage from another Harvard psychologist, William James, about potential forms of consciousness outside the rational—a claim inspired by his use of nitrous oxide. Leary and Alpert also assert that substances such as psilocybin, mescaline, and LSD are “biochemical keys which unlock experiences shatteringly new to most Westerners.”<sup>44</sup> Citing their own research at Harvard, they conclude that “the drug is just an instrument” for realizing the potentialities of the human cortex.<sup>45</sup> And they maintain that “We have had to return again and again to the nondualistic conceptions of Eastern philosophy, a theory of mind made more explicit and familiar in our West-

ern world by Berson, Aldous Huxley, and Alan Watts.”<sup>46</sup> Here Leary and Alpert acknowledge Watts’s authority to write about Asian thought. Moreover, the authors state that *The Joyous Cosmology* is “more daring” than Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell*, because “Watts follows Mr. Huxley’s lead and pushes beyond.”<sup>47</sup>

Watts also pays tribute to Huxley in the opening sentences of his preface:

In *The Doors of Perception* Aldous Huxley has given us a superbly written account of the effects of mescaline upon a highly sensitive person. It was a record of his first experience of this remarkable transformation of consciousness and by now, through subsequent experiments, he knows that it can lead to far deeper insights than his book described. While I cannot hope to surpass Aldous Huxley as a master of English prose, I feel that the time is ripe for an account of some of the deeper, or higher, levels of insight that can be reached through these consciousness-changing “drugs” when accompanied with sustained philosophical reflection by a person who is in search, not of kicks, but of understanding.<sup>48</sup>

Watts claims that Huxley has gone beyond his insights in *The Doors of Perception*, and that the aim of his own essay is to explicate some of these “deeper or higher” levels of insight that both he and Huxley have obtained from their psychedelic experiences. For Watts, a major problem in modern thought is the disjunction between science and “direct experience.” Like Huxley, Leary, and Alpert, he believes direct experience to be the purview of religion, and specifically mysticism in the universalized sense of the word, as proposed by Huxley’s Perennial Philosophy. Watts maintains that “we” (human beings?) need a worldview in which the reports of science and religion “are concordant as those of the eyes and the ears.”<sup>49</sup> Thus Watts’s essay is in part an attempt to bridge the gap between science and religion through insights he has gained from using psychedelic drugs.

In his prologue to *The Joyous Cosmology*, Watts begins with the assertion that “one of the greatest of all superstitions is the separation of the mind from the body.”<sup>50</sup> He maintains that this division has led to a culture that “ever more serves the mechanical order as distinct

from those of organic enjoyment.”<sup>51</sup> What are required, he asserts, is the integration of the individual and the overcoming of this false dichotomy. According to him, “A very small number of Eastern *gurus*, or masters of wisdom, and Western psychotherapists have found—rather laborious—ways of tricking or coaxing the organism into integrating itself.”<sup>52</sup> Watts claims that certain forms of Eastern mysticism, particularly Taoism and Zen Buddhism, have cultivated a disciplined awareness of the relativity and mutual interrelation of all things and events as a direct experience, whereas science only understands this as a theoretical description.<sup>53</sup> However, Watts asserts that because Taoism and Zen are “so involved with the forms of Far Eastern culture,” there is a “major problem to adapt them to Western needs.”<sup>54</sup> He claims that his main interest in the study of “comparative mysticism” has been to identify “the essential psychological processes underlying those alterations of perception which enable us to see ourselves and the world in their basic unity.”<sup>55</sup> He also views the benefit of science to be its ability to find “simpler and more rational ways of doing things that were formerly chancy or laborious.”<sup>56</sup> Thus he concludes that science in the form of psychedelics (mescaline, psilocybin, and LSD) may supply the human organism with the “medicine” it needs to cure itself of its false sense of separateness and directly realize the integrated nature of reality. He believes that psychedelics provide “the raw materials for wisdom” and are useful to the extent that the individual can integrate what they reveal into “the whole pattern of his behaviour and the whole system of his knowledge.”<sup>57</sup>

The main text of *The Joyous Cosmology* is largely concerned with Watts’s poetic reflections on the aesthetics of his perceptual experiences (mainly visual and auditory) compiled from numerous psychedelic sessions but presented as a single session for literary purposes. He also includes some philosophical reflections on the nature of reality. A central motif of union or complementarity of opposites, reminiscent of Taoism, is a recurring theme. Another recurring theme, also found in certain Hindu philosophies, is the idea that human beings are actually God, merely playing (*līlā*) or pretending to be separate entities. Thus Watts freely appropriates Asian religious thought from Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism into his psychedelically induced philosophical speculations on the nature of reality.

In his epilogue, Watts summarizes his view on psychedelics:

Such aids to perception are medicines, not diets, and as the use of a medicine should lead on to a more healthful mode of living, so the experiences which I have described suggest measures we might take to maintain a sounder form of sanity. Of these the most important is the practice of what I would like to call meditation—were it not that this word often connotes spiritual or mental gymnastics.<sup>58</sup>

Here Watts explicates a model that would appear repeatedly in “psychedelic Buddhist” literature: psychedelics are not a spiritual path in themselves, but can be used in conjunction with Buddhist practice. In this passage, he suggests the practice of meditation, which he explains as a type of contemplation or “centering” whereby one lets one’s attention rest in the present moment and allows the contents of consciousness to happen without interference.<sup>59</sup> Watts’s description here is reminiscent of the Zen practice of “just sitting,” although he makes no direct reference to it. However, his *The Way of Zen* (1957) was one of the most widely read and popular books on the subject in the sixties, so he probably did not feel a need to cite a source for his views. Nevertheless, in this context he does mention the Buddhist notion of “void” as the recognition in meditation that life is “pattern-in-process” without substantial basis, thereby making the association with Buddhism explicit.<sup>60</sup>

Watts concludes *The Joyous Cosmology* with the following:

This is certainly the view of man disclosed by these remarkable medicines which temporarily dissolve our defences and permit us to see what separative consciousness normally ignores—the world as an interrelated whole. This vision is assuredly far beyond any drug-induced hallucination or superstitious fantasy. It wears a striking resemblance to the unfamiliar universe that physicists and biologists are trying to describe here and now. For the clear direction of their thought is toward the revelation of a unified cosmology, no longer sundered by the ancient irreconcilables of mind and matter, substance and attribute, thing and event, agent and act, stuff and energy. And if this should come to be a universe in which man is

neither thought nor felt to be a lonely subject confronted by alien and threatening objects, we shall have a cosmology not only unified but also joyous.<sup>61</sup>

This concluding passage reveals both the reason for the title and the overarching rationale for Watts's composition of the essay: to offer the outlines of a new unified cosmology that would repair the alienation caused by modernity's overly rationalized and mechanized view of humanity and nature. Watts (like Huxley) employs a universalistic and perennialist view of religion and mysticism and valorizes the category of direct experience in order to justify the use of psychedelics as spiritual medicines or "chemical keys" to unlock human beings' hidden potential to realize this new cosmology. The unbridled optimism of *The Joyous Cosmology* runs counter to the recent claim by David Smith, who argues that Watts's position on psychedelics was (unlike Timothy Leary's) guardedly optimistic, and that Watts was "in the counterculture but not of it."<sup>62</sup>

Aldous Huxley and Alan Watts were important influences on Leary, Alpert, and Metzner, and *The Doors of Perception* and *The Joyous Cosmology* were key ideological forerunners to *The Psychedelic Experience*. Timothy Leary first met Aldous Huxley on the evening of November 8, 1960 (the same day John F. Kennedy was elected U.S. President).<sup>63</sup> The dinner meeting was arranged and attended by Humphrey Osmond while Huxley was staying in Boston, having given a lecture series at MIT on visionary experience. Ironically, both Osmond's and Huxley's first impression of Leary was that he was "a bit stuffy."<sup>64</sup> Leary, however, appears to have deeply admired Huxley, and therefore it is not surprising that he was encouraged or at least inspired by him (either directly or by example) to write a psychedelic guidebook. In *The Doors of Perception* Huxley mentions *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* a number of times.<sup>65</sup> At one point, Huxley describes how his wife, Laura, asked him if he could focus his attention on the "Clear Light" described in the Tibetan text. He responded that he might be able to if there were someone there to guide him. Leary et al. dedicate *The Psychedelic Experience* to Huxley and quote this very passage from *The Doors*, thereby making the association of their book with Huxley's text explicit.

The basic structure of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (*Bar-do thos-grol*) is as a guidebook to be read to the recently deceased to aid his or her consciousness through various intermediary states (*bardos*) prior to its rebirth in a new material form. During the first *bardo* (Chikhai Bardo), deceased persons experience the Clear Light, and if adequately prepared, they are able to enter this Clear Light and realize the ultimate reality of the Dharma body (*dharmakāya*). If one does not attain the Clear Light in the first *bardo*, a number of other *bardos* appear containing both wrathful and beneficent deities, all of which are the result of one's previous karmic conditioning. At various stages, if one is unafraid, one may realize that these visionary phenomena are intrinsically empty of inherent nature and thereby attain enlightenment.

The Western appropriation of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* has been examined in some detail by Donald Lopez in his erudite study of Tibetan Buddhism's reception in the West, *Prisoners of Shangri-La* (1998). The Tibetan *Bar-do thos-grol* was first edited and translated into English by W. Y. Evans-Wentz and Lāma Kazi Dawa-Samdup in 1927. In his study, Lopez aptly demonstrates Evans-Wentz's idiosyncratic interpretation of the Tibetan text based on his own Theosophical beliefs.<sup>66</sup> Thus in adapting Evans-Wentz's English translation as a guidebook for the psychedelic trip, the Harvard psychologists were continuing a tradition of Western appropriation of the Tibetan text.

In order to adapt *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Leary, Alpert and Metzner needed to decontextualize it and reinterpret its meaning. As Lopez points out, they do this in the same way Evans-Wentz appropriated the *Bar-do thos-grol*: they "resort to the trope of esoteric meaning."<sup>67</sup> According to the Harvard psychologists, the real or the true esoteric meaning of the Tibetan text is not about physical death at all, but about what they refer to as the "death of the Ego." This concept was intimately connected to Leary's theory of psychosocial games. As Daniel Pinchbeck points out in his new introduction to the 2007 edition of *The Psychedelic Experience*,<sup>68</sup> the guidebook makes mention continuously of "the selfish, game-involved nature of man," "selfish game desire," and the "ego-game," which were mainly Leary's terminology, and are completely foreign to the Tibetan text and Evans-Wentz's *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Thus this emphasis on overcoming "games" through "ego-death" during the psychedelic experience is Leary's

superimposition onto the Tibetan text. Leary, Metzner, and Alpert define “games” in their introduction as:

behavioral sequences defined by roles, rules, rituals, goals, strategies, values, language, characteristic space-time locations and characteristic patterns of movement. Any behavior not having these nine features is non-game: this includes physiological reflexes, spontaneous play, and transcendent awareness.<sup>69</sup>

With this model in mind, the former Harvard psychologists call the first *bardo* “The Period of Ego-Loss or Non-Game Ecstasy,” and associate it with the peak of the psychedelic experience. “If when undergoing ego-loss, one is familiar with this state, by virtue of previous experience and preparation, the Wheel of Rebirth (i.e. all game playing) is stopped, and liberation instantaneously is achieved.”<sup>70</sup> For the authors of *The Psychedelic Experience*, the later *bardo* states represent the return of the ego and ego games, and may result in psychedelic hallucinations. Thus, Leary, Metzner and Alpert valorized the experience of a particular altered state they had experienced during their use of psychedelics, which they then associated with the Tibetan Buddhist description of the Clear Light. This altered state becomes the ultimate goal and purpose of the psychedelic experience and is synonymous with Buddhist enlightenment. Other types of experience while on psychedelics are considered (at best) preliminary states along the way, or the side effects of overinvolvement in the ego games of conventional “square” society.

One of the major objectives in creating the guidebook was the unification of science and religion through the use of psychedelics. Lopez writes, “What Leary, Metzner, and Alpert added to Evans-Wentz is the conviction that the harmony of science and religion that Evans-Wentz could only prophesy had now become true, and was accessible to all through the use of LSD.”<sup>71</sup> In their introduction, the authors write:

The Vedic sages knew the secret; the Eleusinian initiated knew it; the Tantrics knew it. In all their esoteric writings they whispered the message: it is possible to cut beyond ego-consciousness, to tune in on neurological processes which flash by at the speed of light, and to

become aware of the enormous treasury of ancient radical knowledge welded into the nucleus of every cell in your body.

Modern psychedelic chemicals provide a key to this forgotten realm of awareness. . . . Now for the first time, we possess the means of providing enlightenment to any prepared volunteer. . . . For these reasons we have prepared this psychedelic version of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The secret is released once again, in a new dialect, and we sit back quietly to observe whether man is ready to move ahead and to make use of the new tools provided by modern science.<sup>72</sup>

Here Leary et al. express the same religious universalism proposed by Huxley and Alan Watts concerning mystical experience, and the corollary belief that that experience can be induced by psychedelics. Like Watts, they propose the unification of religion and science through the use of psychedelic chemicals.

In the new introduction to the 2007 edition of *The Psychedelic Experience*, Daniel Pinchbeck writes: “This quick grafting of entheogenic exploration onto Tibetan Buddhism could be seen as reflecting the absorptive ethos and narcissistic emphasis of our American mind-set, which tends to see all other cultures and resources as fodder to feed its experience, material desires, and knowledge base.”<sup>73</sup> Pinchbeck’s critical views well depict the change in ethos among psychedelic intellectuals of the generation subsequent to the baby boomers. His comments on this imposition of the authors’ ideas onto the Tibetan text are insightful:

Apparently, the tripper’s nefarious ambitions to succeed in the game-worlds of modern life needed to be purged in the hallucinatory fire of the entheogenic encounter. In this respect and many others, *The Psychedelic Experience* overlays a simplistic and moralizing psychological perspective on the subtler and more profound exegesis of an ancient spiritual science found in the original text.<sup>74</sup>

In fact, Leary, Metzner, and Alpert placed such emphasis on their concepts of ego loss and nongame behavior that it entirely pervades their interpretation of the *bar-do thos-grol*, to the extent that they go so far as rewriting (with no reference to the changes) a direct quote



from Evans-Wentz's commentary. They change Evans-Wentz's "Liberation of the 'life-flux' from the dying body" to "Liberation of the 'life-flux' from the ego"; "from the moment of conscious death to the moment of conscious rebirth" to "from the moment of the ego-loss to the moment of conscious rebirth (eight hours later)"; and "practical directions for performing the Transference, which the editor possesses, the process is essentially *yogīc*" to "practical directions for ego-loss states, the ability to maintain a non-game ecstasy throughout the entire experience."<sup>75</sup> The reason for these changes is clear: the authors interpret the Buddhist text as only exoterically about the transference of consciousness at actual bodily death and its true, esoteric meaning as about "ego-death."

Although *The Psychedelic Experience* may seem naïve and simplistic to the contemporary reader, fifty years after it was first published, at the time it was an immensely popular countercultural text employed as a guidebook for the LSD trip by countless hippies. By the mid-nineties, the manual had gone through sixteen editions and been translated into seven languages.<sup>76</sup> Thus, *The Psychedelic Experience* was foundational in establishing a connection between Buddhism and psychedelics and has had a continued and lasting impact on the collective countercultural imagination. The authors' cultural and intellectual prestige as (former) Harvard psychologists no doubt helped to legitimate this connection. Given that their readers knew very little about Buddhism or psychedelics at the time, these new psychedelic gurus were positioned to have a major impact on popular perceptions. And as the authors themselves point out in their introduction, the nature of the psychedelic experience "depends almost entirely on set and setting."<sup>77</sup> "Set" refers to one's mental state; "setting" refers to the physical and social milieu in which the drug is taken. Thus it seems fairly obvious that if one takes a psychedelic using the Harvard psychologists' Buddhist guidebook for the purpose, the trip will be shaped by a set and setting informed by Buddhism.

Once Leary, Alpert, and Metzner left Harvard, after some time wandering around, they set up camp at Millbrook, a mansion estate in upstate New York. It was lent to them by Peggy, Billy, and Tommy Hitchcock, the wealthy heirs of the Mellon fortune.<sup>78</sup> At Millbrook, "The group begins a series of experiments in group living, designed to

help apply the unitive insights of psychedelic experience into the mundane details of interpersonal and group relationships.”<sup>79</sup> Leary soon evolved into “The Acid Guru” of the sixties due both to his flamboyant and controversial style and media hype.<sup>80</sup> His eventual arrest, imprisonment, and apparent torture as a political prisoner have been chronicled recently in Joanna Harcourt-Smith’s autobiography, *Tripping the Bardo with Timothy Leary: My Psychedelic Love Story* (2013).<sup>81</sup>

While Leary and company carried out their explorations on the East Coast, the psychedelic revolution was being jump-started on the West Coast by a very different cast of characters. In his classic, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*,<sup>82</sup> the journalist Tom Wolfe chronicles the misadventures of author Ken Kesey and his group of followers, collectively known as the Merry Pranksters. Strangely enough, Kesey, acclaimed author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962)<sup>83</sup> and *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964)<sup>84</sup> and icon of the sixties counterculture, began his psychedelic career as a human guinea pig for experimentation covertly financed by the Central Intelligence Agency. While living on the infamous bohemian Perry Lane in Menlo Park in the early sixties, Kesey volunteered at Menlo Park Veterans Hospital to be a subject for experiments with psychoactive substances funded by the CIA’s Project MKUltra.<sup>85</sup> As part of these experiments, he was given various substances such as LSD, mescaline, and psilocybin. Kesey was also working the night shift on the psychiatric ward, where he gained access to the various psychedelics that were being tested, and often worked while tripping. These experiences formed the inspiration for his first novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. After its success, Kesey, with family and close friends, moved to a log house in La Honda, California, and kicked off an entirely different type of psychedelic scene from Leary’s group.

Whereas Millbrook was characterized by a highly introspective atmosphere spiced with heavy Asian flavors, Kesey’s group was extremely extroverted. Thus their goals were in many ways opposed. Kesey’s crowd were literally trying to “blow their minds” with sensory overload and used outlandish costumes, Day-Glo colors, music, and lights to draw as many people as possible into what they called “The Movie.” Consonant with their flair for the flamboyant, group members adopted special names similar to comic book superheroes: Mountain Girl, Speed Limit, Sensuous X, Doris Delay, Cool Breeze; Kesey was

known as The Chief, and collectively they were the Merry Pranksters. The Pranksters threw massive LSD parties they called Acid Tests, joining forces with a band called the Warlocks (soon to become the Grateful Dead) to create venues in which trippers would be bombarded by lights, music, and colors of all varieties.

In the summer of 1964, the Pranksters made their infamous trip across the country, fueled by copious amounts of acid and speed, in their Day-Glo colored bus named Furthur (driven by Neal Cassady, the beatnik made famous by Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*). Eventually this motley crew arrived at Millbrook. There they found Leary unavailable, and the whole scene rather uptight. Dubbing the Millbrook scene "The Crypt Trip," the Pranksters quickly moved on.<sup>86</sup>

Unlike the introspective Eastern elites in the Leary group, the Pranksters were not interested in Asian religion, but sought to revel in the ecstatic hedonism of sensory overload as its own type of spiritual experience. In the words of Tom Wolfe,

Everyone had his own thing he was working out, but it all fit into the group thing, which was—"the Unspoken Thing," said Page Browning, and that was as far as anyone wanted to go with words. . . .

If there was ever a group devoted totally to the here and now, it was the Pranksters. I remember puzzling over this. There was something so . . . *religious* in the air, in the very atmosphere of the Prankster life, and yet one couldn't put one's finger on it. On the face of it there was just a group of people who had shared an unusual psychological state, the LSD experience—

But exactly! The *experience*—that was the word! and it began to fall into place. In fact, none of the great founded religions . . . none of them began with a philosophical framework or even a main idea. They all began with an overwhelming *new experience*.<sup>87</sup>

The Pranksters were all about turning on as many people to this new experience as possible with the devotion of a religious quest. Without a doubt, they introduced many hundreds, if not thousands, in the Bay area to LSD, and must be considered key players in the psychedelic revolution.

By the mid-sixties there was definitely something "happening," and that "thing" (the counterculture) included a liberal use of psychedel-

ics. However, there could be no psychedelic revolution without easily available drugs. This problem was solved by people like Owsley Stanley (a genius chemist and early sound engineer for the Grateful Dead)<sup>88</sup> and the Brotherhood of Eternal Love (the infamous “Hippie Mafia” from Orange County, California), who supplied thousands (if not millions) of high-quality, cheap (or sometimes free) hits of LSD to the people.<sup>89</sup> What was so distinctive about Owsley and the Brotherhood was their altruistic intent. These people were not capitalist entrepreneurs exploiting a new market, but more like religious crusaders trying to bring about a revolution in consciousness. For example, after experiencing the mind-shattering effects of a full-blown LSD trip using *The Psychedelic Experience*, John Griggs, the leader of the Brotherhood, had what amounted to a religious revelation. Griggs idealized Timothy Leary and truly believed that giving LSD to as many people as possible was going to make the world a better place.<sup>90</sup> This kind of naïve conviction in the intrinsic goodness of LSD and its ability to make people better—more spiritual, more peaceful, more loving, etc.—is characteristic of the early psychedelic movement.

Like the Millbrook group, many people on the West Coast believed that LSD didn’t just change one’s consciousness, but “expanded consciousness.” And at a time when the Vietnam War was raging, the threat of nuclear holocaust seemed imminent (the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 was the closest the world has ever come to nuclear war), and the President of the United States had recently been gunned down in Texas (the assassination of John F. Kennedy took place in Dallas on November 22, 1963), many in the counterculture believed that our very survival as a species depended on the expanded consciousness possible through LSD. In conversation with psychedelicists, I have heard more than once the statement that the discovery of LSD by Albert Hoffman was a divine revelation meant to save us from the recently invented atomic bomb.<sup>91</sup>

The epicenter of the psychedelic revolution and the hippie counterculture was the Bay area, specifically the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. In the words of Rick Fields,

The center of activity was of course the Haight-Ashbury district, which was just a short stroll from the Soto Zen mission, Sokoji, and

its American offshoot the San Francisco Zen Center. But the spiritual atmosphere was more than Zen—it was eclectic, visionary, polytheistic, ecstatic, and defiantly devotional.

This religious eclecticism is distinctive of the counterculture and well exemplified in the hippie classic *Be Here Now*, written by Ram Dass (Richard Alpert).<sup>93</sup> Dass freely blends aspects of Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, Goddess worship, yoga, and psychedelics into his “cookbook for a sacred life.” Another example of the zeitgeist of the counterculture can be found in the pages of the underground newspaper, the *San Francisco Oracle*, which was printed from September 1966 to February 1968.<sup>94</sup> Fields writes,

North American Indians, Shiva, Kali, Buddha, tarot, astrology, Saint Francis, Zen, and tantra all combined to sell fifty thousand copies on the streets that were suddenly teeming with people. When the *Oracle* printed the Heart Sutra, it presented a double spread of the Zen Center version complete with Chinese characters, but also with a naked goddess, drawn in the best Avalon ballroom psychedelic.<sup>95</sup>

Thus San Francisco in the mid-sixties was ground zero for a new outlook, a new cultural force that freely blended the exotic East, the esoteric West, the occult, mysticism, and psychedelics.<sup>96</sup> Buddhism was definitely part of the mix, and it seems that the time was right for a major influx of new religious ideas and approaches.

If one could define a single moment and a single location that represented the peak of the countercultural movement, a prime candidate would be “A Gathering of the Tribes for a Human Be-In,” which took place in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park on January 14, 1967.<sup>97</sup> An estimated twenty-five thousand people<sup>98</sup> attended this event, held ostensibly in protest of new legislation outlawing LSD that came into effect in California in autumn 1966. Notable speakers at the Be-In included Allen Ginsberg (Beat poet turned hippie), Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Richard Alpert (soon to become Ram Dass), and Timothy Leary. At this event, Leary, with flowers in his hair, proclaimed his infamous, “Turn on, tune in, drop out.” Ginsberg played the drums, and several notable bands played, including the Grateful Dead. Owsley pro-

vided massive amounts of LSD. For the first time disparate groups of the counterculture—Beats, hippies, Berkeley radicals—came together as a single group. Even the Hell’s Angels showed up. The smell of revolution was in the air.<sup>99</sup>

The Human Be-In was the prelude to the “Summer of Love,” which took place in Haight-Ashbury later that year. The district became the home of thousands of young people, who came from everywhere to gather for an experiment in living the ideals of the counterculture.<sup>100</sup> The experiment was short-lived; by October the honeymoon was over and many, disillusioned by the increasing violent crime and use of addictive drugs like cocaine and heroin, decided to leave. The revolution was not over, however.

The counterculture was a dense amalgam of interwoven strands. Some of these were protests against and rejection of the Vietnam War, Cold War politics,<sup>101</sup> the Protestant work ethic, traditional sexual mores, and capitalism; and the embrace of sexual liberation, women’s rights, civil rights, long hair, beards, alternative communal living, smoking marijuana, acid rock, Asian religions, the occult, mysticism, yoga, and (of course) psychedelics. A description of the phenomenon of the counterculture as a “total social fact” of the sixties alternative scene (which was always a minority, albeit a highly visible and vocal one) is beyond the scope of this study. However, both Buddhism and psychedelics were major elements.

So when did the psychedelic revolution end? Some might say that it never did—it only went underground. However, I believe there was a shift within the collective countercultural imagination toward psychedelics that took place in 1969, which forever ended the unabashed idealism that viewed LSD as a holy, sacramental wonder drug. Of course, all sociohistorical phenomena are complexly woven into vast intercausal networks, including the disillusionment of the baby boomer hippies about the salvific power of acid. One could point to the commodification of hippie styles of dress, music, and psychedelia by consumerist society; or the criminal elements and hard drugs that began to appear after LSD was made illegal in 1966; or the failure of the movement to end the war in Vietnam; or poverty, racism, greed, or violence; or even too many “bad trips” as bringing about the end of sixties idealism. However, if one had to find a single event to represent the

baby boomers' end of Eden or fall from psychedelic paradise, which irrevocably shattered the hippie idealism of a LSD-spawned Brave New World, one could do it with two words: Charles Manson.<sup>102</sup>

Much has been written about Manson and his cult followers, known as “the Family,” so I will merely summarize the events leading to the members' arrests and convictions for murder.<sup>103</sup> Sometime early in the summer of 1969, Manson, inspired by his bizarre interpretation of the Beatles' song “Helter Skelter” (on the B-side to their *White Album* released in 1968), became convinced that a global race war was about to ensue between blacks and whites, leading to the end of the world.<sup>104</sup> Manson believed that the blacks would be victorious and then, being unable to govern themselves, would elect him as their new leader and messiah. Manson saw it as his religious mission to start this race war, which he and the Family called “Helter Skelter.” He thought that they could do this by killing Caucasians and then framing African-Americans for their crimes.

The Family began their killing spree in July with the murder of Gary Hinman, a 34-year-old music teacher living in Malibu—a crime seemingly motivated more by Hinman's inheritance money than anything else.<sup>105</sup> Then on August 9, 1969 (a week before Woodstock, the swan song of the sixties counterculture), Manson sent four Family members to 10050 Cielo Drive, Santa Monica, to destroy the house and its occupants. The residence had been the home of a music producer who had snubbed Manson, but unknown to Manson, it was currently being rented to the movie producer Roman Polanski and his actress wife, Sharon Tate. That evening, the Family brutally murdered the pregnant Tate (Polanski was away in London directing a film), three of her friends—Wojciech Frykowski, Jay Sebring, and Abigail Folger—and Steven Parent, who had been visiting William Garretson, the caretaker of the property. Then on the following night, on orders from Manson, six Family members murdered Leno and Rosemary LaBianca (seemingly randomly chosen victims) in Los Angeles.

By December, Manson and several Family members had been arrested. The following seven-month trial, which began on June 15, 1970, was a media circus and attracted the most publicity ever for a U.S. murder trial.<sup>106</sup> The brutal homicides have been popularly imagined as marking “an end to an era of free love, peace, and happiness” and as a watershed event in the United States; they remain a subject of pop-

ular interest and debate to this day.<sup>107</sup> In fact, according to the chief prosecutor, Vincent Bugliosi, next to Jack the Ripper, Charles Manson is “probably the most famous and most notorious mass murderer ever.”<sup>108</sup> Manson, who is currently serving a life sentence in prison, has received more mail than any other prisoner in U.S. history (much of which is fan mail from neo-Fascists, racists, and Satanists),<sup>109</sup> and his name has become synonymous with “evil” in the popular culture.

The Manson Family’s use of psychedelic drugs was well known at the time of their trial. In a study conducted prior to the convictions, fifty-four college students were asked to write “their explanations for the close and unusual relationships in the Manson Family.”<sup>110</sup> The number one single factor chosen by most students was the negative effects of drugs.<sup>111</sup> Thus these murders marked the end of any kind naïve belief in LSD as a salvific wonder drug. In the words of historian Christian Elcock,

If some elements of American society thought that LSD was the solution to all the ills of mankind, then Manson, acid-guru, self-proclaimed “almighty God of Fuck,” murderer and rapist, who led his acid-fuelled followers to slaughter, seriously called into question these abilities. After such spectacular publicity, it was clear that the public would never take such claims seriously.<sup>112</sup>

No doubt the Manson trial would have been enough to put many a would-be tripper off from ever trying LSD. Even die-hard enthusiasts of acid and the psychedelic intelligentsia committed to LSD’s therapeutic, spiritual, creative, and recreational use had to reconsider the possible dangers of misusing psychedelic drugs. As Ralph Metzner states,

It [a psychedelic] has to be taken with that [ritualized] kind of intention and preparation. The way the shamans in the Amazon do with ayahuasca and the Native American Church folks do with peyote. And just taking a pill without that preparation and intention doesn’t do that. The Charles Manson story really brought that point home to me. Here he was, taking LSD and using it to brainwash his followers to be sex slaves and killers. That really brought home the truth of the set and setting principle.<sup>113</sup>



Metzner's view, of course, evolved out of his Millbrook experiences, and was to become an influential element in the psychedelic movement's evolution into entheology, which began in the late 1970s.

The Manson Family murders symbolized for many the death of 1960s idealism. However, the real end may have been caused by something less dramatic but in the long run more corrosive. As a youth-driven movement, the counterculture possessed the unbridled optimism and idealism of the young. It is likely that the belief in the saving power of LSD was just one aspect of this idealism that for many was dashed against the rocks of the grim social realities that must be faced with adulthood. Hunter S. Thompson aptly expresses this disillusionment:

This was the fatal flaw in Tim Leary's trip. He crashed around America selling "consciousness expansion" without ever giving a thought to the grim meat-hook realities that were lying in wait for all the people who took him too seriously. . . . Not that they didn't deserve it: No Doubt they all Got What Was Coming to Them. All those pathetically eager acid freaks who thought they could buy Peace and Understanding for three bucks a hit. But their loss and failure is ours, too. What Leary took down with him was the central illusion of a whole life-style that he helped create . . . a generation of permanent cripples, failed seekers, who never understood the essential old-mystic fallacy of the Acid Culture: the desperate assumption that somebody—or at least some *force*—is tending that Light at the end of the tunnel.<sup>114</sup>

### THE SEVENTIES AND EIGHTIES, ECSTASY AND ENTHEOLOGY

In 1971, President Richard Nixon declared a "War on Drugs," which has raged on for four decades since, cost billions of U.S. dollars, and by all accounts been a dismal failure. In the 1970s, the use of heroin and cocaine increased, and cocaine use reached epidemic proportions in the mid-eighties.<sup>115</sup> Although all legal research on psychedelics had stopped with the criminalization of LSD and psilocybin in the sixties, members of the psychedelic subculture continued their own clandestine research and exploration. One of the most significant develop-

ments in the following decades was the appearance of a new substance in the seventies, which gained in popularity in the eighties: MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxy-*N*-methylamphetamine), or ecstasy.

The growth and popularity of MDMA (a.k.a. Adam, ecstasy, XTC, X, E, Molly) largely can be attributed to the genius chemist and rogue psychedelic inventor/adventurer Alexander (“Sasha”) Shulgin (1925–2014). According to James Fadiman, Shulgin (along with Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, Ralph Metzner, and Huston Smith) ranks as one of the “second wave” psychedelic pioneers.<sup>116</sup> Born in 1925, Shulgin grew up to be a gifted chemist, earning his Ph.D. in biochemistry from Berkeley in 1954.<sup>117</sup> As an independent researcher, he is reported to have discovered, synthesized, and tested on himself over 230 new psychoactive compounds.<sup>118</sup>

Although MDMA was first synthesized by Anton Köllisch and patented by Merck Pharmaceuticals in Germany in 1912,<sup>119</sup> its psychoactive properties were not known. After hearing an account of self-experimentation with MDMA by a chemistry graduate student, Sasha Shulgin synthesized some and began his own experimentation in the late sixties.<sup>120</sup> He discovered that unlike classic psychedelics such as LSD, psilocybin, and mescaline, MDMA did not produce visual hallucinations or strong distortions in cognition or perception. Rather, the drug seemed to enhance perception, increase empathy, decrease fear and inhibition, and produce euphoric bodily sensations.<sup>121</sup> Sensing that MDMA might be useful in a therapeutic setting, Shulgin introduced a therapist friend, Leo Zeff, to the substance in 1977.<sup>122</sup> Zeff went on to use it himself in therapy and introduce it to perhaps thousands of other therapists throughout the United States and the world.<sup>123</sup>

By the early eighties, MDMA had become popular at nightclubs and among partygoers in the Dallas area; and by the late eighties it had become an integral part of the emerging rave party scene.<sup>124</sup> Ecstasy became in the eighties and nineties the “love drug” of the next generation. Like the idealistic baby boomer hippies, many Generation Xers were swept up in a wave of euphoria about the utopian possibilities of a new drug. For many, the rave scene was more than a weekend party—it was a spiritual happening involving ecstatic dance, peace, love, loss of ego, and communion with the group.<sup>125</sup> As with LSD, the growing popularity of MDMA led to the federal government scheduling it as an illegal substance by 1985. However, this seems to have had little effect

on the increasing use of the drug, and the rave scene continued to spread to the United Kingdom, Europe, and the rest of the world.

The end of the seventies and the early eighties also mark the beginning of what Aline Lucas has called “entheology”<sup>126</sup>—a new nomenclature for and way of talking about certain psychoactives that are used specifically in religious, spiritual, or ritualized contexts. Entheology derives from the term “entheogen” (*en-* “engendering” or “becoming”; *theo*, “the divine”), first introduced by Carl Ruck, Jeremy Bigwood, Danny Staples, Jonathan Ott, and Gordon Watson in 1979<sup>127</sup> and subsequently adopted by many members of the psychedelic subculture.<sup>128</sup> As discussed in chapter 1, Robert Jesse is a strong proponent of the term, and his article titled “Entheogens: A Brief History of Their Spiritual Use,” included in *Zig Zag Zen*, lists several psychoactives that he considers entheogens: peyote, psilocybin mushrooms, ayahuasca, the Vedic *soma*, the Greek *kykeon*, cannabis, LSD, and MDMA. In using the term “entheogens” for these substances, modern enthusiasts are intentionally distancing themselves from the term “psychedelic” and its associations with the sixties and hippies.<sup>129</sup> Also, by applying the term to substances that have been used throughout history (often in shamanic or religious contexts) as well as to more recent synthetic chemicals (LSD and MDMA, for instance), they are attempting to attribute more universal, sacred, and sacramental status to the latter. “Entheology” in the general sense proposed by Lucas refers to any kind of theological reflection (broadly understood to include other religions besides Christianity) based on the religious/spiritual/sacramental use of psychoactive substances.<sup>130</sup> It also implies a value judgment that the most beneficial, therapeutic, valuable, and meaningful use of these substances is within a ritualized or sacramental context.

## THE NINETIES AND BEYOND

On July 17, 1990, U.S. President George Bush proclaimed the nineties to be “the Decade of the Brain.”<sup>131</sup> This proclamation nicely captures the national zeitgeist of a decade that witnessed rapid advances in brain science and brain imaging technologies, and the most significant

pharmacological intervention for mental illness in world history. The antidepressant Prozac, first introduced into the market in 1988, was by 1990 the most widely prescribed pharmaceutical drug in the United States.<sup>132</sup> And as of 2011, the U.S. government estimates that one in ten Americans is taking some type of antidepressant medication.<sup>133</sup>

Prozac (fluoxetine) was the first in a new line of drugs known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). These drugs block the receptor sites for the neurotransmitter serotonin in the brain's neural synapses, which increases the presence of serotonin at those sites. For reasons still largely unknown, the presence of more serotonin is linked with feelings of well-being (MDMA also causes a massive release of serotonin in the brain's synapses), and SSRIs have proven effective in treating people with depression. Interestingly, there appears to be a direct connection between the discovery of LSD and the invention of SSRIs. According to the Royal Society of Chemistry,

The connection between mental illness and disturbances of neurochemistry was firmly cemented into place by the discovery of LSD. The idea was extremely controversial and not widely embraced, and the implications were enormous.

This LSD-serotonin connection served as a major catalyst for the revolution in neuroscience that continues unabated today. The role of serotonin in the brain continues to be a topic of extremely high research interest. Drugs that alter serotonin neurotransmission include the new generation antidepressants such as Prozac (fluoxetine), Zoloft (sertraline), and others, which lack the toxic effects of older generation drugs. Modern treatments for migraine are also based on drugs that interact with serotonin receptors. Some of the best drugs to treat schizophrenia also bind to brain serotonin receptors.

In the intense study of brain serotonin systems that followed the discovery of LSD, many new tools, insights, and perspectives were gained that spilled over into related research areas. It is simply impossible to imagine what the neuroscience research world and our understanding of the brain would be like today had LSD never been discovered.<sup>134</sup>

The subsequent "serotonin revolution" dramatically demonstrated the potential of pharmacology to improve people's quality of life,

and may have been a contributing factor in the renaissance of FDA-approved psychedelic research that began in the 1990s.<sup>135</sup> It seems that once the backlash against the counterculture's psychedelic idealism had run out of steam by the end of the eighties, a new generation was ready to take a closer look at the psychopharmacological potential of previously demonized substances for medical and therapeutic use.

In the nineties there were also a number of important developments in the recreational and spiritual use of psychoactives that shaped the psychedelic subculture in the United States. Significant among these was the emergence of a new alternative festival known as Burning Man, a gathering that takes place each year on a barren plain of cracked clay known as "the Playa" in the Black Rock Desert of northern Nevada during the week leading up to Labor Day weekend. Beginning in 1986 as little more than a San Francisco beach party, Burning Man quickly evolved in the nineties into a massive weeklong alternative "happening," which has spawned a global community and in 2010 had over fifty thousand participants.<sup>136</sup>

Burning Man, however, is more than a big party; for many participants the event has profound spiritual significance, and entheogens often play a central role. Lee Gilmore, in her otherwise careful study of ritual and spirituality at Burning Man, intentionally downplays the important role of psychoactive substances at the festival.<sup>137</sup> A number of the people in my study mentioned their active involvement in Burning Man and the use of drugs at the event. When I asked Bart (via e-mail), one longtime "Burner" (participant in the event) about Burning Man's association with drug use, he responded:

Purely as a matter of cultural history, the existence of Burning Man is impossible to imagine without entheogens. . . . Numerous scenes which thrive at Burning Man are basically organized around entheogens, including the rave communities, the third-generation hippies, the festival traveller culture, and, to a lesser extent, the renegade punk/metal pyrotechnic fixer scene. Those groups . . . find a common destination in Burning Man in part because of their shared value for entheogens and the qualities of experience they evoke. The core values of the Burning Man community are precisely those that are brought to the fore by entheogens: serendipity, wonder, chaos,

luminosity, prankster humor, openness, compassion, surrealism, transcendence. It may be a dirty little secret that the organizers of the event cannot publicly acknowledge, but for a huge percentage of participants, entheogens are a magical key that unlock the heart and free it to hear the message of the Playa.<sup>138</sup>

I also asked Liz (a 28-year-old white female) in a Skype interview about her experience of Burning Man, and the following exchange took place:

LIZ: Yeah, and you immediately get a sense of family, of everyone having the same, the same make-up; for lack of a better term. I did MDMA and 2-C-I while I was there [Burning Man]. Everyone I know, everyone in my camp and my friends' camp, did something while they were there.

ME: I see. How did you acquire these substances?

LIZ: There was kind of a lot of free trade of whatever we had that went on. I brought several grams of mushrooms to give away. I was happy to give them away. I had no interest in trading. I just wanted people to have fun.

ME: Were they your own home-grown mushrooms?

LIZ: Yeah.

Although these are the views of only two individuals,<sup>139</sup> they seem to summarize well the ethos of Burning Man, as well as much of rave, techno, psychedelic trance, and doof (Australian bush party) culture. For instance, about drugs at rave and techno dance parties, Anthony D'Andrea writes,

Among intoxicating elements, drugs stand out for their corporeal and political implications. They amplify extraordinary experiences, whether in dance or spiritual scenes. LSD and MDMA provide two different phenomenological registers. While LSD (acid) propitiates a *psychedelic asceticism* enacted by mental states of hyper-imagination and mystical transcendence, MDMA (ecstasy) creates an *oceanic eroticism* expressed by affective states of excruciating pleasures and overflowing immanence.<sup>140</sup>

In all of these alternative festival and dance scenes there is an attempt to create what theorist Hakim Bey calls a “Temporary Autonomous Zone” (TAZ) outside the bounds of wider society wherein entheogenic, hedonistic, communal, and ecstatic experiences can occur.<sup>141</sup> Thus, for many participants these events are spiritual happenings wherein psychoactive substances play an important, even sacramental role.

Another significant development of the nineties was the rapid growth of “ayahuasca tourism.” Ayahuasca, or *yagé*, is a psychoactive brew in which DMT (*N,N*-Dimethyltryptamine) is the active ingredient, traditionally used in Amazonian basin shamanism. Ayahuasca is also used sacramentally by two syncretistic Christian churches originating in Brazil in the twentieth century: Santo Daime and União do Vegetal (UDV).<sup>142</sup> Since the nineties, there has been a veritable explosion of interest among North Americans in ayahuasca, which has led to numerous scholarly publications on the subject<sup>143</sup> and a blossoming tourist industry of people traveling to South America to take part in ayahuasca rituals and ayahuasca shamans traveling to the United States to carry out the same.<sup>144</sup>

Within the wider context of American New Age or alternative spiritualities, the nineties and the “noughties” (2000–2010) saw a dramatic increase of interest in shamanism and traditional plant “medicines” used in shamanic contexts, such as peyote, psilocybin mushrooms, ayahuasca, and *salvia divinorum*. This emerging tradition among modern Westerners, sometimes referred to as “neoshamanism,” attempts to adopt and adapt traditional shamanic practices to the modern world.<sup>145</sup> Michael Harner, an anthropologist and founder of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, has been an instrumental figure in the establishment of modern shamanism.<sup>146</sup>

A pessimistic view of neoshamanism is that it represents one more way that traditional indigenous cultures have been exploited by hegemonic Western society in order to fulfill its rapacious consumerism. Of course the exploitation can work both ways, and ayahuasca tourism has generated its own horror stories of innocent Western seekers being taken advantage of by unscrupulous locals for easy money or worse.<sup>147</sup> Nevertheless, the movement seems to attract highly educated individuals who are genuinely committed to applying traditional prac-

tices of shamanism to the modern context. For example, the Society for Shamanic Practitioners (a nonprofit organization incorporated since 2004) has a board of directors of eight members, among whom there are two Ph.D.s, two M.D.s, two M.A.s, and one Ph.D./M.D.<sup>148</sup> The society describe themselves in the following words:

The Society of Shamanic Practitioners is an alliance of people deeply committed to the re-emergence of shamanic practices that promote healthy individuals and viable communities.

We are a not-for-profit public benefit corporation whose goal is to support the re-emergence of shamanism into modern, western culture. While many other shamanic organizations seek to document and learn from what has been done in the past, the Society is focused on the here and now and is interested in documenting how shamanism is changing and how it is being used as it interfaces with the twenty-first century world.<sup>149</sup>

Deeply embedded in this new shamanism is the belief that traditional rites offer a more holistic approach to healing than modern Western medicine and that shamanism may hold the key for humanity's survival in the face of the current global ecological crisis.<sup>150</sup>

Within the New Age and alternative spirituality scenes in America, entheology forms a bridge discourse between psychedelicists interested in (neo)shamanism and those involved in the Burning Man, rave, techno, psychedelic trance, and doof subcultures. Those who employ the term "entheogens" for certain psychoactives often associate the spiritual use of modern synthetic drugs such as LSD and MDMA with more traditional shamanic plant and fungal hallucinogens such as peyote, ayahuasca, and psilocybin mushrooms. This connection among substances also suggests further connections between ecstatic states in both shamanism and dance culture, such that theorist Anthony D'Andrea refers to the dance-party DJ as a "digital shaman," who creates an atmosphere of excitement and communion through modulating the music,<sup>151</sup> and digital dance events as "neo-shamanic experiences."<sup>152</sup> Another common theme found in both neoshamanism and digital dance culture is an interest in deep ecology and a concern for the environment. Again, entheology forms a bridge discourse,



with theorists often maintaining that the appropriate use of entheogens may be the best way to alter human consciousness sufficiently to avoid global ecological Armageddon.<sup>153</sup>

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter has traced the development of the psychedelic revolution through six decades of American history. In the fifties, interest in and use of psychedelics were more or less restricted to intellectual elites and government-funded research. By the mid- to late sixties, individuals like Timothy Leary and Ken Kesey had brought LSD to the forefront of national consciousness, and it became a key ingredient in the counterculture's spiritual, social, and ideological rejection of mainstream American society. The ensuing cultural clash led to LSD becoming illegal and the federal government shutting down all official psychedelic research. Then in 1969, Charles Manson and the Family heralded the death of the flower children's psychedelic dreams of storming heaven.

The seventies and eighties witnessed the federal War on Drugs and the rapid increase of addictive drug use in the United States. During these decades, MDMA followed a parallel course to LSD: first it was used quietly among elites; next it became popular as a recreational drug; and then it was outlawed by the federal government. Also during this time the psychedelic intelligentsia reconceived and rebranded psychedelic drugs as "entheogens," thereby highlighting their sacred status as sacramental substances engendering the divine, and associating the new synthetic substances like LSD and MDMA with traditional plant and fungal psychotropics.<sup>154</sup>

The nineties and noughties saw the serotonin revolution and the rebirth of official scientific research on psychedelics, along with the emergence of new psychedelic venues such as Burning Man and the digital dance-party scenes and the rapid growth of neoshamanism and ayahuasca tourism. Moreover, the new discourse on entheogens created an ideological bridge between these different alternative spiritualities: both traditional shamanism and the new digital shamanism use mind-altering technologies to induce new states of consciousness valorized as spiritual and beneficial to the individual and society. Such

altered states are widely believed to lead to a more holistic and ecologically healthy view of nature and the world.

One of the most significant historical arcs since the psychedelic sixties is an almost exponential growth in knowledge about psychoactive substances. In the early days there was very little information available to the general public on substances like mescaline, psilocybin, and LSD. With advances in anthropological fieldwork, scientific study, and self-experimentation in the following decades, knowledge about and experimentation with psychedelics have rapidly increased. Moreover, thanks primarily to the research of Alexander Shulgin, there are literally hundreds of new synthetic compounds with which psychonauts (explorers of “inner space”) have become familiar. With the creation of the Internet and World Wide Web, information about psychoactive substances is much more readily available.<sup>155</sup> Gone is the naïve idealism of the sixties that drugs like LSD are inherently good and can save the world. However, the growing complexity of knowledge and perspective has been accompanied by new beliefs in certain psychoactives as sacred entheogens, which if used in the correct way, can be spiritual and therapeutic technologies.

Advances in brain science, brain-imaging technologies, and psychopharmacology are drastically changing how we view the mind/brain. Widespread use of Prozac and the other SSRIs has no doubt lent credence to ideas about better living through chemistry. This sea change in cultural attitudes appears to reflect a less phobic, more open attitude toward the spiritual and therapeutic potential of the drugs, and likely has facilitated the renaissance in psychedelic research.

The following chapter returns to the mid-twentieth century to investigate a parallel to the psychedelic revolution: the dramatic growth in knowledge about and practice of Buddhism in America. For both psychedelic spirituality and Buddhism, the sixties was a pivotal decade in American history, and the coemergence, mutual influence, and rapid growth of these two “revolutions” reflect an unprecedented phenomenon in American religious history.



# 3

## THE BUDDHIST REVOLUTION

**T**O A SIGNIFICANT extent the history of Buddhism in the United States runs a parallel course to the history of psychedelics. In the fifties, knowledge of and interest in both Buddhism and psychedelics were largely restricted to intellectual elites. The sixties witnessed a veritable explosion of interest and involvement, to the degree that I find it appropriate to refer to the “Buddhist revolution” that emerged, comparable to the “psychedelic revolution.” This history has gained some substantial scholarly attention in recent years, and American Buddhism is now established as a legitimate subfield within Buddhist Studies.<sup>1</sup> I will not recapitulate here the scholarship that has already been done, but outline the major developments in American convert Buddhism since the 1950s in order to establish the historical context.

During the seventies and eighties, many of those involved in Buddhism and psychedelics experienced a loss of naïveté as the subcultures went through crises and consequently matured. Also during these decades, the two subcultures crystallized into more distinctive cultural entities with differing worldviews and agendas. While Buddhist practice developed, the backlash against psychedelics was in full force. Consequently, the mutual influence and seeming compatibility of Buddhism with the psychedelic experience appeared less obvious to

many new converts. And as Buddhist groups became more established into mainstream communities, the discussion of psychedelics seems to have become less common and more taboo than in the heyday of the sixties counterculture.

The nineties and noughties were decades of further maturation, consolidation, and growing sophistication among both Buddhist practitioners and psychedelic enthusiasts. In many respects, convert Buddhists became more “Buddhist,” more strict or “orthodox” about their practice, while the psychedelicists became more “shamanic” and developed “entheology,” with its own ideology and imagined historical connections to indigenous shamanic practices. However, certain individuals and groups continued to blend the practice of Buddhism with the use of psychedelics. In fact, psychedelic Buddhism, although in many ways “underground,” has continued since the sixties as a subculture of its own within American Buddhism. This subculture has its own often secret, heterodox (from a traditional Buddhist point of view) practices; thus (borrowing a phrase from Erik Davis) we could say that psychedelic Buddhism in America has become a type of “home-grown American Tantra.”<sup>2</sup>

### **THE FIFTIES, SUZUKI, BEAT ZEN, AND SQUARE ZEN**

Zen Buddhism in many respects led the way in the dramatic growth of convert Buddhism in the United States. And no account of the “Zen boom” of the fifties would be complete without mentioning the influence of D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966).<sup>3</sup> Growing up in impoverished conditions during the tumultuous early years of Japan’s Meiji Restoration,<sup>4</sup> Suzuki was only six years old when his father died, leaving his mother a widow with five children. The young boy had a keen interest in religion, and while studying in Tokyo at Waseda University and Imperial University, he became a Zen student of Kosen Imagita, the abbot of Engakuji, an important Rinzai temple in Kamakura.<sup>5</sup> After Kosen’s death, Suzuki became a disciple of Shaku Soen (Kosen’s replacement), who had a significant impact on Suzuki’s life.<sup>6</sup> Although Suzuki was a serious Zen student, he never became a Zen master or even a Buddhist

monk. Nevertheless, his writings, personality, and image would have a bigger impact on America's popular view of Zen Buddhism than any other single figure.

While in the United States from 1897 to 1908, and then for the next forty years in Japan, D. T. Suzuki was an extremely prolific scholar and advocate of Buddhism, writing in both English and Japanese. Some of his more important and influential titles in English produced in these decades were: *Discourse on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* (1900), *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* (1907), *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1927), *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra* (1930), the second and third volumes of the *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1933 and 1934), *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1934), the *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (1935), and *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture* (1938).<sup>7</sup> However, it was not until Suzuki returned to the United States in the 1950s that he attained celebrity status, was idolized by the "Beats," and became an icon of Zen Buddhism for postwar America.<sup>8</sup>

Suzuki settled in New York City, where he lectured on Buddhist philosophy for several years at Columbia University. During this time he met and gained the admiration of Beat writers Jack Kerouac (1922–1969), Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997), and Gary Snyder (b. 1930). Partly due to the Beats' fascination with Zen, Suzuki, now in his eighties, became a celebrity practically overnight and a spiritual hero for many American young people in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, with the "paperback revolution" of the fifties, Suzuki's many publications on Buddhism became affordable to a wider audience, and his writings, particularly on Zen, were extremely popular.<sup>10</sup> However, according to Jane Iwamura, "In many way, Suzuki's body—his demeanor, gestures, personality, and appearance—would comprise his most definitive text."<sup>11</sup> Thus, not only did his writings have a major impact on popular understandings of Zen, but also Suzuki's image became "a precious icon in Zen Buddhism's Western pantheon."<sup>12</sup>

Although in recent years some detractors have disparagingly referred to Suzuki's approach as "Suzuki Zen" and criticized his lack of opposition to imperialist Japan during the Second World War,<sup>13</sup> there is no doubt that for many Americans in the fifties and sixties Suzuki's Zen was simply "Zen," a timeless, formless truth, cut free from any cultural moorings in Asia. And as Iwamura has shown, Suzuki the man

functioned in American popular imagination as an oriental sage who traveled to the West to share his wisdom.<sup>14</sup>

Although at times criticized for only having a superficial engagement with Buddhism, Beat writers such as Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Snyder were important popularizers of Zen in America.<sup>15</sup> Heavily influenced by Suzuki's writings and somewhat captivated by the personality of the elderly Japanese scholar, they viewed Zen as representing spontaneity and spiritual freedom. For the Beats, Zen was a foil to what they saw as the shallow, overly rational and rationalized American consumerist and materialist mainstream culture of the 1950s.

Jack Kerouac's first exposure to Buddhism was through reading a translation of Āśvaghōṣa's *The Life of the Buddha*. He soon followed this with Dwight Goddard's *Buddhist Bible*, and then any Buddhist sutras he could find in translation. By the mid-fifties, Kerouac was chanting the *Diamond Sutra* daily, meditating (as best he could with his knees wrecked from playing football), and living out of his rucksack as a self-styled wandering ascetic. In the midst of Kerouac's immersion in Buddhism, his first novel, *On the Road* (1957), was published and instantly became a runaway hit, propelling the Beat literary movement into American popular consciousness. After that success, Kerouac wrote a loosely fictionalized account of himself and fellow Beats and their vision of Buddhism in his now-classic *The Dharma Bums* (1958).

The hero of *The Dharma Bums* is Japhy Ryder, a character based on Kerouac's close friend and fellow "Dharma Bum," Gary Snyder. Michael Masatsugu characterizes Kerouac's conception of Buddhism in this novel in the following words:

Kerouac's vision of Buddhism and its future in America were framed around the elevation of "rucksack wanderers," Beat oriental monk figures who rejected Cold War materialism and likened cycles of production and consumption to *samsara* (the Buddhist view of the endless cycle of birth and death from which nirvana was an escape). These "Zen Lunatics" wrote poems in a spontaneous, mystical process reminiscent of the presentation of a Zen *koan*.<sup>16</sup>

Kerouac's romanticization of a train-hopping, hobo lifestyle as a new American Buddhist ideal effectively portrays the Beatnik view of Zen

as a spirituality based on spontaneous freedom, which rejects the cultural ethos of mainstream America. Like Kerouac, many Beats conceived of Zen as a philosophical outlook representing everything they valued (freedom of expression, spontaneity, etc.) and opposed to everything they loathed in postwar America. Needless to say, this version of Zen has little to do with the rigorous discipline and formality of a traditional Japanese *zendo*.

Kerouac became disillusioned with Buddhism later in his life and drank himself to an early grave. However, his good friends and fellow Beats, Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg, only became more serious about their engagement with Buddhism as time went on. Gary Snyder grew up in Washington State, and from a young age had a keen interest in nature. In 1952, after reading a copy of D. T. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, Snyder dropped out of the graduate program in anthropology at Indiana University and enrolled in the Oriental Languages department at the University of California, Berkeley, to study Japanese and T'ang dynasty vernacular Chinese.<sup>17</sup>

In 1955, Snyder took part in the "Six Poets at the Six Gallery" reading in San Francisco, which was also attended by Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. The three men became fast friends, and together with poet Philip Whalen, spent many hours discussing poetry and Buddhism. Snyder appears to have been the most serious about meditation; while Kerouac and Whalen did occasionally practice, the group's interest in Zen was primarily literary.<sup>18</sup> This period was to be Kerouac's inspiration for *The Dharma Bums* and his idealized vision of Snyder as Japhy Ryder, the spiritual hero of a new generation of American "Zen lunatics."

In 1956, Snyder left for Japan to begin formal Zen practice, first with Isshu Miura-roshi and then with Sessō Oda-roshi. For the next several years, Snyder traveled back and forth from Japan to California. Although often physically removed from the rest of the Beats, he continued to have a lasting impact on the movement through his poetry and personal contacts.<sup>19</sup> He has since had a distinguished career as a poet, writer, translator, lecturer, and environmental activist.

Allen Ginsberg was also introduced to Zen Buddhism through the writings of D. T. Suzuki in 1953. Ginsberg was living in New York City at the time, and there he met both Kerouac and Suzuki. At the Six Gallery



reading in 1955, Ginsberg read his now famous poem “Howl,” which was published shortly afterward, whereupon the poet was brought to court on obscenity charges. Ginsberg won the case against his poem, and the trial brought notoriety to the new Beat movement.<sup>20</sup>

During the sixties, Ginsberg was intimately involved with Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert and was a key player in the launch of the psychedelic revolution. Although Ginsberg had been introduced to Buddhism before Kerouac and had maintained his interest through the sixties, he did not become serious about Buddhist practice until the seventies. In 1971, he accidentally ran into the Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (they both hailed the same taxicab in New York City).<sup>21</sup> From that time, Ginsberg became a serious student of Tibetan Buddhism and studied closely with Trungpa for several years. At Trungpa’s request, he cofounded the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado in 1974.

Another important popularizer of Zen in the fifties was Alan Watts (1915–1973). Born in Chislehurst, Kent, from an early age Watts had a keen interest in Buddhism. At age fifteen he declared himself a Buddhist and became an active member of the Buddhist Lodge in London.<sup>22</sup> In 1938 he moved to New York City and studied briefly with Zen teacher Sokei-an at the First Zen Institute.<sup>23</sup> By this time, Watts had already written his first book, *The Spirit of Zen* (1935). After a brief period as an Episcopal priest, Watts left the church and moved to San Francisco in 1951. At the invitation of Frederic Spiegelburg, a professor of Oriental Studies at Stanford University, Watts became an instructor and then the director of the American Academy of Asian Studies (AAAS).<sup>24</sup> In 1953, Watts also began hosting a weekly radio show in the Bay area on Asian religion and philosophy, and a regular show on the San Francisco public television station KQED.<sup>25</sup> According to Michael Masatsuga, during the fifties, “Alan Watts was one of the most visible converts to Buddhism in the San Francisco Bay Area.”<sup>26</sup>

In 1957, Watts published a more mature book, *The Way of Zen*, which is probably his most widely read and popular work on the subject. However, Watts’s interpretation of Zen was always somewhat idiosyncratic. This is well exemplified in the article, “Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen,” which he wrote for a special Zen edition of the *Chicago Review* in the summer of 1958.<sup>27</sup> Rick Fields maintains that “Watts himself was in

many ways, more Taoist than Buddhist, and his essay located the roots of Zen in T'ang Dynasty China and 'the old Chinese masters steeped in Taoism.'<sup>28</sup> In the essay, Watts maintains that both the nonconformity of "Beat Zen" and the intense conformity of "Square Zen" (Zen practiced in the formal Japanese way) are extremes; for him, true Zen is timeless and universal. Watts's understanding is similar in this respect to D. T. Suzuki's view: real Zen transcends history and culture and represents a direct intuition of universal truth. In the sixties, Watts experimented with psychedelics and spoke openly about the relationship between the psychedelic experience and Asian religions. In 1962, he gave the first lecture at the new Esalen Institute in Big Sur.<sup>29</sup> In that same year he also wrote about his views on psychedelics in the now countercultural classic, *The Joyous Cosmology*.

While Suzuki and Watts were popularizing their brands of Zen and the Beatniks were making Zen hip, other Americans during the fifties were deeply involved in "Square Zen," such as Philip Kapleau (1912–2004) and Robert Aitken (1917–2010), who would be important figures in American Zen in the coming decades. Kapleau first became interested in Zen after meeting D. T. Suzuki in Japan in 1948, while working as a court reporter for the International War Crimes Tribunal.<sup>30</sup> Back in the United States, Kapleau followed Suzuki's Columbia lectures for a number of years before growing dissatisfied with philosophical Zen. In 1953, he decided to go to Japan and take up formal Zen practice, which he did for over a decade, primarily with Hakuun Yasutani. In the mid-sixties, Kapleau returned to the states and founded the Rochester Zen Center of Rochester, New York.<sup>31</sup> Also around this time his book *The Three Pillars of Zen* was published. This book was unique in that it was the first English-language work to give detailed accounts of Zen meditation practice, formal interviews, and descriptions of *kensho* (enlightenment) experiences.

Robert Aitken first became interested in Zen while a prisoner of war at a detention camp in Japan. There he read R. H. Blyth's *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*,<sup>32</sup> and later he was interned with the book's author for fourteen months, during which time the two spent many hours discussing Zen.<sup>33</sup> In the fifties, Aitken studied for a short while with Nyogen Senzaki in Los Angeles and spent some time in Japan practicing Zen with Nakagawa Soen and then with Hakuun

Yasutani.<sup>34</sup> In 1959, Aitken and his wife founded a Zen sitting group in Hawai'i, which later became known as the Diamond Sangha.

## THE SIXTIES, THE ZEN DECADE

Growing from its foundations in the fifties, Zen blossomed during the sixties, and numerous Zen centers sprang up all across America. This rapid growth was largely due to a number of important Japanese teachers, steeped in traditional Zen practice but critical of its institutions, arriving in the United States.<sup>35</sup> According to Richard Seager, the shared interest between these Zen teachers and their countercultural American students in experiential religion unconstrained by institutions was “in many respects, a perfect marriage.”<sup>36</sup> According to G. Victor Sōgen Hori, although the first serious Zen communities were not founded in North America until 1959, by 1975, there were over one hundred established Zen centers.<sup>37</sup> Tibetan Buddhism also began to take root in the sixties, but did not really take off until the seventies. The psychedelic revolution also flowered in the sixties, and prominent members of that movement incorporated Buddhist ideas and texts into their understanding of the psychedelic experience. The new Buddhism in America then reacted and responded.

Joshu Sasaki (1907–2014) and Eido Tai Shimano (b. 1932) were two important Rinzai Zen teachers in the United States in the sixties.<sup>38</sup> Sasaki arrived in Los Angeles in 1962, and soon after founded the Rinzai Zen Dojo.<sup>39</sup> Over the next twenty years, Sasaki and his students also established the Cimarron Zen Center in Idyllwild, California, the Mount Baldy Zen Center outside of Los Angeles, and the Bodhi Manda Zen Center in Jemez Springs, New Mexico.<sup>40</sup> Shimano arrived in New York City in 1964 and reinvigorated the Zen Studies Society (ZSS), originally founded to support the teachings and writings of D. T. Suzuki.<sup>41</sup> As the head of ZSS, Shimano became the abbot of New York Zendo Shobo-ji in New York City in 1968, and later the abbot of Dai Bosatsu Zendo Kongo-ji, a Zen monastery in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York, founded in 1976.

The Soto Zen lineage was established in the United States largely due to the influence of Shunryu Suzuki (1904–1971) and Hakuyu Taizan

Maezumi (1931–1995).<sup>42</sup> Suzuki arrived in San Francisco in 1959 to take over as the priest of Sokoji, the only Soto Zen temple in San Francisco.<sup>43</sup> His primary duty was to provide pastoral care for the Japanese American community associated with the temple. However, Suzuki's main passion was for *zazen*, and by the early sixties he was leading a small, informal group of mainly Western students in Zen meditation. By 1962, this group incorporated as the San Francisco Zen Center.<sup>44</sup> According to Richard Seager,

Much of the early history of the San Francisco Zen Center (SFZC) was shaped by the fact that it was at the tumultuous heart of the San Francisco counterculture of the 1960s. Many countercultural social and political ideals subsequently infused this sangha, giving it a deserved reputation for innovation and creativity.<sup>45</sup>

As the group began to rapidly increase, some students rented apartments near Sokoji. At first Suzuki was pretty relaxed about discipline, but as the countercultural craziness of the Bay area reached its height, the roshi saw a need for more discipline. In the words of Richard Baker, an early student who would become Suzuki's Dharma heir, "Everyone was taking acid. Things were a little out of hand. The turning point for Suzuki came when he began to feel that the apartments had become like buildings on the temple grounds; they were part of the temple."<sup>46</sup> Apparently, Suzuki went so far as to suggest that American Zen should have more rules than Japanese Zen.<sup>47</sup> This strict attitude, however, seemed the perfect antidote to the excesses of the hippies, and Suzuki's teachings and students continued to increase. Moreover, like his predecessor D. T. Suzuki, Shunryu Suzuki possessed a charisma and warmth that people found extremely alluring.<sup>48</sup>

In 1967, the SFZC purchased Tassajara Hot Springs, located in the rugged mountains of central California several hours from San Francisco, and established there the Zen Heart-Mind Temple (Zenshinji), America's first Zen monastery.<sup>49</sup> Then in 1969, SFZC purchased a property on Page Street in San Francisco, not far from the Haight-Ashbury district, which is now known as Beginner's Mind Temple (Hosshin-ji) or City Center.<sup>50</sup> After the death of Suzuki in 1971, SFZC and Richard Baker purchased Green Gulch Farm in Marin County in 1972. Now

known as Green Gulch Farm Zen Center, or Green Dragon Temple (Soryu-ji), it has a particular focus on the practice of Soto Zen in relation to organic farming and environmental concerns.

In the years following the death of Suzuki, SFZC has grown into one of the most important and influential Zen institutions in the United States and has spawned numerous teachers and other centers. This is in no small part due to the teachings and living example of Suzuki Roshi. Shinryu Suzuki's approach to Zen could not have been more different than D. T. Suzuki's. Whereas the latter took a largely philosophical view and taught Zen as a timeless reality, Shinryu, in the tradition of Dōgen, placed his entire emphasis on the practice of sitting meditation or *zazen*. A collection of Suzuki's talks on Zen were compiled and published in the now-classic book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, in 1970.<sup>51</sup> In this work, Suzuki emphasizes the oneness of practice and enlightenment in Soto Zen. Moreover, he stresses that the "beginner's mind" (Japanese: *shoshin*), free from preconceptions and completely open, is the true mind of Zen. Rick Fields writes,

It was an inspired move of cross-cultural jujitsu. By identifying beginner's mind with Zen practice, Shunryu Suzuki reversed in one stroke the inferiority Americans so often felt toward the overwhelmingly "mysterious" and complex traditions of the Orient. What might have seemed a problem became instead a possibility. "In the beginner's mind," as he said, "there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few."<sup>52</sup>

Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi followed a similar teaching career. Maezumi was also a Soto Zen monk who was sent to the United States to serve as a temple priest. He arrived in Los Angeles in 1956 to begin his duties at the Zenshuji Soto Mission in Little Tokyo. Like Sokoji in San Francisco, Zenshuji served the pastoral needs of the local Japanese American community, who had little interest in *zazen*. And like Suzuki, Maezumi began teaching *zazen* to Western students in the early sixties, which led to the founding of the Zen Center of Los Angeles (ZCLA) in 1967.<sup>53</sup>

From this beginning, Maezumi went on to establish six Soto temples in the United States and Europe.<sup>54</sup> In 1976, he founded the Karoda

Institute for the Study of Buddhism and Human Values, a nonprofit educational organization, to promote scholarship on Buddhism in its historical, philosophical, and cultural ramifications.<sup>55</sup> Around the same time, he founded the White Plum Asanga, an organization of peers whose members are leaders of Zen communities in Maezumi's lineage.<sup>56</sup> During his lifetime, Maezumi gave Dharma transmission to twelve of his students, among them such important American Buddhist teachers as Bernard Tetsugen Glassman, Dennis Genpo Merzel, Charlotte Joko Beck, Jan Chozen Bays, and John Daido Looi. Moreover, while in the United States he ordained 68 Zen priests and gave the lay Buddhist precepts to over 500 people.<sup>57</sup> Thus Maezumi Roshi's life and teachings have had a major impact on the formation of American Zen.

Another important Soto Zen teacher in America in the late sixties and seventies was Peggy Jiyu-Kennett (1924–1996), founder of Shasta Abbey Buddhist Monastery (established 1970) and the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives. The Shasta Abbey website states,

Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett served twenty-six years as Abbess and spiritual director of Shasta Abbey, ordaining and teaching monks and lay people. She founded Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey in England in 1972. She also founded the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives (OBC) in order to establish a framework within which the temples she founded could communicate and come together. She was head of the OBC until her death on November 6, 1996. Her legacy includes a growing Order with vibrant training monasteries, priories, meditation groups and individual practitioners throughout the world, rich teaching for monks and laity in the form of publications and audio talks, liturgy and ceremonial.<sup>58</sup>

Particularly significant about Jiyu-Kennett's life are the accounts of the detailed visions she experienced in the mid-seventies while extremely ill. Unlike most Zen teachers, who disregard such experience as mere illusion (*makyo*), Jiyu-Kennett came to see these visions as a profound *kensho* (enlightenment) experience.<sup>59</sup> They provide an intriguing point of contact between American Zen spirituality and psychedelic visionary experience.

While the practice of Zen was taking off, the psychedelic revolution was in full swing, and many a hippie found his or her way into the *zendo*. So strong was the connection between the counterculture's psychedelic and Buddhist interests in this decade that Rick Fields remarked, "It was impossible for any roshi to ignore the question of LSD and its relationship to Buddhism."<sup>60</sup> The San Francisco Zen Center, located only a few blocks from the Haight-Ashbury district, was right in the middle of the psychedelic maelstrom. Although Shinryu Suzuki seems to have mostly ignored the issue, Gary Snyder claimed that Suzuki Roshi told him that "people who have started to come to the *zendo* from LSD experiences have shown an ability to get into good *zazen* very rapidly."<sup>61</sup> However, Suzuki is also said to have observed that "the LSD experience is entirely distinct from Zen," and those students who stuck to disciplined practice gradually gave up drug use.<sup>62</sup> According to Fields, Eido Tai Shimano at New York Zendo was less tolerant than Suzuki, and after a run-in with a student high on acid, made a rule that no one who used LSD in or out of the *zendo* would be allowed to sit *zazen*.<sup>63</sup>

Like Eido Roshi, Robert Aitken was critical of psychedelics. About the Maui Zendo in the sixties, he wrote, "Virtually all the young people who knock on our front door have tried LSD, mescaline, or psilocybin."<sup>64</sup> However, in Aitken's experience, regular marijuana use destroyed one's sense of proportion, while LSD "shattered much of the personality structure, and the impulse of the moment assumed paramount importance."<sup>65</sup> His opinion was that *zazen* in the sixties was more a corrective to psychedelic excess than an adjunct to or further realization of the psychedelic experience.

The Zen roshis were not the only Buddhists in the sixties to weigh in on the issue of psychedelics. Beatniks Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder traveled to India in 1962 and had the opportunity to ask some Tibetan teachers about LSD. Snyder recorded in his journal a meeting he, Allen, and Peter Orlovsky had with the Dalai Lama:

Allen & Peter asked him at some length about drugs & drug experiences, and their relationship to the spiritual states of meditation. The Dalai Lama gave the same answer everyone else did: drug states are real psychic states, but they aren't ultimately useful to you because

you didn't get them on your own will and effort. For a few glimpses into the unconscious mind & other realms, they may be of use in loosening you up. After that, you can too easily come to rely on them, rather than undertaking such a discipline as will actually alter the structure of the personality in line with these insights.<sup>66</sup>

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Ginsberg had experimented extensively with LSD and psilocybin in the early sixties with the Harvard group. By the time of his visit to India, he had begun to experience some very bad trips with frightening visions. Fields records an interesting anecdote concerning Ginsberg asking the Tibetan teacher Dudjom Rinpoche in Kalimpong about his negative experiences. The lama said, "If you see anything horrible, don't cling to it; if you see anything beautiful, don't cling to it."<sup>67</sup> This simple advice seems to have helped Ginsberg give up his overattachment to his visionary experiences.

### **THE SEVENTIES, TIBETAN BUDDHISM, AND INSIGHT MEDITATION**

If American convert Buddhism in the sixties was dominated by Zen, the seventies belonged to the Tibetan Buddhists. However, this does not mean there were no Tibetan Buddhists in the United States prior to this decade. Amy Levine writes, "Although the transmission of Tibetan Buddhism to the United States blossomed in the 1970s, its seeds, in the form of a few lamas, arrived in American soil earlier."<sup>68</sup> The primary impetus for the introduction of Tibetan Buddhism to the West undoubtedly was the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, and the subsequent flight of a million Tibetan refugees to India and beyond. In 1959, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and his retinue escaped from Tibet and established a Tibetan government in exile at Dharmasala, India. Richard Seager maintains that three interrelated forces led to the rapid growth of interest in Tibetan Buddhism in the United States following the Tibetan diaspora: one was the campaign to free Tibet from the Chinese; the second was a concerted effort by Tibetans and Western scholars to preserve Tibetan religious writings and culture; and the third was the establishment of an extensive network of practice centers in



the United States by Tibetan lamas and their students.<sup>69</sup> Let us look more closely at the second and third forces.<sup>70</sup>

One of the earliest “Tibetan” teachers in the United States was actually a Mongolian, Geshe Ngawang Wangyal (1901–1983), a Gelugpa lama who had studied at the great monastery of Drepung in Lhasa. Geshe Wangyal came to America in 1955 and settled in New Jersey. There, in 1958, with blessings and a charter from the Dalai Lama, Geshe Wangyal established the Lamaist Buddhist Monastery of America (now the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center), the first Tibetan monastery open to Americans in the United States.<sup>71</sup> In the Gelug tradition, Geshe Wangyal put great emphasis on scholarship and textual study. Thus it is not surprising that two of his early American students, Robert Thurman and Jeffrey Hopkins, went on to become founding figures in the academic study of Tibetan Buddhism in the United States.

Another founding figure of Tibetan Buddhism in America was Deshung Rinpoche (1906–1987), a Sakyapa and former abbot of the Sakya Tharlan Monastery, who arrived in Seattle in 1961. There he worked closely with scholars such as T. V. Wylie, Edward Conze, Agehananda Bharati, and E. Gene Smith at the University of Washington, teaching Tibetan language and Buddhist philosophy, and helped compile an English-Tibetan dictionary. However, Deshung did not give Vajrayāna (tantric) teachings to students interested in practicing Buddhism until the early seventies.<sup>72</sup>

The Tibetan Nyingma tradition was first brought to the United States by Tarthang Tulku (b. 1934), who arrived in Berkeley, California, in 1969. The Nyingma School is a nonmonastic tradition, and its lamas are often married laypeople. Tarthang came to America with his wife, Nazli, and quickly established a strong following of lay practitioners, which developed into a community well suited to Americans with family needs and obligations. At Berkeley Tarthang founded the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center, and in 1972, the Nyingma Institute.<sup>73</sup> In 1975, Dharma Publishing and Dharma Press, founded by Tarthang, were formally incorporated in the United States.<sup>74</sup> These institutions have spawned several others in the following decades. Moreover, Tarthang Tulku has written more than 40 books on various topics related to Buddhism. Thus he and the institutions he established in the early 1970s have been major forces in the transmission

of the Nyingma tradition, Tibetan art and culture, and Buddhist texts to America.

Probably one of the most influential and controversial figures in the transmission of Tibetan Buddhism to America is Chögyam Trungpa (1939–1987). Born in a small village in Tibet in 1939, Trungpa was recognized as the eleventh Trungpa Tulku (reincarnated lama) of the Kagyu lineage when he was less than two years old.<sup>75</sup> Installed as the abbot of the Surmang monasteries in eastern Tibet, Trungpa received a rigorous Kagyu monastic education and was also trained in the Nyingma tradition. At the age of twenty, in 1959, he fled Tibet for India with several hundred others in a harrowing escape through the mountains, which Trungpa wrote about in his book, *Born in Tibet*.<sup>76</sup> In the mid-sixties, he traveled to the United Kingdom, where he first attended Oxford University and then cofounded, with Chöje Akong, a Tibetan monastery, Samyé Ling, in Scotland.

Following a car accident that left him partly paralyzed in 1969, Trungpa disrobed as a monk, married, and moved to the United States in 1970. That year, Trungpa founded Tail of the Tiger meditation center (now known as Karmê Chöling) in Vermont and Karma Dzong, a Buddhist community in Boulder, Colorado. This was the beginning of an active teaching career that was both innovative and controversial. Among his many accomplishments, Trungpa authored fourteen books, including the now classic *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (1973), *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (1984), and *Crazy Wisdom* (1991); established Vajradhatu (now Shambhala International), an umbrella organization for his many Buddhism-related projects; founded the Naropa Institute (now Naropa University, the first accredited Buddhist university in the United States); founded Shambhala Training, a secularized Buddhist path tailored for Westerners; and promoted numerous “contemplative arts,” including Japanese flower arrangement and equestrianism.<sup>77</sup> Trungpa’s early organizations flourished, leading to the establishment of hundreds of meditation centers throughout North America, including Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia.<sup>78</sup> In 1987, Trungpa passed away due to alcohol-related illness.

More than any other Tibetan Buddhist teacher at the time (or possibly since), Trungpa had the ability to adapt his teachings for a Western

audience. A highly charismatic individual, he appears to have embodied the very “crazy wisdom” of the Mahāsiddhas (the Indian Buddhist tantric saints) about whom he spoke and wrote. Concerning Trungpa’s antinomian behaviors, James Coleman writes,

Despite his enormous success and his unquestionable spiritual power, Trungpa Rinpoche remains a controversial figure. A husband and father, Trungpa openly had sex with his students, smoked, and drank heavily enough to be characterized as an alcoholic by many who knew him. To most of his students, Trungpa’s unconventional behavior was as much a part of his teachings as his dharma talks—a way of showing that enlightenment is to be found in even the most profane activities.<sup>79</sup>

Unlike many of the American Buddhist teachers who were later embroiled in sex scandals in the eighties and nineties, Trungpa was always quite open about his outrageous behavior, which seems to have been as much a part of his teaching style as anything else.

Trungpa seems to have grasped the zeitgeist of the sixties and embraced its countercultural craziness. Therefore, it is not surprising that he had a rather sympathetic view of LSD use. Rick Fields reports that Trungpa even privately offered to take LSD with him sometime, which Fields states never happened, to his “regret and relief.”<sup>80</sup> In one of his few public statements about LSD, Trungpa compared acid to “a kind of ‘super-samsara,’ and inasmuch as it heightened certain samsaric tendencies it could be a useful method.”<sup>81</sup> However, even though accepting of LSD and a heavy drinker, Trungpa was adamantly against the use of marijuana, claiming that it was a type of self-deception in the way it mimicked meditation.<sup>82</sup>

The seventies also witnessed the rapid growth of a distinctively Western form of Buddhist practice stemming from the Theravada tradition, known as Insight Meditation (“insight” is a common English translation for the Pāli *vipassanā*). Two seminal figures in this movement have been Jack Kornfield (b. 1945) and Joseph Goldstein (b. 1944).<sup>83</sup> They have followed very similar paths: both came from upper-middle-class Jewish backgrounds, attended Ivy League colleges, were in the Peace Corps, studied extensively with Theravadin meditation masters,

and returned to the United States at about the same time and began teaching meditation.<sup>84</sup> As mentioned in chapter 1, Kornfield had studied intensively with Thai forest monk Achaan Chaa, and had ordained as a monk. Shortly after coming back to the United States, Kornfield returned to lay life and began working on his graduate degree in psychology. Goldstein had studied at Bodh-Gaya in India with the Bengali meditation teacher Munindra-ji (himself a student of the Burmese master Mahasi Sayadaw).<sup>85</sup>

Kornfield and Goldstein first met in 1974, at Trungpa's Naropa Institute in Boulder, during its first summer session. They quickly discovered that their backgrounds and teaching methods were similar, and began holding joint retreats. Then in 1976, together with Sharon Salzberg, Kornfield and Goldstein founded the Insight Meditation Center at Barre, Massachusetts. In 1984, Kornfield left the Insight Meditation Center and moved to the West Coast. After several years of teaching Buddhism and working as a therapist, Kornfield, together with other *vipassanā* teachers, founded Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Marin County, California.<sup>86</sup> Spirit Rock with its affiliates is one of the fastest-growing Buddhist meditation movements in the United States.

Jack Kornfield readily admits his use of LSD in the sixties, and is quite liberal in his attitude about the potential of psychedelics to be used spiritually. In his most recent publication, *Bringing Home the Dharma: Awakening Right Where You Are* (2011), he reiterates his position on psychedelics as possible tools for development on the Buddhist path if used responsibly and developed in conjunction with the Buddhist practices of virtue, concentration, and wisdom.<sup>87</sup>

## THE EIGHTIES, THE DECADE OF SCANDAL

In many ways, the eighties marked the end of innocence for the early Buddhist movements in America. It was a painful coming-of-age decade for several important Buddhist communities, which were rocked by scandals, often of a sexual nature, involving male teachers and female students. Rita Gross summarizes the situation in the following words:

Since the early eighties it [turmoil] has torn apart many prospering North American Buddhist organizations, including, among others, the Zen Center of San Francisco, by then headed by Richard Baker Rōshi; Vajradhatu, the international association of meditation centers founded by Vajracharya the Venerable Chōgyam Trunga Rinpoche, and headed by the Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin during its most difficult phase; the Los Angeles Zen Center, headed by Maezumi Rōshi; and the New York Zen Center, headed by Eido Rōshi. Though most of these communities are now picking up the pieces and regrouping, controversy and bad feelings have not abated and many students have abandoned long-term association with a Dharma center, apparently for good.<sup>88</sup>

The groups mentioned by Gross, all institutions discussed in this chapter, have been fundamental in the transmission of Buddhism to America. Thus, the scandals rocked the institutional foundations of many communities and were major causes of disillusionment for many convert Buddhist practitioners.

Trouble at the San Francisco Zen Center came to light in 1983, when it was discovered that Richard Baker, the Dharma heir of Shinyu Suzuki, was having an affair with a married woman.<sup>89</sup> In the ensuing debacle, other affairs were discovered, and also certain financial improprieties on Baker's behalf. The final result was that Baker left and ultimately founded a new community, the Dharma Sangha, in Crestone, Colorado. SFZC also became more democratic and began electing abbots and board members rather than having them appointed as had been done traditionally. In 1983, similar problems emerged at Los Angeles Zen Center. Maezumi Rōshi admitted he was an alcoholic, and at about the same time it was revealed that, although married, he had had a number of sexual affairs with students.<sup>90</sup> This revelation caused the breakup of Maezumi's marriage and deep division in the community. Likewise, in recent years evidence has come to light from letters written by Robert Aitken that for decades Eido Shimano of the New York City Zen Center had been involved in numerous sexual affairs with female students, which appear to have caused serious psychological harm to the women in a number of cases.<sup>91</sup> Due to these allegations, Shimano retired as the Abbot of the Zen Studies Society in 2010.

Even more shocking than the events at these Zen centers was the revelation in 1988 that Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin, Dharma heir of Trungpa, had contracted AIDS, and had continued having sexual relations with students without informing them that he was infected with the HIV virus.<sup>92</sup> As a consequence, a young male student was infected and passed the virus to a girlfriend. Tendzin was asked to step down as head of Vajradhatu, but he refused, and the community was effectively split until his death in 1990.<sup>93</sup> Trungpa's elder son, Sakyong Mipham, was subsequently selected as the new "Throne Holder" of the organization.

Fortunately, not everything that happened in the 1980s was bad for American Buddhism. In 1980, John Daido Looi (1931–2009) purchased 230 acres of land in upstate New York, which is now the site of Zen Mountain Monastery (ZMM). Looi was born and raised in New Jersey as a Catholic. As an adult, he distanced himself from Christianity and began to explore alternative spiritualities. In 1972, he began formal Zen training with Soen Nakagawa, and then with Maezumi Roshi in 1976.<sup>94</sup> Looi received priestly transmission from Maezumi in 1983 and Dharma transmission from him in 1986.<sup>95</sup> In addition to being the abbot of ZMM until his death in 2009, Looi founded an umbrella organization called the Mountains and Rivers Order of Zen Buddhism (MRO) with affiliated groups throughout the United States and New Zealand, and established Dharma Communications, a nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing Buddhist teachings to a wider audience.<sup>96</sup> Looi was also an accomplished photographer and wrote over a dozen books on Zen practice. Before his death, Looi selected his Dharma heirs, Geoffrey Shugen Arnold to be the head of the MRO and abbot of Zen Center of New York City, and Konrad Ryushin Marchaj to be the abbot of ZMM.<sup>97</sup> MRO continues to be a highly respected American Zen organization known for its skillful adaptation of Japanese Zen to the American cultural and social context.

In an essay written in 1988, "Is Buddhism Changing in North America?", Jack Kornfield identifies three themes: democratization, feminization, and integration.<sup>98</sup> We have seen in this brief discussion of the eighties how scandals rocked several prominent Buddhist communities. Clearly Kornfield's themes are at least in part a response to the turmoil of that decade. Central to the problems faced by American Buddhism were issues of power, authority, sexuality, and money.

Democratic structures of communities such as San Francisco Zen Center were a direct result. Other communities, like Kornfield's Spirit Rock, were set up democratically from the beginning to avoid such problems. While traditionally, Asian Buddhism has been patriarchal and hierarchical, often excluding or subordinating women, American convert Buddhists generally believe in and assert the equal rights and spiritual potential of men and women, and as a consequence a number of important and influential women teachers have emerged.<sup>99</sup> Finally, Kornfield points out that American convert Buddhism is largely nonmonastic and seeks to integrate the Buddhist path with family life and lay concerns. As a therapist, he is also a vocal proponent of integrating Buddhist practice with Western psychotherapy. The integration of Buddhism with Western therapy and medicine is well exemplified in the "mindfulness" movement, spearheaded by such figures as Jon Kabat-Zinn, which began in the 1980s and really took off in the 1990s.<sup>100</sup>

### THE 1990S AND 2000S

The nineties and the noughties witnessed the continued growth and maturation of convert Buddhism in America. Many of the early communities from the sixties and seventies survived the tribulations of the eighties and adapted new structures and ethical safeguards to prevent future abuses of power. Some important new institutions emerged in the nineties, and themes specific to Western Buddhism began to gain prominence, such as "socially engaged Buddhism,"<sup>101</sup> ecological or green Buddhism,<sup>102</sup> gender equality,<sup>103</sup> queer Buddhism,<sup>104</sup> and "mindfulness." Jeff Wilson claims that mindfulness began "to go big time in the 1990s," and that a "critical mass of Buddhist meditation groups, Buddhist publishing houses, Buddhist periodicals, and the Internet coalesced to give Buddhism a prominent place on the American religious landscape and an influence far beyond the numbers of actual Buddhists would suggest."<sup>105</sup>

The nineties also saw the rapid growth of interest in the Free Tibet movement, and the teachings and persons of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. In general,

Buddhism became more “mainstream” in American society and culture, and Buddhist communities became more integrated into the wider community and recognized as legitimate religious organizations on par with Christian churches and Jewish synagogues. This mainstreaming of Buddhism, I believe, also has further divided the psychedelic subculture and the Buddhist subculture in America. Although there has been a renaissance in psychedelic research beginning in the 1990s, psychedelic use as a spiritual practice remains very much a “fringe” cultural activity. Thus, it is to be expected that discourse about psychedelics within Buddhist communities would be less tolerated than in the sixties. This is an issue I explore in more detail in later chapters.

While it would be impossible to outline even broadly all the new Buddhist organizations that have emerged in America since the nineties, three directly relate to interviews later in the book.

Upaya Institute and Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, was founded by Joan Halifax in 1990. As mentioned in chapter 1, Halifax took part in the roundtable discussion included at the end of *Zig Zag Zen*. She is one of the baby boomers eminently qualified to discuss the relationship between psychedelics and Buddhist practice. In the seventies, she explored the potentials of LSD for therapeutic use by terminally ill cancer patients with her then-husband Stanislav Grof. She also studied with indigenous shamans as a medical anthropologist. Halifax became interested in Buddhism in the sixties and was ordained by the Korean Zen master Seung Sahn in 1976, after ten years of practice with him.<sup>106</sup> In the eighties, Halifax studied with Thich Nhat Hanh at his Plum Village in southern France, and was ordained as a teacher in his order in 1990. That same year, Halifax founded Upaya Zen Center. According to the website, their “mission is to provide a context for community practice, education in Buddhism and social service in the areas of death and dying, prison work, the environment, women’s rights, and peace-work.”<sup>107</sup> Joan Halifax is particularly well known for her work on death and dying. Although she feels like she has “graduated” from psychedelics, she is open-minded about the spiritual value of the indigenous use of plant hallucinogens. Although I was not able to interview Halifax, I stayed at Upaya Zen Center for a short time and had the opportunity to interview a number of people there (see chapter 6).



Lama Surya Das (Jeffrey Miller), like Daido Looi and Joan Halifax, is an American-born, first-generation Dharma teacher of the baby-boomer generation. Born in 1950, Surya Das began his spiritual journey in the early seventies, traveling to India, Nepal, and Japan. In 1980, he traveled to France where he completed two three-year, three-month retreats under the Nyingma lamas Dudjom Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche.<sup>108</sup> Surya Das has over forty years of training in Zen, *vipassanā*, yoga, and Tibetan Buddhism, and is an authorized lineage holder in the Nyingma tradition.<sup>109</sup> He is the author of thirteen books on Buddhism, including his best-selling trilogy: *Awakening the Buddha Within* (1998), *Awakening the Sacred* (1999), and *Awakening the Buddhist Heart* (2000). In his contribution to *Zig Zag Zen*, “The Zen Commandments,” Surya Das is frank about his use of psychedelics in the sixties and asserts the potential for psychedelics to be used in a beneficial manner on the spiritual path.<sup>110</sup> I defer a more detailed discussion of his views on psychedelics to chapter 4. In 1991, Surya Das established Dzogchen Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Dzogchen Foundation, with various centers around the United States and the world.

The international network of Bodhi Path Buddhist Centers was established in 1996 by Shamar Rinpoche (b. 1952), the Fourteenth Shamarpa of the Tibetan Karma Kagyu School. The Shamarpas are the second oldest reincarnation lineage in Tibetan Buddhism, and together with the Karmapas, are the lineage holders of the Kagyu School. For almost two centuries (1792–1963), no Shamarpas were formally enthroned. But then in 1963, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and the Sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa formally restored the institution by enthroning Shamar Rinpoche as the Fourteenth Shamarpa.<sup>111</sup> During the 1980s Shamar Rinpoche began teaching at various centers around the world. Bodhi Path has more than thirty centers and groups worldwide, including fifteen in the United States and Canada. Besides the Shamarpa, there are seven other Tibetan lamas who teach at various centers as “visiting Rinpoches,” and twenty authorized teachers.

Founded in 1997, Bodhi Path Natural Bridge in Natural Bridge, Virginia, is one of the main centers of the Bodhi Path network. Located on forty-five acres of forested land in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley between the Blue Ridge and Allegheny mountains, the center offers “a

program of Buddhist education ranging from information for the curious to instruction and support for the advanced meditator.”<sup>112</sup> Tsony, the current teacher, was a Buddhist monk for twenty-five years and has completed two traditional three-year retreats in France under the guidance of the meditation master Gendun Rinpoche.<sup>113</sup> For fifteen years he was the abbot of Kundreul Ling Monastery in France, and he began teaching at Bodhi Path centers in 1999. In 2007, Tsony adopted a lay lifestyle, and he married in 2008. Since 2009, he has been the resident teacher at Natural Bridge. In 2010, while doing research for this book, I had the opportunity to interview Tsony (details are in chapter 5).

## SUMMING UP

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, American Buddhism had arrived as a religion native to North America. By 2000, many Buddhist convert institutions were being led by native-born Americans, and specific issues, concerns, and themes distinctive to American Buddhism had emerged. The earliest institutions, such as the San Francisco Zen Center, were founded by Asian teachers who traveled to the United States and transmitted the Dharma to their baby boomer American students. From this cohort came many of the first-generation, native-born “convert” Buddhist teachers, and in some cases the teaching mantle has been handed on to members of the following Generation X. While Buddhism and the counterculture seemed closely aligned in the sixties and seventies, the eighties witnessed the beginning of a divide between the two subcultures. As Buddhist groups underwent a painful adolescence in a decade wracked by scandal, the psychedelic community went largely underground to avoid persecution from the wagers of the War on Drugs.

The days of the hippies were over, and so were the early days of the psychedelic and Buddhist revolutions. However, this is not the end of the story. For although Buddhism has been much more successful in going “mainstream,” the psychedelic (or rebranded “entheogenic”) movement has undergone a renaissance. Moreover, something revolutionary has happened: in the states of Washington and Colorado, marijuana has been legalized for personal (nonmedical) use. As the rest

of the world watches to see what happens, a brave new social experiment begins in these two U.S. states, which seems to herald the beginning of the end of the draconian drug laws. With the continued growth of interest in indigenous shamanism, techno-trance spirituality, and alternative Asian systems of meditation, yoga, and medicine, America remains a melting pot of eclectic alternative spiritualities. And within this wide array of practices and paths, the journey of the psychedelic Buddhist remains an option for some.

# 4

## OPENING THE DOOR

### Psychedelics as a Gateway to Buddhist Practice

*If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear  
to man as it is, Infinite.*

—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

**E**RIK DAVIS'S essay in *Zig Zag Zen*, “The Paisley Gate,” refers to the “crazy wisdom” of psychedelics and how often members of the baby-boomer generation speak of psychedelics as a “historical door opener” to their practice of Buddhist Dharma.<sup>1</sup> This metaphor is further suggested by the article title; paisley was a favorite of hippies for its psychedelic-like patterns. Moreover, “Dharma Gate” (Sanskrit: *dharmā-mukha*) is a term used in Mahāyāna sources to refer to a means or method, such as the entrance into a meditative trance (*samādhi*), whereby one attains a special realization or insight into reality. In this chapter, we see that this door opening metaphor not only has been used historically to refer to psychedelics but also appears again and again in individuals' personal accounts of their experiences with psychedelics and Buddhism. This commonly occurring trope is intriguing and immediately suggests the possibility of a culturally shared origin. As discussed in chapter 2, Aldous Huxley titled his famous essay on psychedelics and spirituality, *The Doors of Perception*, after a line in a poem by William Blake. This would seem to be a likely source text for the door metaphor. However, later in this chapter I argue that the metaphor may have deeper roots in human neurophysiology.

Given the widespread prevalence of this door metaphor in relation to psychedelics, I have found it useful as a structural framework for the next three chapters. In this chapter, I closely examine accounts of psychedelic usage that describe it as “opening a door” to higher truths, higher consciousness, other realms, or new ways of perceiving, which individuals often claim led them to engagement with Buddhist practice. Throughout the remainder of this book, I include statements by interviewees referring to doors, portals, gateways, etc. *in italics* in order to highlight the use of this metaphor in reference to psychedelic experience. The following chapter, “Closing the Door,” looks at a common narrative among American convert Buddhists who have experimented with psychedelics: once they became more serious about their practice of Buddhism, they stopped using psychoactive drugs. Chapter 6, “Keeping the Door Open,” investigates how some American Buddhists continue to use psychedelics as an adjunct to their Buddhist practice and how they conceptualize the two as being compatible.

### SOME MORE SURVEY DATA

Before we investigate the door opening metaphor in detail, some more survey data may help to place it in cultural and social context. As noted in chapter 1, the survey data from my online questionnaire, “Attitudes Toward Psychoactive Substances Among American Buddhists,” show that Americans interested in Buddhism and psychedelics tend to be white, upper to upper-middle class, and well educated. To further discern these individuals’ interest and involvement in Buddhism and how it relates to their attitudes toward psychoactive substances, I asked a number of questions in the survey. When asked if they considered themselves to be Buddhists, of the 175 who responded, 85.1% (149) said “yes.” However, 94.3% (165) of those 175 stated that they were involved in some type of Buddhist practice. When asked “How important is Buddhism to you?” of the 159 respondents, 34% said “very important,” 35.2% said “extremely important,” and 22.6% said “the most important thing in my life.” When asked if they had ever attended a Buddhist retreat, 71% (115 out of 162) said “yes.” When asked what type of Buddhism they practiced, of the 161 respondents, 60.2% answered “mindfulness/*vipassanā*,” 41%

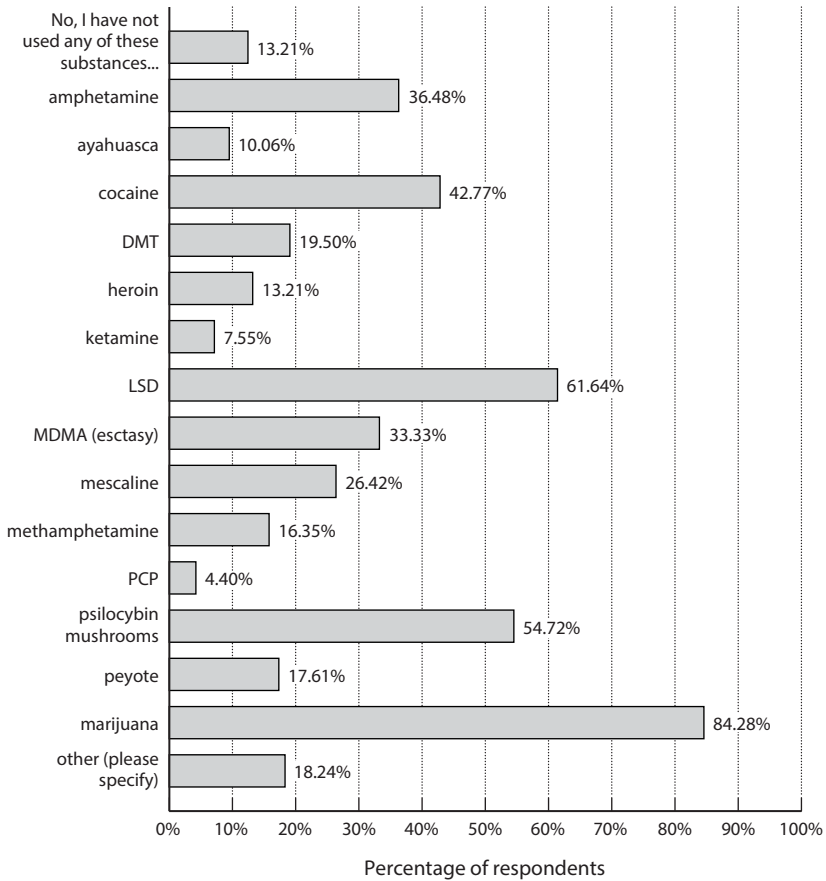
answered “*zazen*,” 32.3% answered “chanting,” 28% answered “visualization,” and 28% answered “Other,” such as Tibetan preliminary practices (*ngondro*), yoga, Tantra, and martial arts. Of those engaged in Buddhist practice, 60.9% stated that they were involved with a Buddhist organization. The most common affiliations mentioned were Tibetan Buddhism (41.7%), Zen (38.5%), and *vipassanā*/Insight Meditation (15.6%). Among those affiliated with a Buddhist organization, the average number of years involved was about ten. Thus a significant number of the respondents to this survey are what I refer to as “serious practitioners” of Buddhism, i.e., they demonstrate a sustained and committed Buddhist practice and associate with formal Buddhist organizations.

When asked, “How did you first become interested in Buddhism?” most respondents stated through reading books (commonly mentioned authors were Allan Watts, D. T. Suzuki, Hermann Hesse, and the Beats); several said through college courses, family, or friends; a few cited traveling to Asia, psychedelic drugs, or martial arts.

These questions were followed by specific questions about the respondent’s use of psychoactive substances, and his/her attitudes toward these substances. Of 146 respondents, 67.1% said they regularly drank coffee and 66.4% that they regularly drank tea. Of 159 respondents, 67.9% stated that they drank alcoholic beverages; while only 12.6% said they smoked tobacco. When asked if they had ingested and/or used a psychoactive substance from a list of several (see figure 4.1), of 159 respondents, 84.3% stated that they had used marijuana, 61.6% had used LSD, and 54.7% had used psilocybin mushrooms. When asked, “How important were your experiences with such substances in attracting you to Buddhism?” of the 135 respondents, 48.9% said “not at all,” 19.3% said “somewhat,” 10.4% said “fairly,” and 21.5% said “very.” Of those who responded to this question, 33.3% stated that they continued to use these substances. The most often and most frequently used substance was marijuana; the major psychedelics (LSD, psilocybin mushrooms, peyote, DMT) were used much less frequently.

When asked to characterize their use of these substances, of the 44 respondents, 27 said it was for spiritual/religious purposes (see figure 4.2). When asked, “Do you think that the use of psychoactive substances is compatible with the practice of Buddhism?” 49.3% of 148 respondents said “yes”; and when asked their opinion of the statement,

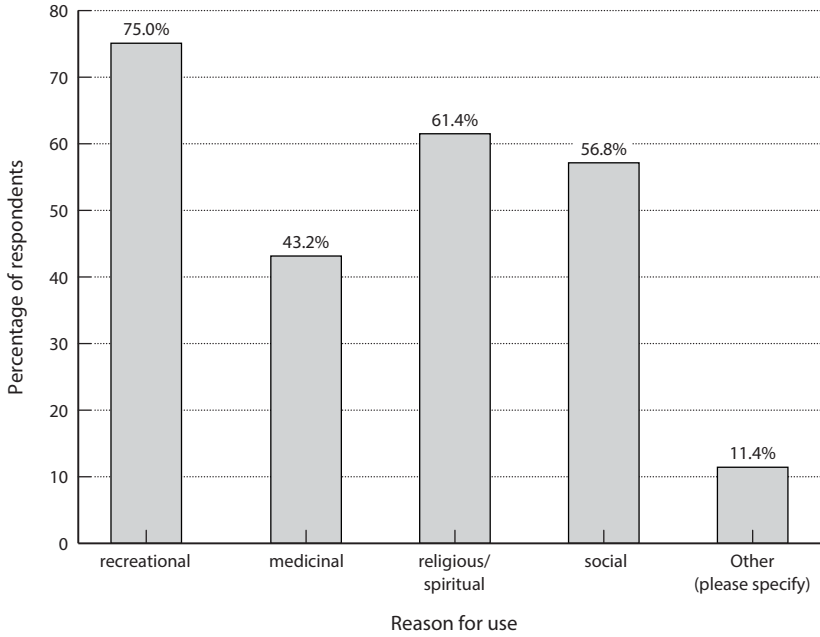
**FIGURE 4.1** Have you ever ingested and/or used a psychoactive substance such as the following (please tick all that apply)?



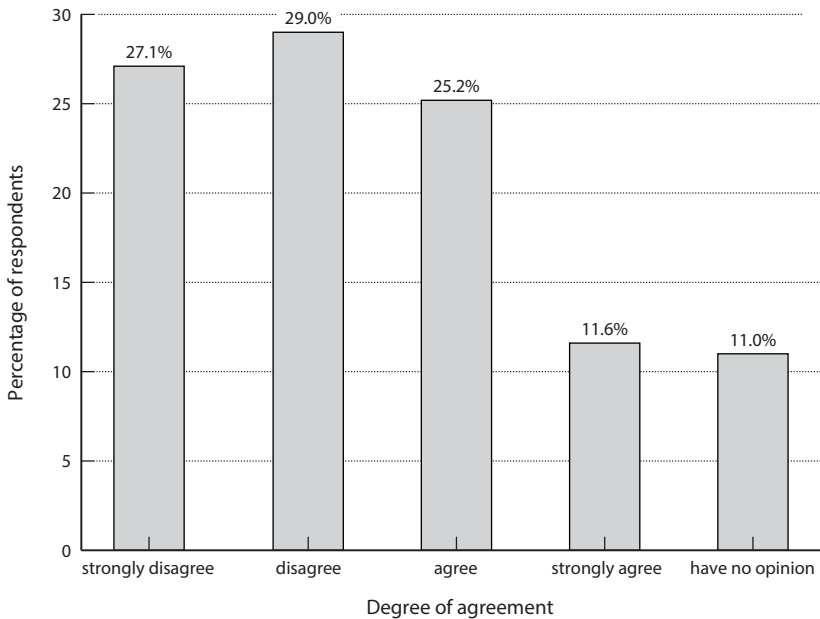
“Psychedelic substances have religious value within the practice of Buddhism,” 25.2% agreed and 11.6% strongly agreed (see figure 4.3).

What can we conclude from these survey results? First, it is important to remember that this survey was not of a random sample of American Buddhists, but was “purposive” and self-selecting. I designed and targeted the survey for a selective sample of American Buddhists with some interest in or experience with psychoactive substances. Also, individuals who have had at least some past experiences with psychoactives would be more likely to respond to such a

**FIGURE 4.2** Would you describe your use of these substances as (please tick all that apply) . . .



**FIGURE 4.3** What is your opinion of the statement, “Psychedelic substances have religious value within the practice of Buddhism”?





survey. Thus the results do not provide statistically reliable data on American Buddhists in general. However, among the respondents, about two thirds are likely to have at least tried LSD, and four out of five to have smoked marijuana. In fact, among the respondents, an individual was as likely to have tried LSD as he or she was to drink coffee, tea, or alcoholic beverages.

### OPENING THE DOOR: THE SURVEY

One commonly occurring theme in survey respondents' answers was the idea that psychedelics could act as a "door" or "gateway." Many used the metaphor of psychedelics as "opening a door" to such things as Buddhist truths, other realities or "places" (spatial metaphors), or higher states of consciousness. The use of drugs seems for some to have functioned as an initiatory experience into different ways of thinking, perceiving, and feeling, which were later consolidated with the practice of Buddhism. Some then left the use of the substances behind; others continue to use them as adjuncts or aids to their Buddhist practice. For example, Jane (#54)<sup>2</sup> is a 55-year-old white female who does not think of herself as a Buddhist, but has had a long interest in Buddhism (more than 25 years), and considers Buddhism to be "very important" in her life. Although she no longer uses psychedelics, she wrote,

LSD, for one, provides an initial experience of self/other boundaries dropping away. It's helpful to have such an experience as a "preview" of other possibilities of consciousness. But then Buddhism is about staying present and being aware. So I feel that at a certain point the use of mind-altering drugs has to be left behind—like training wheels.

Jane does not specifically mention drugs as a "doorway," but she employs the idea of psychedelics as providing an initial experience of the boundary between self and others disappearing, or as "preview" of other types of consciousness. However, such substances, in her view, have limited value as initiatory only—they need to be abandoned at a more advanced stage.

Raymond (#174) is a 74-year-old white male who has been interested in Buddhism for 45 years. He considers himself a Buddhist and Buddhism to be the most important thing in his life. Moreover, he has participated in over two hundred retreats, varying in length from one month to a couple of days. Raymond has had extensive experience with psychedelics and sees them as very important in attracting him to Buddhism. However, he found that with the practice of Buddhism, the use of these substances “became irrelevant.” Nevertheless, he views the use of psychoactives as compatible with Buddhism. Raymond describes their value in these words: “The entheogens have the potential to produce a visit to higher states of consciousness to counter the prevailing, anti-spiritual view of scientism, materialism, and narcissism.” Notice Raymond’s use of the term “entheogens,” introduced by Carl Ruck et al. in 1979, to refer to psychoactive substances thought to engender the divine. Thus Raymond’s choice of words indicates his positive assessment of the value of these substances for spiritual development.

A similar response was given by Steven (#68), a 59-year-old white male who considers himself a Buddhist and has been actively involved in Buddhist meditation as a member of a Tibetan Buddhist organization for 34 years. Although Steven continues to drink alcohol, smoke tobacco, and smoke marijuana (for medical reasons), he no longer ingests psychedelics. However, he does view these substances as having some value for the practice of meditation:

I think LSD, peyote, and magic mushrooms can *open the door*, to a larger experience of being alive. . . . The intellect is shut down, and the senses become vivid. It also takes courage to ingest these drugs . . . like leaping off of a cliff. So, after an experience like that, one could become curious about other ways of approaching that BIG state of mind that are not temporary, like meditation.

Jonathan (#158) is a 42-year-old white male who also no longer uses psychedelics. He does not refer to himself as a Buddhist, nor does he belong to a Buddhist organization. However, he has had an interest in Buddhism for over twenty years, reads about Buddhism every day, and considers Buddhism to be “very important” in his life. In the survey he

wrote, “Psychedelics—the real mental enema—is a great way to *open the door* to new ways of seeing.” Likewise, David (#129), a 23-year-old white male, has been actively involved with a Tibetan Buddhist organization for six years. He used to smoke marijuana but then quit because “The compound delivered no enjoyment, and no one who would participate had Buddhist-related interest in it.” About psychoactives, he wrote in the survey, “I think experimentation can be a great tool for *opening a door*; yet continued use I believe would definitely be an impediment.”

Other respondents found psychedelics to be an important initial experience, and then continued to use them. Ryan (#131) is a 61-year-old white male who considers himself a Buddhist and has had a 47-year interest in Buddhism, including a long-term and serious involvement in Zen (he was the director of a Zen Buddhist retreat center for twelve years).<sup>3</sup> Ryan is also active in the Native American Church as a ceremonial leader. He does not drink alcohol, but regularly smokes tobacco and ingests peyote in Native American ceremonies. About psychedelics, he wrote, “I have found specifically that LSD *opened my mind* to an understanding of reality that I found wonderfully articulated in Buddhism.” Peter (#168) is a 70-year-old white male *vipassanā*/Insight Meditation teacher who considers himself a Buddhist and has been actively involved in an Insight Meditation organization for forty-five years. He drinks alcohol moderately, smokes marijuana five or six times a year, and uses LSD “once or twice a year.” He wrote, “The major psychedelics *open doors* to states of consciousness that can also be manifested through meditation.” Gary (#144)<sup>4</sup> is a 36-year-old Buddhist with sixteen years of serious Buddhist practice with a Tibetan Buddhist organization. He stated about psychoactive substances that “*they are portals* that give insight into certain trainings, and these moments act as powerful triggers for future reference during mind training.” Robert (#119) is a 21-year-old white male who identifies as a Buddhist and has practiced mindfulness and *zazen* meditation, mainly on his own, for five years. He drinks moderately and occasionally smokes marijuana. He wrote, “I see my usage of marijuana as a *sort of gateway* to the more serious study of the mind that Buddhism is for me. I no longer smoke as much as I needed to, because meditation and Buddhist philosophy takes away the need for substances like this.”

Thomas (#125), a 22-year-old white male, is ambivalent about his Buddhist identity (when asked in the survey, “Do you consider yourself a Buddhist?” he indicated both “yes” and “no”). However, he has been interested in Buddhism for three years and became interested through his use of psychedelics. He continues to use DMT, mushrooms, and marijuana. He wrote, “DMT, in particular, *opens the viewer to realms* that would ordinarily lie outside of the scope of sense-perception. It can lead to valuable insights into the nature of experience and that of Mind.” Likewise, Jack (#138), a 51-year-old white male with more than twenty-one years of experience with Zen meditation and living in Zen communities, wrote, “LSD *has opened me up* to Big Mind, a sense of being one with all. Ecstasy is a love drug, *very heart opening*.” During a personal interview at Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in September 2010, he stated, “When I first started doing LSD, I was really fascinated, and it really felt like a major shift in my life. I had gone *into another realm*—you know, *through another door*—and was shown this incredible stuff. It was really powerful.”

Thus the survey shows that a number of respondents view psychedelics as providing an initiatory experience into new ways of perceiving, new modes of consciousness, or new dimensions of reality, which are then further explored through the practice of Buddhism. For some, the value of psychedelics then needs to be transcended through serious Buddhist practice. For others, the use of psychedelics and the practice of Buddhism continue in conjunction. Often the metaphor of a doorway, gateway, or portal is used to characterize the initial insights gained through the psychedelic experience. Often a spatial metaphor is used about traveling or entering a new dimension, realm, or state of consciousness. The use of metaphors involving portals and places may be a way of trying to explain the subjective experience of a profound alteration in consciousness from one’s ordinary baseline waking state. Such an altered state induced through drugs or other means might generate a subjective feeling, as if one is “traveling” through a barrier to “somewhere else.” I explore this idea more at the conclusion of this chapter. For now let us turn to some of the interviews. Through them I demonstrate that a recurring narrative trope in participants’ life stories is that early psychedelic use functioned as an initiatory experience, or gateway, to serious practice of Buddhism.

## THE AMERICAN TRIP: NEW MEXICO

On September 22, 2010, I flew from New Zealand to Phoenix, Arizona. From September 24–26, I attended the Society for Tantric Studies Conference held in Flagstaff. There I delivered a paper titled “American Psychedelic Buddhism as (Neo-)Tantra.” The paper was well received, and the conference offered a unique opportunity to meet some of the foremost American scholars of Tantra, such as David Gordon White, Hugh Urban, Glen Hayes, and Loriliai Biernacki.

On September 28, I left Flagstaff in a rental car and drove to Santa Fe, New Mexico, arriving at Upaya Zen Center around 5:15 p.m. Unfortunately, Roshi Joan Halifax was away traveling in Nepal. While there I shared a room with a young man from the East Coast named Denis. He and I were both “guest practitioners.” I noticed that the average age of the residents appeared to be quite young (there were a lot of twentysomethings). I was also struck by the incredible beauty of the center and how it appears to meld seamlessly into the rugged New Mexico landscape. Aesthetically, the meditation hall or *zendo* is truly stunning. Sadly, there was a bit of a dark cloud over the center on the day I arrived, because one of their committed members had been in a serious accident felling trees up in the mountains at Prajna, the center’s mountain retreat.

While I was at Upaya, I sat *zazen* three times a day and did work practice. The first meditation was at 7 a.m., followed by service (bowing and chanting the Heart Sutra) and *zendo* cleaning. I swept the outside front of the *zendo*. Then there was breakfast, followed by work practice. I scrubbed showers and unpacked linen. This was followed by the mid-day sit and then lunch. After lunch I had time off, so I followed a trail into town and went to the plaza, looking at the shops and the Cathedral of Saint Francis. That evening there was a Dharma talk by a visiting teacher, Michael Stone from Toronto. Afterward I interviewed Stone at Upaya House, Joan Halifax’s personal residence at the center.

MICHAEL STONE

Shōken Michael Stone is the leader of the Centre of Gravity, a Buddhist community located in Toronto, Canada.<sup>5</sup> According to the Centre’s

website,<sup>6</sup> Michael is a psychotherapist, yoga teacher, Buddhist teacher, author, and activist, who is “committed to the integration of traditional teachings with contemporary psychological and philosophical understanding.” Stone has written four books on Buddhism and yoga,<sup>7</sup> and seeks in his teachings and practice to skillfully blend insights from yoga and Buddhist mindfulness meditation.

During our interview, Michael spoke about how he first tried LSD and psilocybin mushrooms when he was fourteen years old. He was particularly impressed with psilocybin. He told me, “I felt a sense that somehow it was a cleansing process, taking mushrooms; and that somehow they were sacred and that in some ways it was a spiritual path. And so I started experimenting, taking mushrooms and then writing later about what my experience was.” After a very intense experience with mushrooms when he was eighteen, Stone had the realization that “this is really profound medicine.” Notice here the term “medicine,” which is often used by Native Americans for peyote and other shamanic traditions to refer to plant hallucinogens. Michael explained to me that this thought occurred to him concerning magic mushrooms:

It reveals your state of mind. With great clarity . . . and if your state of mind is not . . . If you can't really look at your own state of mind, then it would be what people call a “bad trip.” And if you had a state of mind where you were really ready to enter what was going on and work with it, like cooperating with the experience . . . making friends with it, then it could reveal something that couldn't be revealed in my waking consciousness.

I then asked him, “How does this translate into your interest in yoga and Buddhism?” and the following exchange took place:

MS: Right after that I entered a period of my life where I was very depressed and anxious, and I dropped out of university and I had no idea what to do with my life. And I started practicing yoga because a girlfriend introduced me to it, and I started practicing Buddhism at the same time, learning how to sit, and also I started my own psychotherapy. And I realized that there

was a kind of personal layer of the mind that if I didn't really work with, I couldn't integrate it with those bigger experiences. And that now what I needed to do was work more with the personal layer.

ME: So do you feel that those earlier experiences with LSD and mushrooms have a direct connection with your later interest in yoga and Buddhism?

MS: Definitely. I think that a lot of people come into yoga and Buddhist practice, and especially tantric practices, because they want *to break through into some realm* where they want to see what they have been promised by esoteric teachers or, you know, Indian art that they have seen. . . . So I felt like I had that already. And I really saw that, and I would look at these tantric images of triangles within triangles, or bodies within bodies within universes, and I knew it to be true.

When I asked Michael if he continued to use psychedelics, he stated that he did not, and gave this reason: "I stopped using psychedelics because I felt like the practices of really being fully in the body were becoming more valuable to me in my life every day, and they were helping me see how my mind worked with less drama and color. . . . But I certainly think it [the use of magic mushrooms] is *a door opener*."

Toward the end of our interview, I asked a question I would repeat in many interviews about psychedelics and the Buddhist fifth precept to abstain from intoxicants. Michael's response is interesting, because he pointed out that in his own experience, psychedelics had a valuable (if limited) role to play in his spiritual development:

I think that meditators and Buddhists in particular who have commitments to precepts and vows need to really make sure that they are opened to the fact that it [psychedelics] is *a door to aspects of the mind* that many young people use . . . in order to enter into a path that they wouldn't have otherwise found.

And though we can judge the path as using intoxicants, I think that it is not totally an intoxicant. Because it doesn't intoxicate your ego necessarily; it can open it up, and in that respect I think those

drugs, those experiences, really helped me open up to a committed path that is now the center of my life.

In this interview, Stone repeatedly used doorway and spatial metaphors to describe his views of the psychedelic experience. The use of psilocybin mushrooms was clearly a catalyst for his later interest in Buddhism and yoga. His choice of vocabulary, referring to the mushrooms as “medicine” and as “sacred,” strongly corresponds to trends in both (neo-)shamanism and entheology. Stone’s statement that the mushroom experience “reveals your state of mind” evokes the etymology of “psychedelic” (mind-manifesting), and is a common assertion among psychedelic spiritualists. In many ways, Stone embodies the contemporary alternative spirituality and convert Buddhism of North America—he blends psychotherapy, Buddhism, and yoga in a socially engaged manner. While he no longer uses psychedelics, he readily admits his indebtedness to his early psychedelic experiences and asserts that use of such substances does not necessarily violate the Buddhist fifth precept.

#### RICK STRASSMAN

In the early nineties, Dr. Rick Strassman (b. 1952) performed the first FDA-approved human studies with psychedelic drugs in the United States in over 25 years. In the course of his research, he administered several hundred doses of DMT to approximately 60 volunteers between 1990 and 1995. Based on his results, he wrote *DMT: The Spirit Molecule* (2001), which has sold over 100,000 copies and been translated into 12 languages.<sup>8</sup> He has also coauthored, with Slawek Wojtowicz, Luis Eduardo Luna, and Ede Frecska, *Inner Paths to Outer Space: Journeys to Alien Worlds Through Psychedelics and Other Spiritual Technologies* (2008)<sup>9</sup>. Rick is currently clinical associate professor of psychiatry at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine, and president and cofounder of the Cottonwood Research Foundation, which is dedicated to consciousness research.<sup>10</sup>

I first learned about Rick Strassman from reading his article on DMT in *Tricycle* magazine’s special edition on Buddhism and psychedelics,



“Sitting for Sessions: Dharma and DMT Research.”<sup>11</sup> This article was subsequently reprinted in *Zig Zag Zen* as “DMT Dharma.”<sup>12</sup> I was particularly intrigued by the conclusion, wherein he writes,

In the final area of possible overlap, I believe there are ways in which Buddhism and the psychedelic community might benefit from an open, frank exchange of ideas, practices, and ethics.

For the psychedelic community, the ethical, disciplined structuring of life, experience, and relationship provided by thousands of years of Buddhist communal tradition has much to offer. This well-developed tradition could infuse meaning and consistency into isolated, disjointed, and poorly integrated psychedelic experiences. The wisdom of the psychedelic experience, without the accompanying and necessary love and compassion cultivated in a daily practice, may otherwise be frittered away in an excess of narcissism and self-indulgence. Although this is also possible within a Buddhist meditative tradition, it is less likely with the checks and balances in place within a dynamic community of practitioners.

Dedicated Buddhist practitioners with little success in their meditation, but well along in moral and intellectual development, might benefit from a carefully timed, prepared, supervised, and followed-up psychedelic session to accelerate their practice. Psychedelics, if anything, provide a view that—to one so inclined—can inspire the long, hard work required to make that view a living reality.<sup>13</sup>

Here Strassman outlines the contours of what I refer to as “psychedelic Buddhism”—the practice of Buddhism augmented with the use of psychedelics. Also, Strassman, like Myron Stolaroff (see chapter 7), suggests that psychedelics can act as an accelerant on the Buddhist path, and that a well-structured psychedelic experience can function as an inspiration for the “long, hard work” ahead. Charles Tart (see below) maintains the same view of psychedelics as having the potential to give a “preview” that is later developed through meditation practice. Exactly what this preview is of, or how psychedelics can accelerate one on the path and to where, are not entirely clear. Strassman’s conclusion nevertheless presents an optimistic view of a potential

marriage between psychedelics and Buddhism. However, when I interviewed him in Taos, New Mexico, his opinions on this subject seemed much less positive.

On October 1, I left Upaya Zen Center and headed north to Taos. After I checked in at a motel, I got a call from Rick Strassman. We made plans to meet at the Wool Festival in Kit Carson Park the next day (October 2). As planned, I met Rick shortly after 11 a.m. We walked around for a while looking at stalls and talking; Rick bought some black wool for his loom (he has a keen interest in weaving) and then invited me back to his place for the interview. I followed his Toyota truck in my rental car and we stopped for burritos on the way. When we got to his place, we had some tea and settled down in his living room for the interview. This began with my usual starting question about how he got interested in Buddhism and psychedelics. Rick had this to say:

I had quite a rich junior and senior year at Stanford University. I took that course from her [Nancy Lethcoe] on Indian Buddhism, and this was my first exposure to Buddhism; this was 1972, and there just was not that much out there in English translation at the time. There was Conze, and there were some translations by Humphreys and Suzuki, and those were pretty much it in the English language. . . . Trungpa's *Meditation in Action* had just only come out too. And at the same time, I was starting to discover some of the ways in which Western psychology and pharmacology were looking at altered states of consciousness, the most profound being the psychedelic experience. I took some classes on physiological psychology and altered states of consciousness, and sleep and dreams, physiology and behavior, et cetera; they were all being offered at the time. There was a kind of hotbed of consciousness in Northern California on college campuses during those years. My interest in altered consciousness was gravitating toward psychedelics because they produced such extraordinary effects. My interest in Buddhism at the time was purely academic because I hadn't learned any Buddhist meditation at that point. At the same time, I was starting to get a handle on how Western science was beginning to understand altered states—from meditation, from drugs, and from other nondrug states like dreams and so on.

Like many others, Rick became interested in both psychedelics and Buddhism as an undergraduate in college. As time went on, he continued his medical studies, as well as both these interests. By his twenties he had begun practicing Soto-style Zen with a Buddhist community in California, which he asked me for reasons of confidentiality to refer to in this transcription as “The Monastery.” During the interview, Rick explained to me how he often shared his interest in psychedelics with monks at The Monastery and about an unsettling sequence of events that occurred beginning in the mid-seventies. The following exchange took place:

RICK: Let’s see, this was from 1977–1981, when I was in Sacramento.

. . . One thing that is important to mention is the informal discussions I had with the monks during my time in Sacramento, either at my place when they were leading retreats or up at The Monastery, which were about my continued interest in asking how much of an influence their psychedelic experiences had played in their becoming monks.

ME: Right. So this was a typical topic of conversation. And did that continue to be the case?

RICK: Yes. Also, at that time my Zen teacher went through about a year-long period of near-death experiences; they were very visual, and, well, for lack of a better word, they were quite psychedelic. So he started to talk more about his visions, as opposed to a pure, unadulterated . . .

ME: *Kensho* experience?

RICK: Yes. And the monastery even made stained-glass windows of his visions that surrounded the meditation hall.

ME: Now, I’ve heard that other people in his immediate environment actually had the same experiences that he did. Do you know of any information about that? Or [have you] heard any stories or [do you know people who] participated in that? What did he call it, “a *kensho* in slow motion”? And people were experiencing the same sorts of altered states as he was?

RICK: Yes, yes. That’s what I heard.

ME: You heard that, but you didn’t have any firsthand . . .

RICK: No, he was pretty holed-up at another site at that time. And only his closest students were looking after him. It was a contact

high, it seems like, in the classic sense. So they reified his experiences, so it became a lot more acceptable to speak about your visions, but only on the condition that your visions were certified as genuine, as opposed to being delusional. It opened a can of worms.

ME: Right! I can see that. So there was a distinction made between good visions versus bad visions?

RICK: Right. Right. And a number of his students left when he started speaking about his visions. Because they were accustomed to and attached to the concept of imageless, conceptless enlightenment experience, as opposed to one that was more floridly psychedelic. This was taking place when I was finishing up med school and during the early part of my residency. I think that's when it took place. [Looks in a book] . . . Yes, it started in the fall of 1976.

ME: Okay. This is really incredible stuff. Please tell me more.

RICK: Yes, and then he got really sick in April . . . No, the fall of 1975, and then he really got sick in the spring of 1976, and then it went on for about a year, as I remember. Yes, I was still in New York at the time. I moved to Sacramento in 1977. He had come out of that state, but wasn't writing or talking about it much early on. On the other hand, when he did start talking about it, I thought to myself, "Even Zen is psychedelic." It isn't just pure imageless, conceptless kinds of states. That reinforced for me even more my belief that there was a common denominator taking place. Somewhere physiologically was activated, both when you took psychedelics and when you were in the depths of deep states of meditation.

ME: Right. And from your medical background and studying neurophysiology you were looking for a material . . . kind of a neuropsychological link between the two?

RICK: It seemed to me that to the extent that two states resemble each other, there must be some common biological denominator. Either some brain site or psychoactive substances that were released, activated, or increased as the result of taking a psychedelic drug, and as the accompaniment of deep states of meditation. It would just have to be the case if they are phenomenologically the same. . . . I became interested in the pineal gland

as a kind of spiritual organ, thinking that perhaps the pineal gland was activated when you meditated a lot or took a psychedelic substance. Perhaps there was some type of pineal product that was psychedelic in nature, that was activated when you meditated. And I went on to do a study of the pineal gland and melatonin in humans. We were not able to demonstrate any profound psychoactivity of melatonin, however. In the meantime I was learning about DMT, which one could martial circumstantial evidence to support being made in the pineal, but it remained conjectural then and remains conjectural now.<sup>14</sup>

Strassman discloses how the visionary experiences at The Monastery not only caused division in the community but also reinforced his belief in the neurochemical basis in the brain for meditative and psychedelic experiences. At one point in the interview, I asked Rick, “Did you see any tension between your Buddhist practice and your interest in psychedelics?” and the following exchange took place:

RICK: When I first went to The Monastery, I did an informal poll of the junior monks there—all of whom were in their twenties and Anglos like me—and pretty much everybody whom I asked if they had used psychedelics before becoming monks said, “Yes,” and when I asked if their experiences on LSD had led somehow or another to their becoming Buddhists, all of them said, “Yes,” as well, so . . .

ME: Was that the case with you? Do you think there was a direct relationship between your interest in altered consciousness, particularly psychedelics, and . . .

RICK: Yes, I think so. Because it seemed like there were a lot of similarities between descriptions from experienced meditators regarding their visions in some of the more flowery Mahayana sutras and descriptions of the psychedelic experience. You know, the teachings seemed to comport with the core of the psychedelic experience. . . . Here seemed a system of thought that took into account all that the psychedelic experience seemed to point to, and then it took it to the next level, which

was to integrate it into one's everyday life through a sober, grounded meditation practice.

Strassman determined from his informal survey not only that almost all of the monks had tried LSD, but also that their LSD experiences were instrumental in leading them to become monks. Moreover, Strassman made the same connection between the psychedelic experience and some accounts of visionary experiences found in Mahāyāna sutras, as described by Erik Davis and Alex Grey in *Zig Zag Zen* (see chapter 1). In the following segment, Strassman discussed how his background in Zen Buddhism informed his study of DMT:

ME: Now these DMT experiments you did must be some kind of watershed, I guess, for you, because it was quite a huge thing on many different levels. But I thought perhaps now you might want to talk about what is not so commonly known from your book, *The Spirit Molecule*; such as how are things now? How your study changed you? How it changed your relationship to Buddhism, and the kind of person you are now?

RICK: My Buddhist practice and studies were really very influential in designing the DMT research. That was the spiritual model that I brought to the work. I was expecting *kensho* as the end result. If DMT were involved in the enlightenment experience, you know, naturally; if, when someone is having a meditation-induced *kensho* experience, if it is induced by endogenous DMT, I was expecting [that] giving DMT to people would cause an analogous effect. So that was my model of the ultimate goal of the DMT work—to throw people into an enlightened state. And it also influenced my supervising sessions, because I just sat there in *zazen* when people were tripping. I was completely aware of what was happening in the room, in me and in the volunteers, as best I could, but at the same time being able to respond instantaneously if anything went wrong.

ME: Such as if someone had a crisis. I understand. Please go on.

RICK: And also it influenced the development of the rating scale that I used to measure . . . or quantify . . . the DMT effect. It was

based on the Abhidharma principles of the *skandhas*. I snuck in a lot of Buddhism in my study without giving . . .

ME: Without giving it that label. I see what you mean.

RICK: Also, I was planning on interpreting people's experiences when they came out of the DMT effect through the lens of Buddhism. In particular—at least my understanding of it—was that the visionary experiences were not the perceptions of real external things, but were more the reflection of the mind bumping against itself on the way toward the unformed, nonconceptual, nonimageful end point that I anticipated would occur. Even though it wasn't as simple as saying, "It's all in your mind," that was still the basic model.

ME: Right. Kind of a Buddhist "mind-only" framework—this is the play of consciousness, maybe with a more psychopharmacological perspective on things; nevertheless, this is how mind manifests itself.

RICK: Yes, like the mind was generating the perceptions, as opposed to perceiving them. Generated rather than beheld. That was the model I went into it with. From a number of points of view, then, my Zen training and study and practice were extremely influential in how the DMT work came about. But lo and behold, the results of the DMT effect were . . . they weren't anything like my expectations. On a couple of counts—one of them was that of the almost sixty people we gave DMT to, only one of them had a classic *kensho*. Being absorbed into a beatific white light where there was no self, no other, no shadow, no time, no anything other than this beatific white, unified, ego-dissolving experience. There was only one person who had that kind of experience. The rest were interactive, dynamic, highly relational kinds of experiences. Oftentimes an apprehension of seemingly sentient beings who were expecting the volunteers, interacted with them, told them things. There was a lot of communication back and forth. So the quality of the experiences was entirely different from what I had anticipated. And also, whenever I tried to answer the question they inevitably asked me, you know, "Was that real? Or was that just my brain on drugs?" I would say, "It's your brain on drugs. It's mind-only, it's your consciousness bumping up against resis-

tance to being in the unborn, undying, uncreated, unchanging.”  
They all would say, “No way.”

ME: [Laughs] Right! So they didn’t believe you?

RICK: They consistently said, “That was something real. It was more real than real. That was not my mind, that was not the play of *maya*, this was something else entirely.” And when I tried hanging on to that view, you know, the Buddhist view, which was my understanding of it, people just started closing down and getting not so comfortable with divulging all the details of their experiences to me. At a certain point, I said, “Whatever. If that is what they believe, I’ll believe it too—at least for now. And let’s just carry on.” That was another way in which my presuppositions about the applicability of the Buddhist model didn’t quite fit. At the same time, it was a good exercise for applying the Teacher’s suggestion to keep in mind that “I could be wrong.”

Rick found that his preconceptions about what the DMT experience would be like based on his view of Zen *kensho* simply did not fit the evidence. Moreover, the Buddhist “mind-only” paradigm was rejected by his participants outright; they asserted the free-standing reality of their DMT experiences.

As Rick’s research progressed, he discovered that important changes were taking place in The Monastery culture, which led to a less tolerant view of his interest in psychedelics. He had this to say about it:

RICK: While that was going on, I was still going to The Monastery here and there. I think people there were getting a little alarmed at how much progress I had actually made in my studies. I was giving people DMT, as opposed to just talking about it. And it was becoming real, rather than just theoretical. As that was starting to happen, people were getting a bit . . . you know . . . I felt a certain uneasiness begin developing in some of my interactions with the monks. And then all hell broke loose at a certain point, which I describe in my book.

ME: Yes. And that seems to have been a real painful experience, especially because it seems like there was real confidence



broken, and a lot of ethical issues involved in that breaking of confidence.

RICK: Yes, yes . . .

ME: And the betrayal of this . . . Well, it was a pastoral situation where you were trusting someone with something and were subsequently betrayed. It sounds incredibly painful.

RICK: Yes, it was a betrayal of confidentiality, and I said, "You know, we can disagree all we want, but when I confide in someone, I expect it to stay confidential." I decided to complain. I had confidence broken and wanted to bring that into the light of day. I also thought this would be a good opportunity to discuss more openly the psychedelic-Buddhism issue. So they convened a panel and decided it was true, my confidence had been broken, but it was for the greater good, which was "to prevent people from making a mistake in Buddhism."

ME: Yeah, it seems quite ridiculous. There must have been a deep sense of betrayal, really, for you.

RICK: Yes. Well, it was really a sense of betrayal, but you know, that's just how it goes. But the Teacher was dying, and senior monks were jockeying for position in the monastic organization by attempting to outdo each other's orthodoxy.

Rick's betrayal by his Buddhist community led to his disillusionment with formal Zen practice and the rediscovery of his own Jewish tradition. His community's change in attitude toward psychedelics is likely indicative of not only internal politics but also a general shift in convert Buddhism in the eighties and nineties toward a more conservative stance concerning illegal psychoactive substances. As Buddhist communities became more integrated into mainstream American society in these decades, open discourse on psychedelics appears to have become less acceptable.

#### SEAN MURPHY

On October 6, 2010, I interviewed Sean Murphy at the Institute of Native American Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Sean is a freelance journalist, travel author, and award-winning fiction writer who has practiced Zen

for over twenty years, first with Taizan Maezumi Roshi of the Zen Center of Los Angeles and then with John Daido Looi Roshi of Zen Mountain Monastery in upstate New York.<sup>15</sup> Currently, Sean practices Zen with Gerry Shishin Wick Roshi of the Great Mountain Zen Center in Colorado.<sup>16</sup> Included among Sean's publications is a fascinating collection of modern Zen stories called *One Bird, One Stone: 108 American Zen Stories*.<sup>17</sup> To write it, Sean traveled the United States for a year and interviewed over 100 Zen teachers and students at Zen centers throughout the country. Sean also teaches creative writing, meditation, and literature at the University of New Mexico in Taos, as well as at South Methodist University (Taos campus) and at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe.<sup>18</sup>

Although Sean gave up using psychedelics in the seventies, he recognizes that they had some impact on his spiritual development as a Buddhist. During our interview he discussed what he views as the difference between his psychedelic-inspired insights and a Zen *kensho* (sudden intuitive flash of realization). The following exchange took place during our interview just after Sean described an experience he had while reading Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*:

ME: You said you had that realization from taking psilocybin and LSD—that there was a spiritual world?

SEAN: Yes.

ME: Do you remember any particular insights that you would see as spiritual, or what led to those particular insights? Because obviously not everyone who trips has a spiritual experience.

SEAN: No, they don't. Basically what I saw was that the world was incredible, deeply significant; that reality was amazing. Deeply significant, deeply meaningful, it deeply mattered, it was all unified. That's what drugs showed me. But that is not the same as *kensho*, a spiritual awakening; a spiritual awakening is deeper, broader, more lasting, if it's a real one, a big one.

ME: And did you feel like that experience with reading Kerouac was a small *kensho*?

SEAN: It was a small beginning. It was a small *kensho*, a small beginning.

ME: So how would you relate the two [psychedelic experience and *kensho*]? Was one kind of looking through a window and seeing

that there was a landscape out there, versus going out into the landscape?

SEAN: That is a really good analogy.

ME: I don't want to put words into your mouth, but . . .

SEAN: Definitely on drugs I saw, "Whoa, the world is intense and kind of real and amazing"—but the clarity of actual realization [through *kensho*] was much more amazing. Just like, "Whoa, the world is trippy!" Everything we see is conditioned by our sensory apparatus and our minds, and means of perception. And we can't even tell what is real outside of our minds. Like I said, the way I see it now is that there is no inside and outside.

ME: Right. But at that time your *kensho* was more . . .

SEAN: Like the first time seeing the ox.<sup>19</sup> It's like seeing it, but not really seeing the full ramifications.

ME: It's like mountains are not mountains anymore, but you haven't come full circle.<sup>20</sup>

SEAN: That's right. It's not full circle. There is some division in that. But it really sent me on a path.

ME: Okay. What was that?

SEAN: Well, I put down the book [*Dharma Bums*] immediately, and it was nighttime and I walked up and down the street and everything looked unreal to me, conditioned by the mind. It was as though I could see the unreality of it; and I am sure psychedelics had softened me up for that . . .

ME: Right! Sort of prepared the ground . . .

SEAN: Prepared the ground. But I was also meditating at that time. Somewhere in that same period I ran across a book—I don't even think I read the book—I saw it on someone's shelf. I had just gotten interested in consciousness, because one of the things that happens with drugs is watching your mind become its own reality show. And that is something that the general public . . . unless you stumble upon it in some way—you are not used to altered states of reality. So you are not used to watching the mind states as well as reality . . .

ME: You just take it for granted that what you perceive is real.

SEAN: But one of the pleasures in psychoactive substances is that you watch the working of your own mind and it is incredibly

amusing. Right? All that drug humor comes out of that, “Oh, look at that thought! Look at that thought! Look at what the mind is doing here and there.” So I think it *tuned me in to watching the terrain of the mind*, and to taking an interest in the terrain of the mind as well as what appeared as external reality. If I really had to point to it, I think psychedelics helped me with that. Like, “Oh, the mind itself is of interest.”

In this interview segment we see once again the notion that psychedelic experience can function as an initiation into a new way of seeing things, which for Sean eventually led to the practice of Buddhism. However, he was careful to distinguish between his psychedelic experiences and an authentic Zen experience of *kensho*. Moreover, these days he views psychedelic drug use as much too dangerous to be pursued as part of Buddhist practice (see chapter 5 for more on this).

## THE AMERICAN TRIP: SAN FRANCISCO

On Sunday, October 10, I flew from Phoenix to San Francisco. On Monday, I took a bus and then BART to Berkeley and got off at El Cerrito Plaza station. From there I walked to the residence of Charles Tart, a longtime researcher in transpersonal psychology, altered states, psychedelics, and Buddhism.

### CHARLES TART

Charles T. Tart (b. 1937) is currently a core faculty member of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California; a senior research fellow of the Institute of Noetic Sciences (Sausalito, California); and professor emeritus of psychology at the Davis campus of the University of California, where he taught for 28 years.<sup>21</sup> He has been involved with research and theory in the fields of hypnosis, psychology, transpersonal psychology, parapsychology, consciousness, and mindfulness since 1963. He has authored numerous books and is the editor of two, *Altered States of Consciousness* (1969) and *Transpersonal Psychologies* (1975), which have been widely used as textbooks. He has

had more than 250 articles published in professional journals, including *Science* and *Nature*.<sup>22</sup> Tart is also a longtime practitioner of aikido, Gurdjieff's work on awakening consciousness, and Buddhism. His primary research objective is "to build bridges between the scientific and spiritual communities and to help bring about a refinement and integration of Western and Eastern approaches for knowing the world and for personal and social growth."<sup>23</sup>

When I interviewed Charley (as his friends call him), he was quite modest about his knowledge of Buddhism and hesitant to affiliate too strongly with the tradition. In his words, "I generally describe myself when asked as a student of Buddhism, or someone who is very interested in Buddhism." His primary experience with Buddhism has been through the teachings of the Tibetan Lama Sogyal Rinpoche and his Rigpa Foundation.<sup>24</sup> Tart has also studied mindfulness meditation extensively with Shinzen Young.<sup>25</sup> When I asked how he first became interested in altered states, psychedelics, and Buddhism, the following exchange took place:

cr: Oh, I was a teenager in the 1950s. And I had read a lot of very exotic literature, including Theosophical literature and parapsychological literature, even as a teenager. But in my vague memory Buddhism was kind of referred to in passing. Westerners didn't really know much about it at all. I didn't seriously give it any thought. And then before I ever got seriously introduced to Buddhism, I was introduced to psychedelics in the late fifties. I was a graduate student at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. And I was visiting a friend at the parapsychology laboratory at Duke University, and he introduced me to a visiting scholar from Austria, Ivo Kohler, who was one of the early gestalt psychologists. Not gestalt as in gestalt therapy, but gestalt in the sense of the people who studied perception and saw the wholes in it. And he was from Austria doing a sabbatical year at Duke, and somehow we got talking about psychedelics. And he informed us that there were some very interesting European studies on the effects of mescaline on people, but as far as he knew there had never been any studies on Americans and mescaline. Well, I happened to have

read Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception*. So I volunteered to represent my country.

ME: Oh, okay. So you were curious to find out what it would be like to try mescaline?

CT: I was a curious young man, and this was not an official experiment in the lab, so we didn't ask permission because we were sure it would have been denied. But we arranged for me to come in one Saturday morning, and he gave me what I realized later was a massive dose of chemically pure mescaline sulphate, 400 milligrams.

ME: Wow.

CT: And it was a big sacrifice for me to do this because he wanted me to skip breakfast, and at that time in my life skipping breakfast was a big deal.

ME: Right! [Laughs]

CT: Well, he gave me that stuff, and it tasted like warm vomit because it was dissolved in tap water, but it was science, right? So I would do anything for science. And we waited for something to happen and after an hour, or an hour and a half or something, basically nothing had happened. I said, "Maybe if I press on my eyes the phosphenes are maybe 10 percent brighter than normal."

ME: [Laughs] Which would happen regardless of what you had taken!

CT: It was basically nothing happening. So I think he was kind of deciding that Americans were different than Europeans, and he said, "Well, you can go home and have a nice day, or I could give you some more."

ME: [Laughing] Oh no!

CT: So he gave me another 100 milligrams, and a little while later I went from feeling completely normal to the peak of the experience in a few seconds.

ME: Wow.

CT: Later I realized that for all my intellectual openness, nobody was going to mess with my control. I was in charge of things here. And I had psychological processes I didn't even know of that kept my state of consciousness from changing, and finally the sheer massiveness of the dose overwhelmed me. And at that point it was wonderful! I mean, God bless Aldous Huxley

for giving me the kind of set to make it really good! So I had a wonderful day and I learned all sorts of stuff. A lot of things that had been abstract intellectual ideas to me became realities. For instance, disassociation. I knew about the concept. But . . . I discovered what disassociation meant from an inside point of view. . . . Also, the word “beauty.” It was a word I had used a lot before, but I now knew what beauty was. Just the incredible loveliness of the world! I would have to think of the other things, but I got insights into so many ways that my mind worked that stayed with me all through my career, giving me an experiential feel for a lot of things, which otherwise would have remained abstract concepts. So that was an incredible opening.

ME: So would you describe it as transpersonal, or mystical? Was it kind of a peak experience?

CT: It was definitely transpersonal. It was definitely a peak experience—it was the most intense experience I had ever had in my life. It was mystical in the sense of feeling that the world is connected. I don’t think it was specifically mystical. God didn’t show up and say, “Charley, you are doing a good job! Here is your certificate of accomplishment!” The childish part of me is still waiting for that, actually. But it certainly made me realize this is what mysticism is about. The mind can open up and have these incredible experiences. You know the feeling of understanding all sorts of things that I didn’t understand at all in my ordinary waking state. I mean, I touched on what I later called “state-specific knowledge,” which would be understood in a psychedelic state, but back in our ordinary state doesn’t particularly make any sense.

ME: Right. So that experience must have had a big impact on your life.

CT: So it definitely affected the rest of my life right then and there. That was the end of that for about a year or so, and then I was a graduate student, as I said, at UNC, and I had an office in the basement of the psychiatry building, because that is where they had physiological equipment for the dream research I wanted to do. And there was a psychiatrist there who was doing research on LSD and psilocybin. The amusing part of this is that I was once asked him what was the foundation that was supporting

his research, and he mentioned it and it didn't mean anything to me. And many years later I discovered it was one of the front associations that the CIA had set up to promote psychedelics research. So if I seem a little crazy, I can say that when I was young and impressionable, the CIA gave me LSD!

ME: Right! [Laughs]

CT: God, I really must send them my thank-you letter. So I probably had six or eight all-day-long sessions with either LSD or psilocybin in the course of the next couple of years. Which again deepened my insight into a lot of things.

It is clear from the above transcription that Tart's early experiences with mescaline, psilocybin, and LSD had a profound impact on his life and subsequent intellectual and spiritual pursuits. When I asked whether he thought psychedelics could be useful in the practice of Buddhism or other spiritual disciplines, he had this to say:

If someone deeply wants to understand their deeper self more, and they want to go on a spiritual quest, and they are not really mired in their own kind of neurotic or psychological kinds of problems, and they are guided in a proper way, I think psychedelics could be an excellent introduction to the spiritual process. Look at it this way. Somebody comes along and says, "You could be much happier, but you will have to sit for three hours a day for the next twenty years with the hope of having a breakthrough." Assume it's true. What the hell is going to motivate you to devote all that time?

If psychedelics show you initially, "Oh my God! There is a spiritual world!", that is going to increase your motivation. In an even more general sense, any altered state, whether psychedelic induced or otherwise, simply by showing you that there is more than one way for your mind to work can increase your motivation. That your ordinary way is not the only way your mind can work, can be extremely liberating and give you hope. Because if you don't know that, and you are not happy with the way your mind works currently—too bad! You're stuck in it.

Tart here expresses a position very similar to that of Strassman's article on DMT and Buddhism: under the right conditions, psychedelic use



can provide an introduction to a spiritual process or world that can function as inspiration on a spiritual path.<sup>26</sup> While Tart's understanding represents a universalism common in Huxley's perennial philosophy and transpersonal psychology (see chapter 7), Strassman's position (in his article) is more particularist and addresses specifically Buddhist practice and psychedelic drug use.

#### A SHORT VISIT TO THE HAIGHT AND SFZC

On Tuesday, October 12, at 11 a.m., Ryan Brandenburg met me at my motel for an interview. I felt an immediate connection to Ryan, who has been involved in both the Native American Church as a Road Chief and the practice of Zen for over 30 years. During our interview, Ryan spoke candidly and lucidly about his psychedelic experiences, training in Zen, and involvement in the Native American Church (see chapter 6 for interview). The next day I met Allan Badiner at the Old Jerusalem Café, 1340 Irving Street. The address was close enough for me to walk, so I left early and went to Golden Gate Park. While wandering around in the park, I came out at Haight Street, and realized I must be near the famous Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco—ground zero of the psychedelic revolution. I walked down the street, passing lots of head shops, clothing stores, bars, and cafés, until I came to the famed Haight-Ashbury intersection. I'd had no plans to come here, but it was as if Fate had led me. The place seemed a bit seedy, commercial and “hippie” in that retro-kitsch-nostalgic kind of way. I noticed several homeless people, some quite young, hanging out. After this, I went back into the park and then found my way to Irving Street for my interview with Allan (see chapter 6 for interview). The interview went well, and at about 3:30, I dashed off to take a bus to 370 Page Street to interview Dairyu Michael Wenger.

Michael Wenger (b. 1947) is an ordained Soto Zen priest who began practicing at San Francisco Zen Center in 1972; in 1999, he received Dharma transmission from Sojun Mel Weitsman.<sup>27</sup> Wenger is the author of two books: *33 Fingers: A Collection of Modern American Koans* (1994) and *49 Fingers: A Collection of Modern American Koans* (2011), and the editor of *Wind Bell: Teachings from the San Francisco Zen Center—1968–2001* (2001). He is currently the guiding teacher at Dragons

Leap Meditation Center in San Francisco. Although he is very serious about Zen, Michael's views on psychedelics were pretty balanced and fairly liberal. During our visit, he shared some of his writings and paintings with me.

My interview with Michael was informal; however, I did jot down some notes from our conversation. One of the things I remember vividly was being struck by Michael's gentle, calm demeanor. He seemed perfectly at ease with his environment and almost childlike in the innocent freshness with which he approached each new situation. When we touched on the subject of psychedelics, Michael said that they did "open something up" in the sixties. He said people in the sixties were searching for "spiritual experience; they wanted BIG experiences, like enlightenment." They were trying to change their consciousness. About psychedelics, he said that because they destroy the normal way of seeing things, they could help or harm. He claimed that the psychedelic experience could be as "bewildering as wisdom giving." For these reasons he wouldn't recommend using these drugs. He then contrasted psychedelic experience with Zen. Zen, he told me, is about learning about your own consciousness rather than changing it, and the discipline of Zen is important because it pulls you through the difficult states. The use of psychedelics could be an escape or a meditation, in the sense that "anything could lead to an awakening experience." Thus meditation experience "is not the same as nor different from psychedelic experience." When I asked him about shamanism, he said he believed that shamans using peyote or mushrooms could get one in touch with the natural world. However, he claimed that Buddhism does not need psychedelics, and that the dangers of their use may outweigh the benefits. When pressed on the issue, he said that the blending of Buddhism and psychedelics *could* work for some people, but in his experience, for most people it does not. He humbly stated that he is more on the cautious side. He said he is more interested in meditation, and expressing the freedom of Zen through his paintings and poetry.

After this interview, I walked down the street to the San Francisco Zen Center for the evening *zazen* sit. Afterward, I ate dinner at the center and had a nice chat with an English woman who was visiting and traveling around the world. At 7:30, I attended a Dharma talk by Shosan Victoria Austin. Austin began practicing both Zen and yoga in

1971. In addition to being a yoga instructor, she is a Dharma heir in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki, a priest of the Soto School, and a Dharma teacher at SFZC.<sup>28</sup> I was impressed by her scholarly knowledge of Buddhism, and actually was somewhat star-struck with just being in the San Francisco Zen Center. The place has now (in some circles anyway) attained quasi-legendary status as one of the first and most important Zen centers in the United States.

### BART

On Thursday, October 14, at 10 a.m., Tom came to my motel for an interview (see chapter 6 for interview). At 7 that evening I met with Bart in the Castro district for another interview. Bart (#72) is a 35-year-old white male who identifies as a Buddhist, has done numerous Zen retreats, and continues to practice *zazen*, mainly on his own. He also has extensive experience with psychoactive drugs and continues to ingest psychedelics two or three times a year. When I asked Bart about the beginnings of his spiritual journey, the following conversation took place:

BART: So I remember a very vivid experience, which was like my first point of connection to what we are going on to talk about. . . . [It] was when I was still in high school . . . [cat jumps up on coffee table]

ME: [Laughs and moves cat off]

BART: No cats sitting on MP3 recorders. So when I was still a senior in high school, I remember taking a pretty hefty dose of LSD for me at the time, which was I estimate probably around 200 micrograms . . .

ME: Yep, that's a good whack.

BART: So I was up all night having fun with my friends and I sort of crashed out, maybe at about T+ 8 hours or so, and I was still very much feeling the effects. I sort of crashed out on the couch and kind of semislept and did a lot of free association with my brain—that kind of thing. And I had this extremely vivid experience of perceiving myself and other objects in the world as concretely instantiate patterns of information.

ME: I see. Please go on.

BART: It was very interesting. Somehow it seemed like I started thinking about my own nature as a biological organism constituted by DNA, and thinking about how that is sort of like semantic information in the chemistry there, and started seeing everything as sensible patterns of information.

ME: Now did you know anything about information theory at all prior to this?

BART: No.

ME: So it was almost an intuitive kind of sense of some of the basic ideas behind that?

BART: That was my experience. I mean, I subsequently came out of that with a lot of puzzlement, wondering what that could be. But it was a very vivid experience, and it seemed to me that it was veridical—it didn't seem like a hallucination; it seemed like a disclosure of something that was deeply true, and it left me vitally interested in understanding the nature of that perception. So I became much more interested in philosophy. Actually, it was only a couple of years ago that I looked back over the stages of my intellectual progression, and could see a very clear train starting from that experience and going on. I left for college the next year and started studying philosophy and started getting excited by Plato and would go over poststructuralism, phenomenology, and Heidegger, and getting more excited, thinking, "That's kind of it, but not really." And then I started getting into Vedanta and found out about that, and thought, "Oh, that's much closer." And when I finally found Nagarjuna and Madhyamaka philosophy, which was probably six years later, that I just jumped over; I felt like I had been trying to find a way of understanding that basic experience.

ME: That whole philosophical journey?

BART: Yeah, I wanted to understand what that was. I felt like I had a very vivid intuition about what I would now think of in terms of the information-theoretic nature of physical substance; and you can see that in contemporary physics and it's all over the place in various mystical traditions. . . . So it did feel like a spontaneous visionary experience of that quality. And it became very interesting to me to find other people who have had similar experiences quite independently, and I felt like there was probably something

there. So my progression was first intellectual, trying to unravel the nature of that experience—I was studying phenomenology and philosophy in college, and started to zero in on Buddhism and then became interested in that. A couple of years after college, I went to India to sort of kick around; that’s when I really became interested in Buddhism.

At first Bart was interested in Tibetan Buddhism and studied seriously with a lama, taking the five lay precepts (including the fifth precept, which for him meant he stopped taking psychedelics for several years). After some postgraduate study of Buddhism at the University of Virginia, he moved to San Francisco and became a serious student at SFZC. After a time, Bart became interested in Burning Man and psychedelic spirituality more than Buddhism, but he has kept up his own personal *zazen* practice. He had this to say about the relationship between Buddhism (in his case, Zen) and the use of psychedelics:

That is, if you have what the Zen people call “The Great Doubt” and you harbor it, it can only lead you into questioning, and those are *doors that open* as soon as you start to knock on them. . . . So I believe that LSD and psychedelics in general for a number of reasons just tend to plant that seed in people—that doubt. And I think it has a lot to do with the fact that we mentioned earlier, that people realize in a new kind of way that the world that they take for granted as having a particular shape and structure—those things have a lot to do with the parameters of consciousness and the behavior of the brain. And a lot of things we think are primary qualities that adhere to things themselves are actually a complex interplay between how things are perceived and what is actually there. So it can start people, as it started me, on that line of questioning. And I think that is very often the case.

### LAMA SURYA DAS AND BOOMER BUDDHISM

On March 30, 2011, I conducted a phone interview with the American Buddhist teacher Lama Surya Das (Jeffrey Miller). I asked about his

introduction to psychedelics and how it influenced the course of his spiritual journey. Due to the eloquence and impassioned nature of his response, I quote at length:

I hesitate to say so in print, but I've kept quiet for over forty years about my own spiritual experiences, visions, extraordinary dreams and such. But I had my first genuine vision of God on LSD, mescaline, or psilocybin, I forget which, in 1969. I was eighteen and in college at the University of Buffalo, and it certainly wasn't God with a beard sitting on a cloud. It was the formless and cosmic, luminous, transrealescent [*sic*] absolute, the ultimate, the real thing. And I understood what the Buddhist teachings meant when they said everything is imbued with the radiant, timeless, deathless and unborn, undying buddha nature, and all beings are nothing but clear light. There was a oneness beyond duality that connected all beings, interwovenness, interbeing, totally interdependent and relational—God, mankind, women too! It just all made sense to me after that spiritual breakthrough and epiphany. I found glimmers of the same inkling in the Gospels and Jewish mystics after that, which had never really been apparent to me in my suburban Long Island Jewish Hebrew school, rational family background, and cultural Judaism.

Here Surya Das introduces a number of important ideas. The first is the notion that the experience he had on drugs as a teenager was a genuine mystical experience; and more than that, it was an experience of ultimate reality. Also, there is a strong implication of what Aldous Huxley called the “perennial philosophy,”<sup>29</sup> i.e., that all mystical traditions point to the same underlying reality. Surya Das asserts this position by equating this reality with God, buddha nature, oneness, nonduality, “interbeing” (a term coined by Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh), and the clear light.

Later in our interview, Surya Das stated that his psychedelic experience not only inspired his journey to India but also gave him the fortitude to continue his search in the face of adversity. Eventually, through the practice of Buddhism, he found a way to stabilize and maintain the realization he had had while on a psychedelic:

I found a way that was more subtle and healthier, better for me, and not such being a yo-yo, up and down, experiencing IT and then coming down and missing IT. I could get there and be there, through genuine continuous spiritual practices. . . . You know, there was a *there* there, and not only that I wasn't just visiting it by taking pills or other things—I could actually live there. I met gurus, masters, saints, sages, lamas, rinpoches, the Dalai Lama, and the great saints of India, male and female, who all seemed to live that way. And they pointed out a way of life where I could live that way, and become that way, and be that way. And I wanted to live there on *the high ground*. And I don't mean in the Himalayas. On the high ground, *the inner Tibet—the high ground within*.

Surya Das uses some intriguing spatial metaphors here, such as referring to a “*there* there.” With this expression, he indicates the view that his psychedelic experience revealed a higher order of reality above, beyond, or within the ordinary experience of conventional reality, which is right “here.” Surya Das also uses the expressions “*the higher ground*” and the “*Inner Tibet*” as spatial metaphors for this higher order of reality. Through traditional spiritual practices, he attained what he sought: the ability to live “there” without relying on drugs.

Lama Surya Das is one of the most outspoken Dharma teachers about the positive influence psychedelics had on his spiritual development. Although he no longer uses psychedelics and does not advocate that others do, he recognizes a real spiritual potential in their use. For Surya Das, psychedelics have the potential to reveal how things truly are, and not merely give us “hallucinations.” He states, “Well, obviously psychedelic experience *opens the doors of perception*, as Aldous Huxley famously said, and that is what meditation and true transformative practices do. So we cannot just see farther or deeper, hallucinations or visions, but also see things as they are.” Surya Das summarizes his view on psychedelic Buddhism in relation to other types of Buddhism: “So you know, as usual, different courses for different horses. Especially in the religious game. . . . There are so many different kinds of Buddhism. I think psychedelic Buddhism or boomer Buddhism is one of them.”

The trope of psychedelics as a type of “door opener” is a commonly recurring theme. What exactly the door opens to seems at times to

be vague and variable. Sometimes the metaphor simply represents an initiatory experience that brought about a new perspective. Often, along with this metaphor of a door or gateway, spatial metaphors are used to refer to other dimensions of reality, experience, or consciousness. It is tempting to apply a constructivist interpretation and claim that these metaphors are cultural in origin. The door opening has been well known in the psychedelic subculture since Aldous Huxley wrote his famous essay, *The Doors of Perception*, in 1954. However, I suggest that there may be another reason for this metaphor, based on the subjective experience of psychological and neurochemical changes human beings undergo when they experience altered states of consciousness.

### **A NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

Rick Strassman's intuition that there could be a shared biological mechanism for altered states of consciousness induced through meditation and psychedelics is potentially a fruitful line of inquiry for future research. Moreover, archeology and cultural anthropology appear to lend supporting evidence for a shared neurochemical basis of altered states. From his many decades of studying cave art and ethnographic data on modern indigenous peoples, who maintain a culture related to cave art, David Lewis-Williams developed what he calls a "neuropsychological model" to explain cave art dating back over 10,000 years ago.<sup>30</sup> Briefly stated, Lewis-Williams asserts that this art depicts the visionary experiences of shamans who entered altered states of consciousness (ASCs). Viewing consciousness as a spectrum, he identifies several states, such as waking (problem-oriented) thought, daydreaming, hypnagogic states, dreaming, and unconsciousness. In addition, he distinguishes three levels of intensified inward consciousness.

In stage 1, a person experiences what Lewis-Williams calls "entoptic phenomena." These are geometric visual percepts such as dots, grids, zigzags, curves, and meandering lines.<sup>31</sup> Entoptic phenomena include what have been called phosphenes (images caused by the structure of the eye) and "form constants" (images derived from the

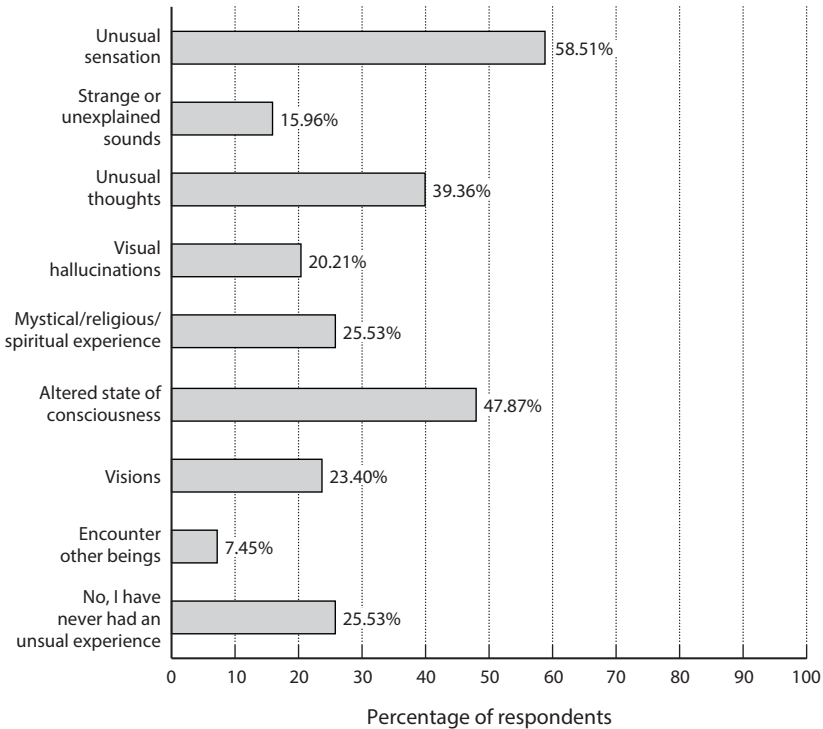


optic system beyond the eye). Entoptic phenomena, phosphenes, and form constants have been extensively documented in the psychological and ethnographic literature. They are thought to be “hardwired” into the human nervous system and appear the same to anyone who experiences the first stage, regardless of culture. In stage 2, “subjects try to make sense of entoptic phenomena by elaborating them into iconic forms, that is, into objects that are familiar to them in daily life.”<sup>32</sup> Often objects that appear in this stage are described as repeating architectural designs or features made of jewels or gems stretching out toward an infinite horizon.<sup>33</sup> Stage 3 is characterized by what Lewis-Williams calls “iconic hallucinations,” images derived from the personal experiences and culture of the subject. Often entrance into this stage is experienced as a passage through a tunnel or vortex and arrival into a different spiritual realm of experience beyond or outside of the body.

A strength of Lewis-Williams’s model is that it accounts for how ASCs are both culturally determined and innate in human physiology. Extensive ethnographic data demonstrate that some form of institutionally sanctioned altered state appears to be the social norm, rather than the exception. In an ethnographic survey conducted of 488 societies, 437, or 90%, were reported to have “one or more institutionalized, culturally patterned forms of altered states of consciousness.”<sup>34</sup> Such states can and have been attained through numerous methods, such as by psychotropic plants, sensory deprivation, sleep deprivation, fasting, extreme pain (as in the Lakota Sun Dance), trance dancing (San and !Kung Bushmen), hypnosis, intense concentration, and meditation.

Lest the reader think that such profoundly altered states are only possible through the introduction to the brain of some psychoactive substance, I should mention here some preliminary results from a current research project I am conducting on the contemporary practice of *vipassanā* meditation as taught by S. N. Goenka. In an anonymous online survey of people who have undertaken at least one ten-day intensive course in *vipassanā*, when asked, “During a *vipassanā* course, have you ever had an unusual experience, such as the following (tick all that apply)?,” 45 out of 94 (47.87%) claimed to have experienced an “altered state of consciousness,” 19 reported having “visual hallucinations” (20.21%), 22 reported “visions” (23.40%), and

**FIGURE 4.4** During a Vipassanā course, have you ever had an unusual experience, such as the following (please tick all that apply)?



7 reported encountering “other beings” (7.45%) (see figure 4.4). Even these preliminary findings demonstrate the potential for nonordinary experiences during meditation. For example, in this survey, when given the option “to explain or describe any unusual experiences you had during a *vipassanā* course,” one respondent replied with a classic description of Lewis-Williams’s stage 2: “I experienced beautiful, impossibly vivid visions of cities in the sky during the first three days of my first course.”

Another strength of Lewis-Williams’s model is that it offers a powerful explanation for the cross-cultural appearance of entoptic visual phenomena during profound alterations in human consciousness.<sup>35</sup> One possible weakness in the model is that it is not particularly fine-grained. The typology does not include what we could call “substage 1” altered

states (such as subtle alterations in visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory, or kinesthetic perceptions), or states possibly going beyond stage 3, such as unitive states like the “clear light” or “pure consciousness,” which seem to appear somewhat frequently in mystical and psychedelic literature. Other weaknesses include a neglect of other experiential aspects of ASCs, such as changes in cognition and emotion, as well as a failure to account for these alterations in terms of human neurochemistry. However, in recent decades the scientific and medical communities have restarted studies on the effects of psychotropic substances on human psychology,<sup>36</sup> which promise to shed light on these psychological and physiological aspects.<sup>37</sup> I discuss some of these experiments in more detail in chapter 7.

One of the most intriguing findings of recent research is the discovery that DMT naturally occurs in trace amounts in human tissue.<sup>38</sup> Rick Strassman has postulated that some individuals might naturally possess higher amounts of this compound, and that certain stressful events such as massive trauma could cause the human body to release larger quantities of such endogenous chemicals, leading to the profound changes in consciousness that are reported during such nonordinary events as so-called “alien abductions” and “near-death experiences.”<sup>39</sup> Thus the door opening metaphor commonly used by participants in my study might represent a shift in consciousness from stage 2 to stage 3 of Lewis-Williams’ model. Since the feeling of being transported to “somewhere else” in an altered state appears to be a cross-cultural, psychological universal, possibly related to the physiological hardwiring of the human brain, one could hypothesize the existence of certain naturally occurring chemicals in the brain, like DMT, that can act in similar ways as LSD, psilocybin, or mescaline.

After discovering Lewis-Williams’s neuropsychological model, I felt I had found the connecting thread that could explain the similarities, pointed out by Erik Davis, Alex Grey, and Paul Williams, between the psychedelic experience and visions described in such Mahāyāna sūtras as the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and *Avataṃsaka*. Psychedelics and Mahāyāna Buddhist “trances” (*samādhi*) appear to induce similar alterations in consciousness.<sup>40</sup> In the case of psychedelic experiences through the ingestion of LSD, psilocybin, and mescaline, anecdotal data confirm the appearance of entoptic phenomena (stage 1) that may then be imag-

ined as iconic images (stage 2), which can in some cases progress into the experience of being transported to another realm or dimension of reality (stage 3). Likewise, the visionary accounts in some Mahāyāna sutras may be the literary “residue”<sup>41</sup> of actual experiences undergone by some early practitioners who entered altered states of consciousness induced through various technologies, such as intense concentration, visualization, fasting, and sleep and sensory deprivation. For some, these practices led to entoptic phenomena (stage 1) and then iconic images of culturally significant objects such as buddhas and their jeweled lands appearing in every direction (stage 2); those who then entered the next stage (stage 3) would experience traveling to these buddha lands and hearing buddhas preach the Dharma.

The possibility of Huxley’s influence on the door opening metaphor has already been mentioned. However, the constructivist explanation of a cultural trope and the neurophysiological explanation based on Lewis-Williams’s model of ASCs are not mutually exclusive. The enduring metaphor might be related to both. While it is sometimes applied to the experience more literally as a passage to “somewhere else,” at other times people use it more loosely to indicate an initiation into new modes of consciousness or a “spiritual reality.” Given the intensity of altered states induced through psychedelics and the appropriate set and setting, such a spiritual interpretation of the experience might seem natural. I discuss the problematic relationship between experience and interpretation more in chapter 7.

It is clear from my survey and interviews that many convert American Buddhists who have tried psychedelics found them to be a “door” or “gateway” to their Buddhist practice. Moreover, some have continued to use psychedelics. Although from a more traditional or “orthodox” Buddhist perspective, the use of such drugs may be seen as a violation of the fifth precept against intoxicants, it appears that many American convert Buddhists do not consider this precept to be an essential part of the Buddhist path. The following chapter explores the reasons some Americans tried psychedelics and then chose to discontinue their use as their Buddhist practice matured.



# 5

## CLOSING THE DOOR

### The Fifth Precept and Graduating from Psychedelics

**T**HIS CHAPTER focuses on a cohort of individuals who indicate some experience with psychedelics but then gave them up; in other words, they had “opened the psychedelic door” at some point, but then chose to close it. Often this choice was related to their practice of Buddhism; however, in responses to the survey and in interviews, people rarely stated that they gave up substance use because of an explicit precept or rule, such as the Buddhist fifth precept to abstain from intoxicants. Much more common were statements that they had made a rational choice not to use psychedelics as their Buddhist practice matured. This was sometimes framed in terms of simply losing interest in drugs or the desire to use them; other times, in terms of a positive desire for more mental clarity or a wish to follow a safer, more structured spiritual path. In the first section, I examine in more detail the influence of the Buddhist precept against intoxicants as a curb to psychedelic drug use among American convert Buddhists. In the next section, I investigate the much larger group of individuals I encountered who claim to have used psychedelics at some point, but then stopped using them as their Buddhist practice evolved.

## TAKING THE FIFTH

One question that motivated my research for this project was whether and/or to what extent their practice of Buddhism influenced contemporary American Buddhists' consumption of psychoactive substances. A traditional, devoted Theravāda Buddhist layperson, for example, would likely view Buddhist moral conduct or virtue (Pāli: *sīla*; Sanskrit: *śīla*) as central to a proper lifestyle. The traditional foundation of Buddhist ethics consists in maintaining the "five precepts," to abstain from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and the consumption of intoxicants. Many traditional Mahāyāna laypeople follow the same precepts. For monastics the practice of virtue is much more involved and consists of following more than two hundred rules (numbers vary among traditions and for monks and nuns). The crucial precept for this study is obviously the fifth, to abstain from intoxicants. Historically, this precluded the drinking of alcohol but allowed for the use of certain stimulants, such as green tea.

A number of questions were asked in the survey in order to ascertain the impact of Buddhist practice on respondents' consumption of alcohol and other psychoactive substances. To the first question, "Has your involvement or interest in Buddhism affected your consumption [of alcohol]?" 72 out of 153 people (47.1%) responded "yes." Those who answered affirmatively were then asked, "Please specify in what way your involvement or interest in Buddhism has affected your consumption." Of the 72 responses to this question, many stated that they drank less because of their interest in Buddhism, or quit drinking because alcohol clouded their minds and therefore negatively affected their Buddhist practice. Only 10 specifically mentioned Buddhist vows, precepts, or ethics in relation to abstaining from alcohol.

Similar survey questions were asked about psychoactive substances. To the first, "Do you continue to use such substances?" 91 out of 135 (67.4%) answered in the negative. They were then asked, "Was your decision not to use these substances in any way related to your interest in Buddhism?" and 43% responded, "yes." These people were then asked, "Could you explain how your decision to discontinue using these substances relates to your interest in Buddhism?" Of the 39 people who answered this question, only eight specifically

mentioned Buddhist ethics, discipline, precepts, or vows. For example, Amy (#109) is a 28-year-old white Buddhist who has been practicing mindfulness/*vipassanā* for twelve years with a Theravāda Buddhist organization and considers Buddhism to be “the most important thing in her life.” When she became interested in Buddhism, she gave up alcohol and marijuana out of a desire “to maintain meditation practice and follow the precepts with a clear mind.” Similarly, Jerry, a 68-year-old white Buddhist who has practiced *zazen* for decades and states that his psychedelic experiences were “somewhat important” in attracting him to Buddhism, gave up both alcohol and psychedelics in order to follow the precept to abstain from intoxicants. Likewise, Arthur (#85) is a 60-year-old white Buddhist who has been practicing Buddhism for almost forty years. He considers Buddhism to be the most important thing in his life, and although he still drinks socially, he gave up using psychoactive drugs because “The monastic code prohibits intoxicating substances. I am not a monastic, but I am aiming to reach that level of keeping the precepts.”

Some people did not mention precepts or vows, but rather the authority of a teacher or the rules of an institution as reasons for giving up drugs. Kenneth (#165), a 65-year-old white male who has practiced Tibetan Buddhism for forty years, wrote that his psychedelic experiences were “very important” in attracting him to Buddhism; however, he gave them up after he received “very strict instructions from my root lama” not to use such substances. Zachery (#142) is a 19-year-old white Buddhist who practices Zen and was living in a Zen community at the time of the survey. He has extensive experience with psychedelic drugs but was currently not using them because “My Zen Center has a no-tolerance policy, and I have chosen to honor it.”

Based on the above survey data, it appears that, although some people are aware of and do follow the five precepts, strict adherence to the fifth precept is not considered an essential part of the Buddhist path for many contemporary American convert Buddhists. Most of the respondents continue to drink alcohol and consume psychoactive substances, and those who curbed or discontinued their use of such substances because of Buddhism often describe this choice in terms of the negative effects alcohol or drugs have on the mind, rather than a desire to follow precepts.



Another online survey I conducted, from June 2012 to March 2014, also appears to confirm a lack of interest in following the fifth precept among people who have had at least one 10-day course of *vipassanā* meditation as taught by S. N. Goenka. This worldwide contemporary meditation movement, which has roots in the Theravāda tradition, places strong emphasis on following the five precepts. One question on the survey asks, “Which of the five precepts do you follow in your daily life (tick all that apply)?” From the 94 responses, the following results were obtained:

Abstain from killing	85%
Abstain from stealing	97%
Abstain from lying	84%
Abstain from sexual misconduct	85%
Abstain from intoxicants	59%

Thus the percentage of those following the fifth precept (59%) was considerably lower than the percentage of those following the other precepts. Since this *vipassanā* movement stresses the importance of all the precepts, it appears that among the contemporary English-speaking practitioners of *vipassanā* meditation who completed this survey there is some resistance to observing the fifth. Thus, these results seem to agree with the results obtained in my survey on American Buddhist attitudes toward psychoactive substances.

## GRADUATING FROM PSYCHEDELICS

We saw in chapter 1, during the treatment of the roundtable discussion in the *Tricycle* magazine special edition and *Zig Zag Zen*, that Zen Roshi Joan Halifax claims to have “graduated” from psychedelics. This metaphor of “graduating” seems to describe well the attitude of a number of people who completed the online survey and whom I interviewed. This group tended to admit readily their previous use of psychedelics and often recognized some important insights gained from their experiences, but then stated that they chose to discontinue their drug use (Michael Stone, Sean Murphy, and Lama Surya Das, for example,

fit into this category). This choice often was described in terms of outgrowing, transcending, or going beyond the need to use psychedelics as their Buddhist practice matured. Thus, rather than giving up drugs because of any particular precept, rule, or regulation, members of this group often claimed that such drug use was of limited, if any spiritual utility and became pointless once a certain stage of maturity on the Buddhist path had been attained. Some individuals stated that their desire for such substances just fell away; others claimed more positively that they quit using them in order to maintain the mental clarity required for their Buddhist practice. In other words, many feel that they, like Halifax, have “graduated” from psychedelics. In this section I first look at several survey responses that fit into this category, then turn to some more in-depth profiles drawn from the interviews of individuals who also, in their own way, “graduated” from psychedelics.

Malcolm (#181) is a 31-year-old white male who has practiced with a Soto Zen group for ten years. Although Malcolm had some previous psychedelics experience, he stated in the survey that he does not see psychedelics as having religious value within the practice of Buddhism. However, he is not opposed to using them and suggested that at some future point, he may try them again:

My psychedelic experiences were very enjoyable, but my early notions that they contained some sort of spiritual truth were put to rest fairly quickly by my experiences with *zazen*. In Zen, we remember Nansen’s contention that ordinary mind is the Way; escaping to a psychedelic state is a lot of fun, but it doesn’t really free the mind from delusions. That said, I don’t think that psychedelic states are harmful either. They just began to feel like a bit of a distraction for me, and so I gradually began to use them less. Now, I checked the box saying that I don’t use them anymore, but this doesn’t mean I never will again. If somebody offered me some DMT, for instance, I might just try it out of pure curiosity.

Benjamin (#1) is a 60-year-old Dharma teacher of Eastern European and Russian Jewish descent who has been actively involved in a Zen organization for 32 years. In his younger days, he had extensive experience with psychedelics, which he describes as “very important” in

attracting him to Buddhism. However, his use of the drugs stopped when he began to practice Zen. Benjamin wrote, “When I found *zazen*, I no longer needed to use psychoactive substances to explore spiritual reality.” Likewise, Hannah (#177) is a 40-year-old white woman who has practiced with a formal Zen group for fourteen years. She stated, “The desire to use them fell away as my practice answered the questions I’d been searching for through drugs.”

Samuel (#172), a 29-year-old white male, has had a seven-year interest in Buddhism and at the time he took the survey, had been involved with a Tibetan Buddhist group for two years and was earning a master’s degree in Buddhist studies. He considers Buddhism to be “the most important thing in his life.” Samuel does not think that Buddhism and psychoactive substances are compatible and strongly disagrees that these drugs have a religious value within Buddhism. He stated, “I stopped using drugs so that I could maintain a steady and focused mind.” Likewise, Sophie (#169) is a 35-year-old white woman who has practiced Tibetan Buddhism with a Buddhist organization for fifteen years. Before that, Sophie smoked marijuana; however, she discontinued using it after becoming a serious Dharma practitioner. She explained her choice in these words:

Dharma encourages the cultivation of increasingly profound awareness of the nature of reality—if this is a worthwhile goal, substances of this nature are counterproductive. The Buddhist meditations, such as in the Lam Rim or Lojong or other analytic/insight meditations, which are based on logical deductions and undermine our fantasies and fears, require mental clarity and also proved far more “real” and productive experiences personally than any experiences with drugs or alcohol.

Sophie did not respond to the question “Do you think that the use of psychoactive substances is compatible with the practice of Buddhism?” However, when asked, “Could you specify what substances and in what way you view their use and Buddhism as being compatible?” she provided this response:

Drugs can make a person aware of the range of mental processes and experiences that are not part of our typical sense of self, or of our real-

ity, and highlight the importance of perception in determining our feelings and actions. This point having been made, however, their further utility seems questionable, especially if the motivation to create favorable conditions for oneself and others has already been created.

Joshua (#121), a 35-year-old Jewish male, was introduced to Tibetan Buddhism by his maternal uncle. During his twenty-year interest in Buddhism, Joshua has taken part in a number of retreats and continues to practice Buddhist meditation techniques such as mindfulness/*vipassanā*, chanting, and visualization. Moreover, he considers himself a Buddhist and reads books on Buddhism daily. Although he is an experienced user of psychedelics (LSD, mescaline, and psilocybin mushrooms) who sees these experiences as “somewhat important” in attracting him to Buddhism, Joshua gave up using the drugs on the advice of his uncle. He described this choice in the following words:

My uncle advised me that psychedelic substances may *open doors* but that there is a danger of endlessly *opening doors* and never going through any of them. He suggested that if I wished to go *through a door*, I would need to do that myself. This neatly summed up my decision to discontinue using these substances. I also remember hearing that Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, having tried LSD, said it was like “double samsara” and this struck me as an apt description and helpful warning.

Notice the appearance of the “door opening” metaphor once again.

Abby (#75) is a 40-year-old white woman who has been interested in meditation since she was eight years old. At the age of 25 she began practicing Buddhist meditation, and at 31 she became involved with a Buddhist group. Her background is primarily in mindfulness/*vipassanā* and Zen. Abby identifies as a Buddhist and considers Buddhism to be the most important thing in her life. An experienced psychedelics user, she gave them up when she became serious about Buddhist meditation:

Through the use of psychedelics, I realized what was possible, I could articulate what I felt was missing in my life: a kind of direct presence

without mental chatter/activity, without judgment, without expectations. But continued use of drugs showed me that these moments could just as easily be co-opted by the “normal” mind. Meditation provided stability, clarity, and also a kind of maturity; a growing understanding of the nature of these abnormal states as experiences born of physical and mental conditions, nothing special, nothing that could be held as permanent. The drugs became redundant. Although sometimes I think I might like to take the mushrooms again for the colors.)

Abby stated that her practice of meditation led to “a kind of maturity,” making drug use “redundant.” She described this as a natural process whereby psychedelics ceased to be useful. However, she did not make any moral judgments about their use.

Liam (#34) is a 27-year-old white male who became interested in Buddhism at the age of fifteen. For the last six years, he has been active in a Tibetan Buddhist organization (attending the center weekly) and has completed numerous meditation retreats. Although also involved with the Unitarian Universalists, Liam considers himself to be a Buddhist and that Buddhism is “extremely important” in his life. Liam claims that his experiences with LSD, marijuana, and psilocybin mushrooms were “fairly” significant in attracting him to Buddhism, but he no longer ingests these substances. “I aspire to cultivate a natural state of mindfulness throughout my life and daily activity. I found that these substances dampened my experience of awareness although they did offer me the experience of alternative states of mind beyond the habitual mind.”

In the above examples taken from the survey, there is a clear emphasis on individual choice. These American convert Buddhists often claim to have given up psychedelics because of a rational decision to discontinue their use. Often this is expressed in terms of deepening maturity in Buddhist practice and a desire for greater mental clarity. Much less often, respondents state that substance use was abandoned out of a desire to follow an authority figure or a particular rule or precept. This emphasis on individual choice likely stems from a new epistemology common among contemporary alternative spiritualities in America, whereby the individual’s own experience functions as the

highest source of authority for them. I discuss this new epistemology and its emphasis on direct experience at length in chapter 7.

### SEAN MURPHY FLASHBACK

In chapter 4, I include a sample of an interview I conducted in Santa Fe on October 6, 2010, with Sean Murphy, author of *One Bird, One Stone: 108 American Zen Stories* and longtime Zen practitioner. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sean no longer takes psychedelics, although he feels that some of his experiences with these substances in the seventies introduced him to a new way of looking at his mind and reality. In the same interview, Sean spoke at length about how society, drug use, and Buddhism in America have changed, and the dangers and possible tragic results of drug use. The following is a transcription of the conversation that took place in Santa Fe:

SEAN: And I will say—though I can't advocate the use of these things because they are too dangerous—I definitely saw people get themselves into a mess with mushrooms. I saw people try them, love them, start taking them every day, or every other day, and they just kind of trashed their brains; and some of those people didn't come back. And I can't advocate the use of them for that reason. And some people freak out from one experience. So it is a dangerous means. It's a dangerous means. . . . When I first got interested in Buddhism, it was completely a countercultural phenomenon. And now there is a little crossover, but not any more than there is between doctors and lawyers and Buddhism.

ME: Yeah, Buddhism is established now.

SEAN: It's established. And it's gotten a little bit straight. So not only is it really separate from the counterculture, it has gotten really separate from the psychedelic thing, which has gone off on its own bizarre direction. Drugs have gotten so bad now that that's why I can't advocate them. People start pot, then they go to — psychedelics, then they go to crack, then they go to heroin. You know, we have had a bunch of kids in and around Taos die of overdoses.

ME: From heroin?

SEAN: From heroin, yeah. Because they just started indiscriminately experimenting with everything. And it is very uncontrolled, and it is just a very different culture now. And there are balanced ways of investigating consciousness, and Dharma is a balanced way. So I don't advocate anything, although I know some of my students experiment with stuff, and I tell them to be careful. And one student I was really trying to have friendly talks with because I knew he was experimenting with them . . . I tried to have a straight, deep talk with him, but, you know, he died of an overdose a few weeks after last semester.

Sean is unambiguous about the dangers of drug use. First, he sees psychedelics as a “dangerous means” (implying the Buddhist idea of *upāya*, or “skillful means”), because they can “trash” someone’s brain or cause them to “freak out.” In other words, psychedelics, in his opinion, can cause brain damage or lead to some type of psychological breakdown. Second, the current drug culture has changed, so that young people do not discriminate and will ingest any type of illegal drug, which can lead to tragedy, as in the example given above. In contrast, Sean advocates the practice of Buddhism (“Dharma”), which is a “balanced way” to investigate consciousness without the dangers of using psychoactive substances.

## THE AMERICAN TRIP: EAST COAST

On Saturday, October 23, 2010, I boarded a flight from Seattle to Atlanta and then another to Lynchburg, Virginia. At the airport I took a taxi to my mother’s apartment for a short visit. On October 27, I drove from Lynchburg to the Bodhi Path Buddhist Center in Natural Bridge, located in the Shenandoah Valley. The drive was a pleasant one through the Blue Ridge Mountains, and the countryside was very beautiful with the autumn foliage just peaking. Driving in the Blue Ridge reminded me of the account in Tom Wolfe’s *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* of Neal Cassady driving the bus Furthur down the Blue Ridge Mountains without ever applying the brakes (needless to say,

I didn't attempt the same stunt). I arrived at Bodhi Path around ten o'clock in the morning.

#### LAMA TSONY

As mentioned in chapter 3, the center is one of many established by Shamar Rinpoche, the Fourteenth Shamarpa, of the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. There I met Lama Tsony, the resident teacher, who had been a monk for over twenty-five years and completed two traditional three-year retreats under the guidance of the meditation master Gendun Rinpoche.

During the course of our interview, Tsony explained that when he was a youth in France, he and his friends were quite involved in the recreational use of LSD. After a near-death experience one night, Tsony gave up taking psychedelics. Not long afterward, he discovered Buddhism and began a lifelong pursuit of the Buddhist path. When recounting his days of experimentation, Tsony described an experience while on LSD of what he would later come to understand as nonduality:

**TSONY:** I remember earlier than that during some of the acid experiences, having this experience of nonduality—what I would call with my language now a nonduality experience. I remember very clearly at some point the border that you usually conceive between yourself and what is not yourself just vanished, and I felt the experience of being in “one taste” of everything. Like everything had the same nature; everything had the same basic stuff. . . .

**ME:** Right. The same substance?

**TSONY:** Substance. Right. Whatever. It was all moving like dough or magma, like anything could happen. Still, I had the observer, who was aware of it. And the observer, being aware of this, tended to freak out, because the observer was used to having a definition of “me and mine,” and this disappeared. And so I totally freaked out, and I really wanted to get out of this. So this, if I remember clearly, was an experience of the nonduality of things, but being totally unprepared, sort of propelled into that



without any preparation, and with a self, with an observer, who still conceived himself . . .

ME: So there was still a bit of separation.

TSONY: There was an observer. But whatever was me—the “me” was gone. The observation was there, but the “me” was gone, and I think the observer was afraid to lose what now I would say was the mentally projected image of myself.

Toward the end of our interview I mentioned this LSD-induced experience of nonduality to Tsony, and the following exchange took place:

ME: So, since we are running out of time, do you see that there is a possibility in the experience of LSD to get a glimmer of emptiness or nonduality, but because of its unstructured nature there is a higher potential for danger, say? Or is that what you found in your own experience?

TSONY: Yes, I would say that. Because we are talking about one’s reality, which is covered by mental distortions about reality, or habits or whatever; we don’t perceive it. But sometimes there is a crack in this veil and something pops out. It could be kind of spontaneous; it could be induced by drugs, or you could be led into that through a safe and validated path progressively. . . . I think the use of drugs in different cultures that took that medium to realize a deeper reality were extremely structured, extremely codified. You are not just popping a pill of enlightenment.

ME: Right. Like maybe psilocybin mushrooms in traditional cultures, or peyote or something like that?

TSONY: Yeah. Like the native Indians. You know, all these cultures . . . this was very much codified. You were supported; guides were there; people would help you go through the dangerous paths they knew were coming because they went through that. So I really believe in the necessity of having a structure, and having a qualified guide. To discover mind’s nature. Because you never know what is going to come up.

ME: It seems that during this time when all the psychedelic movement happened in the sixties, it ended up as sort of this sub-

culture wherein there are elders, guides, there is a culture there, and a kind of protocol; people developed the ideas of a certain set and setting, which would seem in some ways to be a modern creation of the same kind of tradition. How do you see that in relation to Buddhism? Because some of these people actually try to do both. They practice meditation, they do retreats, they have their teachers—Insight, Tibetan, or Zen—and they will still use magic mushrooms, LSD, or whatever, but in this sort of ritualized context. Do you have any kind of thoughts on that?

TSONY: You know, I come from a very structured background of a Tibetan school. You know, thirty years or so of step-by-step training; no improvisation. Any improvisation could lead you really astray, and actually could be very dangerous for your life or your sanity, and will also sort of postpone your achievement. You think you'll take the HOV lane<sup>1</sup> and you are getting there faster, but actually you are just going nowhere. And then you will have to back up and start again. So I really believe in the value of an experienced yogic tradition. In a larger sense—I am not just limiting it to Buddhism, this modern tradition. I mean, a tradition at some point is new; any tradition is at some point is new, so you can't say that because this tradition has 2,500 years it is better than others; maybe [it's] simply more proven.

ME: A proven track record.

TSONY: Yeah. But you cannot say that it is basically better than a new thing. For me, then, the reference point will be the expertise, the experience of the guides—their experience, their wisdom, and their compassion. Often you've got people who do research, and they experience a lot of things, and they come with some things that are interesting. You know, ideas and things. But the compassionate aspect is maybe sort of missing. Like to nurture and take care of your student, rather than just throwing the student into some experiences, like, "It worked for me, so it should work for you."

The central point Tsony made in our interview is that while sudden flashes of illumination or insight are possible through a drug-induced experience, a structured, codified, validated, step-by-step path

grounded in a yogic tradition and taught by experienced guides is safer. While recognizing the validity of other traditions that use psychoactive substances, such as the Native American Church, Tsony emphasized the dangers of improvisation on the path and the importance of wise and compassionate spiritual guidance.

#### GEOFFREY SHUGEN ARNOLD SENSEI

On October 30, I caught a plane to New York City via Charlotte, eventually making my way to my home state of Connecticut to visit family and old friends. On November 2, I took the train to Grand Central Station, then the subway to Brooklyn, to Fire Lotus Temple, the Zen Center of New York City (ZCNYC), to interview Geoffrey Shugen Arnold, head of the Mountains and Rivers Order (MRO) and abbot of ZCNYC.

Shugen Sensei began full-time residential study with the MRO in 1986 and received Dharma transmission from John Daido Loori Roshi (1931–2009) in 1996.<sup>2</sup> Since 2009, he has been the head of the MRO, and he currently divides his time between ZCNYC and Zen Mountain Monastery in upstate New York. The monastery website states, “His teachings have appeared in various Buddhist journals, *The Best Buddhist Writing 2009*,<sup>3</sup> and his first book, *O, Beautiful End*,<sup>4</sup> a collection of Zen memorial poems, was published in 2012.”<sup>5</sup> I had sat a *sesshin* with Shugen Sensei in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2007, and considered him my Zen teacher (and still do). In fact, following the formal recorded interview for this project, we had an informal student-teacher interview concerning my Zen practice. The MRO is one of the most respected Zen institutions in the United States, and as Shugen Sensei is its current leader, his views on Buddhism and psychoactive substances are likely to be taken as authoritative by many practitioners. The following is a transcription of some of our recorded interview.

SHUGEN: When I was in grade school going into high school, like a lot of kids I drank, experimented with drinking, and was doing some drug use . . . mostly smoking pot, some hallucinogens, some mushrooms; I did a little bit of acid; and actually, it was not very appealing to me. I drank because that was what my peer group did, I smoked and that was fun, but the couple of times that I

tripped. . . . One time I actually had a pretty frightening experience, which was not something I particularly wanted to repeat, but even though I was definitely hallucinating and was seeing everything in a very nonordinary way, I couldn't forget that this was induced: that everything that was happening was because something, some external substances, had been introduced into my system. So I felt like no matter how interesting or expansive it might be, it really didn't have anything to do with me, or not very much to do with me, in the sense that I was under the influence of something that was present at that moment and then was going to leave. And I was going to be left with the same world and this same person that I had been before. And that was not interesting to me, because my sense was [that] what I was looking for was something that was more transformative in a substantive way. That was not actually dependent upon any kind of external assistance.

ME: Right. I see what you mean. Please go on.

SHUGEN: I felt like that was the only way that my life could change in a fundamental way, because if I was dependent upon something to induce that change, then it really didn't belong to me.

ME: A number of people that I have spoken to said that they viewed their perception of the world as what the world was really objectively like. But then when they experimented with LSD, they realized how contingent that viewpoint actually was.

SHUGEN: Yes.

ME: And that was what interested them in Buddhism. And then as they got more serious about their Buddhist practice, that just became a thing of the past. But it seemed to function almost as a door opener in a way. That doesn't seem to have been your experience at all.

SHUGEN: Not for me. I mean, I understand how that could be, and I have read [about] that view and that experience a lot. For me, because it was something that was induced, I really didn't give it any validity, because in a way it was like watching a film. You know, I'm having an experience while I am watching the film, but it is really not mine. It is not that I am not a part of it when taking drugs; it's not that my mind is not part of this

in some way, but I knew when the effects of the drug wore off, I was going to be the same. So I personally did not empower that experience, and I think that is the difference. Some people did empower it, in a way, where they saw a kind of potential, or maybe it raised questions or doubts about the way they perceived the world and then led them on; but it didn't for me, because I really discounted it almost entirely simply because it was drug-induced. I don't think one is better than the other; it's just how it was for me.

ME: Right. An important issue that seems to come up within Buddhist circles, and people have different opinions about it, are the precepts, and in particular the traditional fifth precept against intoxicants. And for some people it is very obvious to them that psychedelics fit within that category; but other people see it as an entirely different category, or as something else. What are your views on this?

SHUGEN: I would throw it all into the same category. I mean, whether it's psychedelics or any other clouding of the mind, I think I would put it all in the same category. From my own perspective, intention plays a very large role in this.

ME: I see. That's good. That is very clear what you said. Just to talk more broadly around these issues, I've encountered a number of people who are involved in the Native American Church and also Zen practice, and someone in that context is using peyote, which is an organic substance that has a long tradition of being used by Native Americans, and they see the two as going together in some way. So would you see peyote, from the Buddhist point of view, as an intoxicant in this context? Or [does] the context of it or the intention in using it put it into a different category? I mean, this is kind of a new thing—combining the Native American Church and Zen at the same time!

SHUGEN: Peyote is clearly an intoxicant—it is altering the way you are seeing things, and it is being introduced from the outside. I mean, you could argue that deep states of meditation are doing the same thing, but there is nothing being introduced to your system. What is happening [in meditation] is that you are letting go of all the contrivances that we place on our conscious-

ness, all the things that we oppose in the use of our mind, and allow[ing] it to return to a natural order of mind. So it [peyote] is an intoxicant. The question is, “Is it okay?” Well, I wouldn’t make a blanket statement; I would deal with an individual student who was asking to do that, or was doing that. And again, I think I would go toward what is their intention. Someone who is just looking for license to do what they really want to do, to get high and call it spiritual—I mean, one of the problems in our culture is because all of this stuff is available so easily. There is kind of a supermarket mentality about just picking this off one shelf and this off another shelf, and putting together a kind of potluck spiritual practice.

ME: I see what you mean.

SHUGEN: And the danger of that is we never go deep into anything.

I mean, I can’t imagine that I am ever going to plumb the depths of the Buddhist tradition entirely. That I’m going to tap it out in terms of . . . I just don’t think that is possible. So when we spread ourselves out in that way, I think we are both cheating those traditions that do have integrity, that are complete traditions within themselves, because we are not really engaging them fully; and we are also cheating ourselves, because we are not giving ourselves the opportunity to see what happens when you really commit to a path and take it, and really invest yourself in it, where you can’t just turn around and go toward something else when it gets tough, because something else at that moment seems to be offering something that is alluring; but you have to stay with what you’ve got until that opens up, until that bottom that seems solid opens up, and you pass through into a whole new possibility, which you would never have come to if you hadn’t stayed with it.

Shugen Sensei made a number of comments that illuminate his position on psychedelics. First, he mentioned that in his youth he did experiment with them, but found that the experiences felt artificially induced. Because the drug experiences were brought on by a foreign agent introduced into his body, they did not fundamentally change him in any way and did not belong to him. Thus he did not empower

these experiences with any special significance. The next point is that psychoactive substances are intoxicants in the Buddhist sense, but that the fundamental issue is really the intention of the individual who is taking them. Finally, Shugen Sensei criticized what he sees as a “super-market mentality” or a “potluck spiritual practice,” which would combine elements of different spiritual traditions rather than committing fully to a single practice or tradition. Thus, although Shugen “opened the psychedelic door” in his youth, he quickly shut it again, because he felt it would not lead him where he wanted to go—i.e., to a spiritual transformation on a fundamental level.

In this chapter we have investigated the views of several American Buddhists who have at some time in their lives used psychoactive substances such as marijuana, LSD, psilocybin mushrooms, and peyote, but chose to discontinue such use because of their involvement with Buddhism. While some individuals explicitly referred to the Buddhist precept to abstain from intoxicants, many more indicated that as their Buddhist practice matured, their desire for and/or interest in drugs decreased. Sometimes individuals framed this discontinuation of substance use more positively as a desire for greater mental clarity or focus, which they had come to appreciate from their Buddhist practice. Some felt that their previous psychedelic experience opened them up to new ways of thinking or seeing, which then became unnecessary as their practice deepened. Others saw Buddhism as a safer, more structured alternative to psychedelic spirituality. Most people indicated that they had learned something from their psychedelic experiences, even if, as Shugen Sensei claims, it was only to discover the artificially induced nature of these experiences and their inability to effect a deeper transformation. Thus in a sense, these individuals each “graduated” from psychedelic drug use. The next chapter looks at a different group who have kept the door open by their continued use of psychedelics as a spiritual adjunct to their Buddhist practice.

# 6

## KEEPING THE DOOR OPEN

### Psychedelics as an Adjunct to Buddhist Practice

*Nobody stopped thinking about those psychedelic experiences. Once you've been to some of those places, you think, "How can I get back there again but make it a little easier on myself?"*

—Jerry Garcia

**F**ROM THE data collected in my survey and interviews, I ascertained that certain individuals not only view the use of psychoactive substances as compatible with Buddhism but also believe certain drugs have religious value within their practice. Some of these people follow a spirituality that combines Buddhism and the use of psychoactive drugs, particularly marijuana and the classic psychedelics such as LSD, psilocybin mushrooms, and peyote. As mentioned in chapter 4, when asked to characterize their use of psychoactive substances, 61.3% of survey respondents who answered this question said it was for spiritual/religious purposes. When asked, “Do you think that the use of psychoactive substances is compatible with the practice of Buddhism?” 49.3% of respondents said that they thought they were compatible; and when asked their opinion of the statement, “Psychedelic substances have religious value within the practice of Buddhism,” 25.2% agreed and 11.6% strongly agreed. In this chapter, I investigate in greater detail the beliefs of individuals who think that psychoactive drugs and Buddhism are compatible, view psychedelic substances as possessing religious value, and follow a spiritual/religious path that combines the use of psychoactive substances and the practice of Buddhism. Opinions and beliefs varied widely. After reviewing some of the responses on the survey, I enter



into more detailed narratives of individuals' personal spiritual journeys acquired through the interviews.

## SURVEY

Some of the individuals surveyed who no longer take psychedelics nevertheless view them as of some spiritual benefit, or as providing valuable insights in relation to Buddhism. For example, Logan (#190) is a 32-year-old white male who self-identifies as a Buddhist and has been interested in Buddhism “on and off” for ten years. In the last two years he has begun practicing regularly with a Zen group. Although he no longer uses psychedelics, he considers his experiences with them “fairly important” in attracting him to Buddhism. He described the relationship between psychedelics and meditation in these words:

I think that, especially for the psychedelics (plant teachers/LSD/DMT/ etc.) and to a lesser extent the dissociatives (ketamine/DXM), they can be used as vehicles for awakening. I think actually that a disciplined meditation practice increases the likelihood that some insights will be able to be carried back from these altered states.

Likewise, Emma (#156) is a 64-year-old white woman who does not consider herself a Buddhist, but has been interested in Buddhism for twenty years and has practiced mindfulness/*vipassanā* with a group for eleven years. Although she no longer ingests psychoactive substances, she has tried ayahuasca, LSD, MDMA, marijuana, and psilocybin mushrooms. She claims that these experiences were “somewhat important” in attracting her to Buddhism, and feels that psychedelic use and Buddhist practice are compatible: “I believe psychedelics can help people know their truest nature and be connected to others on a deeper level. I’m not really sure what Buddhism really is, but the practice of meditation itself I find very beneficial.”

Zachary (#142)<sup>1</sup> is a 19-year-old white Buddhist who practices Zen and was living in a Zen community at the time of the survey. He has extensive psychedelic drug experience, but was currently not using these substances because his “Zen Center has a no-tolerance policy,” and he

had “chosen to honor it.” However, he stated, “I may return to using substances after leaving.” He believes that psychoactive substance use is compatible with the practice of Buddhism and agrees with the survey statement “Psychedelic substances have religious value within the practice of Buddhism.” He wrote, “The use of hallucinogens may inspire an individual to realize some classic Buddhist tenants [*sic*]. It may at the very least cause them to question their perspective. I don’t think ‘tripping’ is particularly useful to someone who is as active in the tradition as I am.”

Ronald (#24) is a 50-year-old white male who has been interested in Buddhism for twenty-five years. Although he does not participate in a formal Buddhist organization, Ronald considers himself a Buddhist and practices *zazen*, chanting, and “various quick and dirty Buddhist tricks.” He has previously used LSD, psilocybin mushrooms, MDMA, and marijuana, but no longer does so. However, his choice to stop using these substances is not related to his practice of Buddhism, and he believes that psychedelics could have religious value within the practice:

My experience is that hallucinogens and marijuana may be compatible with Buddhist practice as long as the user is mindful of their altered state. In this sense, they are like meditative practices: designed to change the perceptive process and thus make it more susceptible to analysis and reconfiguration.

Troy (#9) is a 33-year-old Buddhist of “mixed race” who began practicing seriously with a Zen group three years ago. In the past he has used LSD and marijuana, but he no longer does so. His previous drug use had no influence on his interest in Buddhism, nor did his discontinuing drugs have anything to do with his Buddhist practice. He feels that the use of psychoactive substances is compatible with the practice of Buddhism and agrees that psychedelic substances have religious value within that practice. He described the potential value of LSD from a Buddhist perspective:

I think that having tried LSD at least once is likely to be beneficial in understanding the fluidity of the mind. I would not advocate regular

use in any sense, but I think otherwise one is tempted to think of one's perceptions of reality as being completely transparent and unaffected. Having had even a single experience with LSD or other hallucinogens would change that.

Some individuals who completed the survey continue to smoke marijuana and mentioned specifically the benefits of smoking cannabis within a Buddhist practice. For example, Elizabeth (#83) is a 19-year-old white female who has been interested in Buddhism for five years; she does not consider herself a Buddhist but practices mindfulness and visualization meditation on her own. She has tried ecstasy once and smokes cannabis "once a week, or more." She wrote,

I think marijuana is extremely in line with Buddhist ideas of equilibrium, experiencing the highs and lows of life, yet never letting anything become extreme one way or the other. However, the experience is in the hands of the user, and any drug can be used to enhance or degrade Buddhist experiences and understanding.

Likewise, Jeffrey (#116),<sup>2</sup> a 48-year-old white male who has been interested in Buddhism for about fifteen years, stated that marijuana

helps with concentration, focusing, and mindfulness, and reduces the ego's influence over the individual personality. Enhances one's current mood and/or mind-set, slows perception of time, leading one to believe time is a mental construction. Enhances one's perception that s/he is a participator in activities in life as opposed to an uninterested observer. A natural remedy for certain kinds of health issues, a natural medicinal remedy.

Jennifer (#33) is a 30-year-old white female who has been interested in Buddhism "for at least a decade." Although she is not associated with any formal Buddhist organizations, she considers herself a Buddhist and practices Buddhist meditation. She has never tried a classic psychedelic, but smokes cannabis "less than five times a year." About her use of marijuana, she wrote,

The use of cannabis allows me to “quiet the mind” and practice mindfulness more readily than I am able to when I am not using anything. The combination of meditation and cannabis use frees me from the racing thoughts that anxiety brings. Being able to practice mindfulness and meditate more effectively makes me feel like I am making strides in my Buddhist studies—regardless of whether I am using psychoactive substances or not.

Similarly, Ashley (#143), a 22-year-old white female who was raised in a Buddhist household, feels that marijuana benefits her Buddhist practice of mindfulness, *zazen*, and visualization. Ashley explained to me in an interview how she first discovered the spiritual benefits of cannabis when she smoked it as a successful treatment for her chronic asthma. She continues to smoke marijuana frequently and ingests psilocybin mushrooms occasionally. About her cannabis use, she writes, “Marijuana calms the monkey mind and enables me to reach a state of deep relaxation much faster. It also helps me become more self-reflective.”

Lyra (#95), a 25-year-old Chinese American, was raised in a traditional Buddhist household and has some experience smoking marijuana. In the survey, she answered “no” to the question “Do you think that the use of psychoactive substances is compatible with the practice of Buddhism?” and disagreed with the statement that “Psychedelic substances have religious value within the practice of Buddhism.” At the time of our Skype interview (March 2011), Lyra had practiced *zazen* for several years with a traditional Buddhist organization and was pursuing a graduate degree in Buddhist studies. Also in our interview Lyra told me that she considered smoking marijuana a violation of the Buddhist fifth precept. However, several years later (2014), we had some e-mail correspondence, and she confided in me that several intense encounters with “the sacred plant” ayahuasca in the mountains of central Taiwan had changed her life. As a part of that transformation, Lyra discontinued her Buddhist studies and no longer considers herself a Buddhist (although Buddhism is still a tradition she “respects greatly”). Currently she is a life coach specializing in self-healing and spirituality. Thus Lyra is someone who not only “opened the psychedelic door” but also has closed the Buddhist door behind her.

Another group of survey respondents continue to use classic psychedelics such as LSD and mushrooms in conjunction with or as an adjunct to their Buddhist practice. Individuals understood the relationship between their drug use and Buddhism in different ways. A recurring theme was that psychedelics can enable one to break habitual mental patterns and view reality in a different, more enlightened manner. Often it was believed that these insights could then be consolidated into daily life through a disciplined meditation practice. For example, Walter (#147) is a 56-year-old white male who states that he has been interested in Buddhism “his whole adult life.” For the last four years he has practiced mindfulness meditation with a Tibetan Buddhist organization. He considers himself a Buddhist and has experimented with a wide array of psychoactive substances; he continues to use marijuana “almost daily” and ingests mushrooms “once a year or so.” In the survey he wrote, “I think psychoactive drugs encourage you to break habitual patterns of thought.” Likewise, Larry (#79) is a 61-year-old white Buddhist who has been interested in Buddhism since the mid-sixties. He has practiced meditation as a member of both an Insight Meditation group and a Tibetan Buddhist organization for over twenty years. Larry has experimented with a broad range of psychoactive substances and sees some of these experiences as very important in attracting him to Buddhism. He continues to smoke marijuana “a couple of times a week,” and occasionally to use “true psychedelics.” He states that these substances can “access states of consciousness that can also be accessed (and better stabilized) through meditation practice.” He also sees them as having the ability to disrupt “habitual states of mind.” Similarly, Kevin (#163), a 34-year-old white Buddhist, has been interested in Buddhism for twelve years, smokes marijuana regularly, and has ingested LSD, MDMA, and psilocybin mushrooms. He believes that his experiences with these substances were very important in attracting him to Buddhism and that “Some [substances], especially marijuana and most psychedelics, seem to have an innate capacity, though not definitively in all cases, to induce spiritual awareness.”

A number of times survey respondents referred to the plant or fungal hallucinogens as “teachers,” implying some type of shamanic understanding or framework for their use. For example, Bruce (#78) is

a 56-year-old white Buddhist who has practiced with an Insight Meditation organization for fourteen years. He has extensive experience with psychedelics and continues to take a daily oral extract of cannabis and to ingest psilocybin twice a year. He stated, “I view sacred teaching plants as essential to our development as human beings.” Likewise, Jonathan (#117), a 34-year-old white Buddhist who smokes marijuana and occasionally uses psychedelics, wrote,

Any of the tryptamines I have taken (psilocybin, DMT analogues) are great teachers; however, without Buddhist practice and meditation those drug-induced insights will fade and are difficult to integrate into everyday life. If I feel I am stuck in my practice, a good trip will *open my mind* to new experiences and insights, and then I do my best to integrate them in my daily practice.

A number of individuals mentioned the ability of psychedelics to induce in people the experience of nonduality or oneness; or the ability to transcend, undermine, or see through their ordinary ego identity. For example, Jeffrey (#116), a 48-year-old white male who has been interested in Buddhism for about fifteen years, described the relationship of psychedelics to Buddhism in the following manner:

LSD, psilocybin mushrooms—animates within the mind the consciousness of all sentient and nonsentient beings, making the observer one with the observed, and forges a template that the individual and the universe are one and the same. Tends to put the ego on display as an ephemeral, temporary, and imaginary entity. Helps one observe the observer and lose the place where one normally puts the “I.”

Likewise, Eric (#92) is a 43-year-old white male who has been interested in Buddhism for sixteen years. Although he no longer considers himself a Buddhist, he has attended about eight week-long *sesshins* and continues to practice *zazen* on his own. Eric also has extensive experience with psychedelic drugs and continues to use them for recreational, spiritual, and social reasons. About these substances, he wrote: “They are explorations of the transient phenomena of the mind,

in the interests of undermining the conventional ego and opening up the Big Mind: *they open doors* and pull the rug out from under the new dimensions you find.”

Brandon (#159) is a 28-year-old white male who has been interested in Buddhism for ten years. He considers himself a Buddhist, feels that Buddhism is “very important” to him, and practices mindfulness/*vipassanā* and *shamata* (calm) meditation. Brandon is also an experienced drug user who feels that his use of psychoactive substances was very important in attracting him to Buddhism. In the survey he stated that he uses marijuana “about 3 times per week, on average,” and “psychedelics, such as DMT and LSD, about 5 times per year in total.” Concerning the compatibility of these substances and Buddhism, he wrote:

More so referring to LSD and DMT. These substances give one an experiential account of the ground of being, the mystical sense of oneness that underlies our attachment to form. Hard to point to with words, as the experience is trans-egoic. But I found that Buddhism (and perhaps Hinduism) is the closest things there is, in terms of worldviews, to corroborating my experiences with psychedelics.

Some individuals mention the utility of psychedelics for training the mind, or to realize certain specific Buddhist doctrines and virtues. For instance, Gary (#144)<sup>3</sup> is a 36-year-old Buddhist with sixteen years of serious Buddhist practice with a Tibetan Buddhist organization, including a three-year solitary retreat. He considers Buddhism to be “the most important thing” in his life, and feels that his previous drug experiences were “very important” in attracting him to Buddhism. He continues to use “ganja and psilocybin very occasionally.” He wrote:

In my own experience, these substances have played a pivotal role in opening my vision and ability to work on certain issues in the mind. To know how that happens requires the person to ingest and investigate. I do not see them as something to become dependent on, but *they are portals* that give insight into certain trainings, and these moments act as powerful triggers for future reference during mind training.

Bart (#72), a 35-year-old white male, identifies as a Buddhist, has done numerous Zen retreats and continues to practice *zazen*, mainly on his own. Bart also has extensive experience with psychoactive drugs and continues to ingest them two or three times a year. In the survey, Bart was quite articulate and detailed in describing the value of using psychedelics within the context of Buddhist practice:

A few broad generalities about the classical psychedelics: 1) it's useful to familiarize one's self with nonordinary states of awareness; 2) alteration to consciousness calls attention to the constitutive role of subjective awareness in co-creating the experience of reality; 3) psychedelics facilitate awareness of and integration of suppressed primary process material, which is highly relevant to preparatory practices and "purification" of karma; 4) psychedelic experiences, particularly in high doses, may temporarily inhibit the ascent to the fallacious appearance of phenomena as intrinsically existent, which yields experiential insight into the concepts of dependent arising and emptiness; 5) experiences of psychedelics may give rise to profound feelings of compassion, and in such states the relationship between deep compassion and a sense of nonseparation may be particularly evident; 6) experience in staying centered in the midst of baffling, disturbing, and/or intense experiences can be useful for advanced practice.

In this passage, Bart mentions the possibility of psychedelics providing a direct experience of some specific Buddhist doctrines such as dependent arising and emptiness. Moreover, he suggests ingestion of such materials may lead to the feeling of compassion (a central Buddhist virtue) and help one to stay "centered" (implying the Buddhist virtue of equanimity). He also proposes that the use of psychedelics may help to increase awareness and integration of "primary process material" (suggesting the psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious), which can lead to the purification of karma. Thus, overall Bart appears to understand psychedelic drugs as tools or as a technology that can be used to progress on the Buddhist path.

Two other respondents to the survey, Henry (#178) and Ryan (#131), made specific reference to peyote use within the context of the Native



American Church (NAC). The NAC is an established religious tradition, and its use of peyote is protected by federal law within the United States.<sup>4</sup> Although the NAC developed in modern times among indigenous North Americans as a response to the colonization and repression by Europeans, the religious use of peyote in Mesoamerica dates back several thousand years.<sup>5</sup> Here I discuss Henry's experience; Ryan's story is in the next section.

Henry, a 41-year-old Apache/Mexican male, is both a serious practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism and an active member of the Native American Church. He became interested in Buddhism in his early twenties when he formally "took refuge" in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha). When asked in the survey about substances he continues to use, Henry replied, "Native American Church—HH Dalai Lama and HH Karmapa as well as my heart teacher consider what I do with peyote '*terma*' and a type of *chöd* in the Tibetan understanding of practice." Henry's use of these Buddhist terms is significant. The Tibetan word *terma* (*gter ma*) means "Hidden Treasure," and usually signifies secret teachings in the form of texts, which were concealed by the enlightened being Padmasambhava or his consort in the eighth century, when he is said to have brought Tantric Buddhism from India to Tibet.<sup>6</sup> These *terma* are thought to be "time-locked" and can only be found by certain Buddhist adepts when the time is right. Although *terma* are usually texts, Tibetan Buddhists also recognize "mind *terma*" that are revealed directly from Padmasambhava or another enlightened being to the mind of the adept. Therefore, *terma* function as a means of ongoing revelation in the Buddhist tradition. Thus when Henry states that these important Buddhist authorities recognize his use of peyote as a *terma*, he is saying that they recognize the religious use of peyote as a means of Buddhist revelation of higher or secret truths.

Henry also refers to his use of peyote as *chöd*. In Tibetan, *chöd* (*gcod*) refers to a special tantric ritual usually involving the offering of one's body and flesh to demons in order to placate them and convert them to Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> Henry does not explain exactly why his use of peyote in the NAC would be considered a form of *chöd*; however, he seems to be implying that these high-ranking Tibetan religious leaders understand the religious use of peyote by indigenous Americans to be a form of tantric ritual.

In my Skype interview with Henry in April 2011, he explained that he personally met with the Karmapa and the Dalai Lama, both of whom understood his use of peyote in the way he mentions above. Henry stated,

Yes, I met with the Karmapa three times. But the third time, which was the first time I had an audience with His Holiness [the Dalai Lama] too. . . . It cleared up a lot of things for my understanding of the practice, because where I related cultural concerns of mine, my own understanding of where I come from relating to how I saw the Tibetan community, and what was represented. And in that there was a clear and present message that, “Yeah, what you are doing with this medicine [peyote], that’s your practice. Collecting these songs, that’s your practice. This is your *chöd*.” So that was like a stamp of approval; and it’s funny because . . . I can remember my ego was afraid of not getting that stamp of approval, and somehow they were going to say that everything I was doing was wrong.

In sum, Henry demonstrates a strong commitment to both the NAC and Tibetan Buddhism. In his mind, the ingestion of peyote and his Buddhist practice form a seamless unity, so his use of the medicine is understood simultaneously in the context of the NAC and as a tantric ritual in the Buddhist sense.

## **FIVE LIFE NARRATIVES OF PSYCHEDELIC BUDDHISTS**

In this section, I discuss the life narratives of five men who are deeply committed to both Buddhist practice and the spiritual use of psychedelics. As mentioned in the introduction and chapter 1, white male converts to Buddhism appear to be the group most optimistic about a possible marriage between Buddhist practice and the spiritual use of psychoactive substances. Each individual discussed here conceives of the relationship between Buddhism and psychedelics in his own fashion, but generally speaking, they all see psychedelics as in some manner complementing or augmenting their Buddhist

practice. I discuss these five in particular because they all seem to have successfully integrated psychedelics into their Buddhist practice, and they are articulate and self-conscious about the way they believe psychedelics and Buddhism fit together. By looking at these life narratives in some detail, I hope to demonstrate the highly individualized approach to spirituality that each has developed, and to show how their current religious worldviews are explained through their life narratives. I highlight and foreground the important role personal life narratives play in the construction of a distinctively American psychedelic Buddhism.

#### ALLAN

As the Gen-X editor of *Tricycle* magazine's special edition and coeditor of the book *Zig Zag Zen*, Allan Hunt Badiner seemed a good starting point for my research on Buddhism and psychedelics. I was able to interview Allan in San Francisco on October 13, 2010. The interview began with the following:

ME: Allan, thank you very much for agreeing to do this. In a way, you are a pioneer in this area with your work for the *Tricycle* edition and for *Zig Zag Zen*, but I was hoping just to talk to you about your own person experience—how you got interested in Buddhism, how you got interested in psychedelics, what you see the relationship between the two of them being. . . . You can just start at the beginning.

ALLAN: They are definitely related for me personally, which is what drove me to write the book, or gather information from experiences of others as well, and it was clearly a subject area that had not been explored thoroughly, which is amazing given that so many figures that called our cultural attention to Buddhism *and* psychedelics were the same population, people like Allen Ginsberg, Ram Dass, Alan Watts, and others. But personally, the progression went something like a chance experience with MDMA, travel in India, Shaivism; *bhakti*, and then, after a year in India wanting to prepare myself to reenter life as we know it, I went to Sri Lanka and sat in meditation for a ten-day retreat.

After a profound experience of inner peace and calm while on retreat in Sri Lanka, Allan returned to the United States in 1985. In the decade that followed, a number of charismatic personalities catalyzed Allan's interest in Buddhism and psychedelics. For four years he studied closely with the Theravada monk Havanpala Ratanasara in Los Angeles. Following this, while staying at the Ojai Foundation, Allan met the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh and was quite taken by him. Around the same time, Allan began ingesting psilocybin mushrooms with close friends out in nature and subsequently developed a deep appreciation for the natural world and ecological issues. This inspired him to edit his first book, *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays on Buddhism and Ecology* (1990).<sup>8</sup>

Allan's first powerful experience with a psychoactive was when he took MDMA (ecstasy) at a party prior to his departure for Asia. During this experience, he had had a profound feeling of "loving everyone." So when he returned to the States from Asia, he decided he needed to know more about this drug. In a desire to better understand the empathic qualities of MDMA, Allan managed to track down Alexander "Sasha" Shulgin in San Francisco. As mentioned in chapter 2, the popularity of MDMA largely can be attributed to this genius chemist and rogue psychedelic inventor/adventurer. Among the psychedelic intelligentsia, Shulgin is something of a cult hero. Allan told me,

I felt immediately a heart connection. . . . He had this shocking white hair that went in all directions. And he was like the proverbial mad scientist. What I noticed about him was this tremendous energy, humor, and wit, and brightness, and intuitiveness, and he was so delightful.

Another person who was to have a profound influence on Allan Badiner was Terrance McKenna. As mentioned in chapter 1, McKenna was also a leading figure among the psychedelic intelligentsia and something of a psychedelic celebrity. Soon after their meeting in the early nineties, Badiner and McKenna became friends. As discussed in chapter 1, Badiner interviewed McKenna for his special edition of *Tricycle*, wherein McKenna presents an unqualified pro-psychedelic stance, but his enthusiasm for Buddhism was somewhat lukewarm;

he describes Buddhism without psychedelics as a kind of “training wheels practice,” i.e., not the “real thing.” In the same edition of *Tricycle*, Badiner also gives an account of his own experience with *yagé* (ayahuasca), which was given to him by a “shaman” in Hawai‘i.<sup>10</sup> In our interview, he revealed that the “shaman” was in fact Terrance McKenna. When recounting this intense experience, Allan described to me the following exchange he’d had with McKenna:

I said, “What did you do to me? How could you do that to me?” [Laughs] I had a full-blown death experience. It was maddeningly frightening. . . .

And I love his [McKenna’s] line, “Oh, you’ll do it again.” And I said, “Why, because whatever doesn’t kill me makes me stronger?” And he said, “No, no. That which *kills* you makes you stronger.”

Oddly enough, that little joke became a major teaching in my mind. In terms of the relationship between life and death, and how life takes meaning because of death; and how an awareness of death makes you more alive. . . .

Yeah, so it was a powerful teaching just in the proverbial joke, and I meditated on that for a long time. He was a great master, even though he was a scoundrel and all that stuff. Not really a scoundrel—he was one of the most compassionate people I have ever experienced in my life. And I have been around a lot of highly trained compassionate people. It just came natural to him.

His friendship with McKenna was to have a lasting influence. However, McKenna was also a teacher, spiritual guide, and “his shaman,” who introduced Allan to ayahuasca, which initiated profound Buddhist insights for him. Thus in a sense, McKenna was both a psychedelic and Buddhist guru for Badiner.

While Allan’s psychedelic experience is not extensive, he believes that if used appropriately, psychedelics can be employed for spiritual purposes. He summarized his position nicely in an e-mail sent to me on November 10, 2010:

In a somewhat indirect way, I came to meditation *via* psychedelics, and thus I have an abiding confidence that a disciplined daily prac-

tice of meditation in conjunction with judicious and selective use of plant psychedelics is a most efficacious path for personal evolution.

Alex Grey, well-known psychedelic artist and coeditor of *Zig Zag Zen*, has a very similar view.<sup>11</sup> In an e-mail interview (January 22, 2011), I asked him, “Do you think that the use of psychedelics is compatible with the practice of Buddhism? If so, in what way?” Alex gave the following response:

They are different spiritual practices and not mutually exclusive. For me, I do psychedelics rarely and Buddhist practice every day. In my experience, one enriches the other. Doing psychedelics reminds me of the *place of perfection* or enlightened mind. Meditating trains the mind, a mind that continually returns from perfection to the material realm.

Thus Alex and Allan agree that the occasional use of psychedelics can augment a disciplined daily practice of meditation. This is an outlook that Allan developed over time from his use of psychoactive substances, his training in meditation, and his personal encounters with Buddhist teachers and psychedelic spiritualists.

Allan’s story is an excellent case study of the impact certain charismatic individuals can have on members of both Buddhist and psychedelic subcultures. He is outspoken about how Havanpala Ratanasara, Thich Nhat Hanh, Alexander Shulgin, and Terrence McKenna inspired him and influenced his views. From what Allan has written and from our interview, I would describe his general worldview and ethical framework as essentially a moderate psychedelic Buddhist.<sup>12</sup>

#### TOM

I interviewed Tom in San Francisco in October 2010. He is a white male who was born in Los Angeles in 1949. In 1960, his family moved to San Jose, where Tom was confirmed in the Lutheran faith. When he was a freshman in high school, around 1964, he got involved with a charismatic Christian youth group, and had “the white light Christian conversion experience.” He described this in the following way:

TOM: And I was, like, a Christian for a year! [Laughs] Which doesn't seem like that much . . .

ME: When you are that young, it's a big deal.

TOM: It is a big deal, yeah. So then there was this famous—you probably know it—there was this famous *Life Magazine* cover story on LSD in, like, '65 or '66.<sup>13</sup>

ME: Yes, I know of it.

TOM: And I read it and I was just fascinated. And I was like, “You mean you can get this from a pill?”

ME: [Laughs] So you immediately saw that there was similarity between what you had experienced and LSD?

TOM: Oh yeah! The spiritual experience and the descriptions of the states, and so on and so forth, were so similar. So I got together with my girlfriend in high school; she actually went to a nearby high school. So it turned out that at the age of sixteen, she was working as a research assistant at the place in Menlo Park, the Institute for Advanced Study . . . the place that James Fadiman was working at, and Myron Stolaroff.<sup>14</sup> She knew all about this stuff, though she hadn't really taken much of it herself. But she knew of all the studies that were being done, and the work with Analysis. This was before, just before, it became illegal.

Tom then related to me how he took LSD for the first time around Easter of 1967, and “had a great experience.” When I asked him if it was a spiritual experience, he said it was definitely “recreational,” but that it was “impossible to get away from a sense of God” because he was “bent in that direction.”

When Tom was eighteen, he was arrested for the possession of marijuana and spent a night in jail. Fortunately, his lawyer was able to remand the case to the juvenile court and Tom did not have to serve time as an adult. He studied as an undergraduate at an Ivy League university on the East Coast, where many students were smoking marijuana and taking LSD. During this time, he began reading some Allan Watts and “sort of got into that”; however, in retrospect he stated, “I actually thought I knew something about Buddhism; of course, I didn't!” It was also during this time that a friend introduced him to a “Western Theosophical group” called Agni Yoga or Actualism, based in

north San Diego County. Tom became involved with this organization for the next twenty years and practiced their form of meditation, which according to him was mainly visualization and energy work. Also during this period, he studied as a graduate student at another East Coast Ivy League university and received a Ph.D. in comparative literature.

Tom said that Agni Yoga had a “no drugs policy,” so for twelve years he quit taking any substances. Although he said he was always on the periphery of the group, he was serious about his meditation practice and has continued to meditate daily. After twelve years of abstinence, a friend reintroduced Tom to smoking marijuana. Not long after that, he took mushrooms and tripped for the first time in fifteen years. Around this time he learned that a former member of the Agni Yoga group named Fred was running “structured psychedelic sessions.” Tom and his wife soon began participating in these sessions, and when the Agni Yoga group discovered this, they were kicked out.

Following their dismissal from Actualism, Tom and his wife became very close to the members of Fred’s group, whom Tom states were primarily psychiatrists in residency who were also serious practitioners of Insight Meditation. Tom described Fred’s sessions in the following words:

It [the group’s meeting] was four times a year. And it would be a whole weekend thing. We would meet on Friday night and we would fast on Saturday, and we would frequently take a hike. At first, we were in the city, and then we did a lot in the desert, Joshua Tree. I actually found a place out there that turned out to be perfect.

So then Saturday night we would take the drug, and one of the things was it was quite a variety over the years. I mean, we usually didn’t do LSD or anything like that, but of course we did a lot of mushrooms, but we also did iboga (my favorite), and we did ayahuasca; this ayahuasca Terrance McKenna was brewing up in Hawaii, which was horribly viscous.

Fred’s sessions were pretty ritualistic too. The format was you would have an opening circle around and everyone would talk. Then you would take the medicine. There was a lot of music playing, but two or three times in the evening you would reassemble in a circle, and the talking staff would be passed. And at a certain point, Fred



really wanted you to sing in the first round. And then he would do his shamanic thing; he would tell stories, or lead us in meditation, and so on and so forth. I mean, he's a master; he really is.

They [the sessions] were excellent. And sometimes at the end he would give us toad slime, 5-MeO-DMT. Actually, the first time we had taken mushrooms, we smoked the toad venom at the end of it, and, like, my whole reality shattered. Of course, my eyes were closed, I had a blindfold on or something, and then I got really scared and I kept telling myself, "It will be all right. It will be all right." Like I was falling through space. . . . But then it was better than all right! [Laughs]

While Tom was active in this group, he also began a serious practice of Insight Meditation, and discovered a group that practiced a highly structured and extremely intense psychedelic protocol that had been developed by Mexican psychiatrist Salvador Roquet<sup>15</sup> and carried on by a student of his work named Pablo Sanchez. Tom described these sessions in the following manner:

But the protocol is, especially for a night journey, which are the only ones I have taken, you do all this preliminary stuff—all this art stuff, trust exercises, and all of that; then you take a really large amount of mushrooms—"a committed dose," as they say—and there used to be this slide show (and there still is); and the whole thing was you put your blindfold on, and you didn't take it off all night, even to go to the bathroom, so there was a staff of people leading you to the bathroom. . . . And so then at a certain point to extend the experience they would give you 150 mics [micrograms] of LSD. . . . And then at a certain point in the evening you got a shot of ketamine. And I mean like you are already blasted with all these mushrooms and LSD, so it is probably the most intense protocol that I have ever been through.

Then in the 1990s Tom began studying with Ken McLeod,<sup>16</sup> an American Buddhist teacher who had studied with Kalu Rinpoche in the Kagyu Tibetan tradition. Tom describes Ken as a "very brilliant guy" who was adamantly against Tom's psychedelic drug use, so Tom quit again for another twelve-year period. With Ken, Tom had a number of what he describes as *kensho* or breakthrough experiences practicing

Mahamudra and Dzogchen techniques. Around this time, Tom also did a three-month retreat with the IMS (Insight Meditation Society) and had some important insights.

After twelve years, Tom and Ken parted ways, and Tom began smoking marijuana and using psychedelics again. He also studied to be an Insight Meditation teacher, and once again got involved in a group conducting the intense psychedelic protocol developed by Roquet and Sanchez. He said he also takes part in “smaller mushrooms circles, mainly in nature on backpacking trips” every other summer.

Toward the end of our interview, I asked Tom about the spiritual value of psychedelics, and the following exchange took place:

ME: Right. Now obviously you have gotten a lot out of psychedelics, and it seems that you continue to get a lot out of psychedelics. Do you see psychedelics as inherently powerful tools, or is it something that cuts both ways? I mean, would you recommend the use of psychedelics to people? Or is it just that it is what works for you?

TOM: Well, I have recommended it to people. I’ve done some sitting for people [as a psychedelic guide]. . . . I am a huge believer in the set and setting thing. So it depends. One of the main things I have been taught is that you formulate an intention when you go in, and when things are flying all over the place, you remember to return to your intention. And the intention is either for healing, or wisdom, or insight, or it can be for both. So I think in those circumstances I have recommended it to people, but I don’t recommend it casually. Not like when I was a kid and everyone was dropping acid at the drop of a hat.

ME: Right. Do you think it is that intention for healing or wisdom that makes it for you a spiritual thing, rather than just a recreational thing?

TOM: Yes. I think it can’t help but be spiritual if you’ve got a daily practice, or even if you don’t have a daily practice, but have done a fair amount of meditation or retreat work. But part of what does make it spiritual is the frame. You know, so doing a prayer to the four directions, and having an intention . . . I mean, that is really important. So one thing that I have done . . . people have

mainly taken psychedelics in an unstructured rave situation or whatever . . . I have introduced them to a more structured thing.

From our interview, I formed a strong impression of Tom as what I call a “classic psychedelicist.” He is a baby boomer who tripped on LSD in 1967—the height of the psychedelic revolution. He is highly intelligent and extremely well educated; moreover, several of his associates are important figures within the psychedelic intelligentsia. However, Tom’s spirituality is not easily characterized. It is definitely psychedelic and heavily influenced by Buddhism and meditation. Yet he has also undergone long periods (twelve years) of complete abstinence from psychoactive substances. Thus, rather than “keeping the psychedelic door open,” he has opened and shut it a number of times. Also, Tom’s practice of Tibetan Buddhism and Insight Meditation has been serious, sustained, and of great importance to him. Trained as a meditation teacher, Tom also acts as a psychedelic spiritual guide leading people through their experiences. The protocols he has followed are the most intense and highly structured I have encountered, and his attitude toward his psychedelic drug use is definitely as a spiritual practice heavily influenced by (neo-)shamanism.

#### GARY

In March 2011, I conducted a Skype interview with Gary (#144), a 36-year-old white male from Seattle, who first experimented with LSD when he was fifteen. Gary described his teen years:

I grew up in a Christian household; none of it made sense to me. There were a lot of contradictions—I don’t want to criticize, I just wasn’t connecting. And around the age of fifteen, I met some gothic kids and they introduced me to LSD, so when I took that, at the time the particular music they were listening to was sound experimental and industrial. A lot of the groups they were a part of, a lot of these bands, were all involved in occult organizations—Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth, Illuminates of Thanateros, Chaos Magick—things like this. When I found out about that—a completely alternative way of viewing reality—in conjunction with taking LSD, and how that

*opened up my vision* to the fact that there was a lot more going on than I had been told, that society had given me. . . .

So a fifteen-year-old taking LSD started the process of me becoming aware of telepathy, becoming aware of energetic [*sic*] systems, and the interaction between energy systems, and how that relates to human psychology and different types of spirits, elementals, and other beings—being able to perceive those—being able to perceive the entities in the astral plane that are drawn in *thangkas* and different things like that. Things that the average human thinks are fictitious, or not real. . . . So that kind of led to my curiosity deepening when it came to Dharma.

Gary explains how his experimentations with LSD and the occult within youth goth culture led to his direct experience of psychic powers, esoteric energy systems, and more. For him, these experiences were not “mere hallucinations” but actually “real,” although hidden from the “average human.”

Then around 1991, Gary began to get interested in Buddhism, and in 1993, he became involved in the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT). In 1996, he took the *pratimoksha* vows (basic rules of monastic discipline), which include abstaining from intoxicants, and he followed them strictly for the next ten years. In 2002, Gary’s mother passed away, and shortly afterward he underwent a three-year solitary meditation retreat within the NKT. Following the retreat, Gary stated, “There were kind of a lot of politics and stuff, and I got disillusioned with being involved in any kind of group activity. So I left, and ever since then I tried MDMA, taken some psilocybin, and especially ganja.” Thus after his retreat and ten-year period of abstention from psychedelics, Gary left the NKT and reopened the psychedelic door.

In our conversation it became clear to me that Gary is very self-conscious about his substance use and understands it as a part of his Buddhist practice. He described this in the following way:

I don’t take excessively, but I definitely utilize it, and I feel like when I really thought about it—the *pratimoksa*—it seems like there are really three reasons why it prohibits the ingestion of intoxicants. The first one is that it causes damage to the gross and subtle bodies of the

practitioner, so that reduces vitality and longevity. The second reason is that it tends to cause us to act in harmful ways when we are under the influence. And the third reason is that, which is a little bit more subtle, by taking a vow to refrain and maintaining the vow, we purify the negative karma that we have accumulated through negative actions in the past under the influence of intoxicants.

But my personal take or approach to this is that if you are not taking it in excess, you are going to do less damage; and basically living in *samsara*, the condition of our body is to degenerate anyway, but if you don't take the substances in excess, you are not going to create an accelerated process of degeneration. In other words, that thought makes me feel that it is okay to take it in small portions spread out in time. The second thing—as far as engaging in harmful actions—if you're a practitioner and you have been working on generating good intentions and all the different views such as those of the *lamrim*—viewing others as your mother, the kindness of others, and so on—the likelihood that you are going to engage in heavy negative actions while under the influence is almost nonexistent. And the last one about purifying the negative karma—that's not the only way to purify negative karma.

Having considered the possible dangers of substance use, Gary had come to a rational decision that for him, at least, the benefits outweigh the costs. He described the main benefits as being able to “reattune” his perceptions and to develop a compassionate, nonjudgmental attitude toward others:

And so because I see the benefits of having experiences where you take a substance and maybe it opens you up to experiences that you haven't accessed in a while and you are having trouble accessing them through meditation; so when I ingest anything it puts me into a space where I reattune to perceiving energy, and reattune to perceiving subtle beings, and am able to do—as far as the astral goes—visualizations and those things completely come to life.

So I think in that sense it is great; even learning to not judge people, learning . . . because there is this tendency in a strict Dharma community to develop this group perception that you are taking the

essence of your precious human life and everyone else who isn't practicing Dharma is wasting precious human life, but that view itself totally contradicts Dharma, which is ironic. They tell us to rejoice in even the slightest moment of happiness in the life of a living being. I remember hearing Lama Zopa saying once in a teaching that he would happily endure an eon in hell for one being to experience a moment of happiness. And I was like, "That is true cherishing right there; that's real compassion."

As further rationale for his substance use, Gary explained that he sees his choice to take intoxicants as based on his understanding of Dharma. He feels that the concept of "rejoicing in the happiness of others" implies that everyone is on their own journey, and therefore different people and different contexts require Buddhist teachings to be modified accordingly.

So what I have learned as far as taking intoxicants is that my approach to Dharma now I feel is pretty balanced, because it is based on Dharma, really. And when you say, "Rejoice in the happiness of others, cherish a moment of happiness in others," that means that everyone is on a spiritual journey and they're going to learn in different contexts; they are going to need different contexts to help them learn certain lessons; they are going to have different capacities to grow at different places and different times; and it is important for people to know that, so they can help people appropriately according to their particular circumstances.

When I asked Gary if he sees the psychedelic experience and the meditative experience as being the same, he had this to say:

I've heard it described by certain people, and certain lamas have said that the psychedelic experience—what you perceive in those spaces—is what highly realized beings are seeing all the time. You know, when you are on a substance and you are hallucinating and you are seeing the vibrations of the energy coming off objects, and you can actually swipe your hand and touch that energy and play with it; that kind of experience is. . . . For instance, sometimes a Master will look at

your subtle body and this whole energetic system, and they will tell you things about it, things that you need to work on, or blockages and things. And that tells me that when you are highly realized, you perceive things as if you are on a psychedelic. . . . When you get into the generation and completion stages of Highest Yoga Tantra—that is a completely alien reality that you are navigating there, and it is definitely psychedelic. So I think it's important that they [psychedelics] not become a crutch, but that we are able to see how that experience gives us a taste of what it would be like to actually live in that reality all the time.

Here Gary is repeating an idea first expressed to me by Lama Surya Das, who describes his initial psychedelic experience as showing him that there is a “*there there*.” Implicit in this idea is the belief that a psychedelic experience can reveal a higher order of reality, existence, or consciousness, which is the same “place” where realized beings reside all the time. According to this view, psychedelics can act as an introduction, preview, or taste of that reality, world, or dimension.

When I asked Gary about his daily practice of Buddhism, he mentioned several Gelugpa techniques such as *lamrim*, *lojong*, and various visualizations. Then he summarized his practice and how psychedelic use relates to it:

But I would say overall, as a consistent theme for my daily practice, is—most of the time when I am out and about I try to focus on equanimity in my view of others, and really causing the different virtuous minds like renunciation, great compassion, *bodhicitta*, and these things to really vibrate, so that my mind is vibrating in that zone. That itself brings us back to the psychedelic experiences in that there is this view that objects are separate from mind. That mind is inside body only, and what we perceive is outside of our mind. For starters, if they were, we wouldn't be able to perceive them. So there is a dependent relationship between mind and objects. So when you understand that, you close the gap. There is this strong sense of “I, me here; and other over there.” And there is this gap between us; and my retreat master said, as long as we love others this side of the gap, we are never going to be able to fully empathize with people. But

when you get rid of that gap, when you realize there is a union already, then you are really able to start empathizing with others, and climb down the mountain of Self and climb up the mountain of Others, so to speak, so that you can really relate.

So with respect to the psychedelic experience—when you are high, you have that experience; you see the energy, you see the connection between yourself and the other phenomena around you; you see the interaction of the energy between yourself and everything else going on around you; you see the interdependence of everything. So that makes it easier when I am focused on developing compassion. It's not just like I am over here and I am generating this mind that I will liberate those people, or I wish they were free from suffering kind of thing. It's like an actual energetic interaction between me and these people.

Here Gary made explicit reference to psychedelics as a means of realizing interdependence and breaking down the false dichotomy between the “inside” and “outside” of the mind, and between “self” and “other”—both important objectives for a Tibetan Buddhist.

Toward the end of our interview Gary talked some about what he sees as the possible dangers of psychedelics and how he attempts to avoid them.

GARY: I feel like it is important not to let psychedelics become a crutch for gaining experiences that don't immediately appear through meditation alone, especially because—going back to the first [reason for the fifth precept]—taking too many substances is going to be degrading to your body, you know? So my approach has been that I do these things as stepping-stones and reminders. . . .

I feel like there is always a danger of people abusing a substance; and also too—I really don't mean this as a criticism, but it's based on a lot of people I have talked to in the Buddhist tradition—is there's a tendency for people to never develop concentration, and so never really gain deep access to these different meditation objects. It's because they are attached to constantly being busy.

ME: Yes. I see what you mean. Please go on.

GARY: So if a person has those kinds of tendencies, I could see how psychedelics could easily become a crutch—it's the easy way.



Instead of putting in the real effort that will bring more of a stable experience, you know? So I guess that's what I say on that.

ME: That makes a lot of sense. Just to toss out an idea here—the phrase kept coming to my mind, “Sometimes a poison is a medicine.”

GARY: Yes.

ME: So it seems that your attitude toward these substances is that you recognize that they have the potential for harm and that they are dangerous, but you use them in a skillful way.

GARY: Yeah.

ME: As a skillful means, in a way. In that way, it is a poison, but used in a certain way, that poison can be a medicine. I'm just throwing that out there [chuckles].

GARY: Exactly. And for me, coming from a more shamanic background, you know, with Chaos Magick and stuff—it's all the things I read about mushroom shamans, and shamans using peyote and all these different things. . . . There is some validity to that stuff. Using those things to access the other realms of experience that we don't tend to be able to access with our senses . . .

And again, coming back to our reality being a psychedelic experience—it is through taking those substances we are able to bring that other, more energetic, spiritual, higher dimensionality into the sensual reality, or rather, we become aware of what is already going on within our sensual experience.

Gary was one of the most interesting and articulate American psychedelic Buddhists I interviewed. Although a Gen-X Buddhist, not a baby boomer, Gary was heavily influenced by his teenage experimentation with LSD, which played an important role in attracting him to Buddhism. Like Bart (discussed above), Gary articulates his substance use as a means of realizing certain Buddhist truths; he also sees them in a shamanic context as a way of reattuning his mind to higher-dimensional reality, and as a foretaste of an awakened state of consciousness. Although Gary no longer associates with a Buddhist group, he considers Buddhism to be the most important thing in his life and maintains a serious daily practice. While recognizing the danger of psychedelics as a possible crutch to avoid developing real concentration and attain-

ments through meditation, he sees them as useful tools in his highly individualized conception of the Buddhist path.

### SHANE

In May 2011, I interviewed Shane (#111) on Skype. I had contacted him because on the online survey he indicated that he had a serious Buddhist practice that incorporates the use of psychedelics. About the compatibility of psychoactive substances and Buddhism, Shane wrote in the survey:

In my understanding, the heart of Buddhist practice is the clear seeing of suffering and its release. Implicit in this is the more subtle seeing into the True Nature of experience—how the world works. Meditation practice can open the mind to very deep levels of seeing the way things are, including in an energetic or transpersonal way. But my mind feels constricted by habits & a thick veil of ordinary life, and ecstatic practices seem to build up enough energy to thin that veil somewhat. My use of psychedelics and the way I've seen my teachers and friends use them is to *open the channels* in the mind/heart that are connected to subtle, ecstatic, & energetic experience. I feel supported by the plant medicines to work beyond my “normal” range of experiences and to be able to use these experiences to see more clearly in the subtle realms. More simply: I feel sometimes pretty dense. The medicines seem to open or lighten me. This feels extremely useful as a part of my Dharma practice.

In the above passage, Shane (like Gary) mentions subtle, energetic experience that can be accessed through psychedelics. Also, his reference to “plant medicines” is highly suggestive of the shamanic use of plant hallucinogens, particularly peyote, which members of the NAC often refer to simply as “the medicine.” Another intriguing aspect of Shane’s statement is the mention of his “teachers and friends” using psychedelics, which suggests a larger community.

During my interview with Shane, he revealed that (unlike many people I spoke with) his journey to Buddhism had nothing to do with psychedelics and his use of such substances did not begin until he was

already committed to his Buddhist practice. At the time, Shane was 39 years old and living in the Bay area. He began our interview by talking about his first spiritual experience as a child:

So, I was raised Catholic, so my first religious experience was . . . I was raised Catholic, but it was the seventies, so my parents were under the influence of some more . . . experimental strains of Christianity at the time. And we used to go to a little Pentecostal meeting a couple of times. And I say that because I don't know a lot of Catholics that do the whole born-again thing. But I had something like a born-again experience when I was nine or ten; I was kind of coached into it. I mostly remember being embarrassed that it was happening. I mean, I was with my parents. I didn't know what was happening. I said, "I accept Jesus into my heart as Lord and Savior," or something like that, and I was crying, and it was somehow meaningful.

However, by the time Shane became a teenager he had lost interest in religion, and he went to a "kooky anarchic art school" as an undergraduate. His main subject was music, and while in school he became very interested in medieval choral music and the Latin Mass. After college, Shane hitchhiked across the United States a number of times, playing his violin, and one day found himself in Santa Fe at the age of 22 with no money. He gravitated toward a used bookstore called Blue Moon Books and began reading books on Zen. This began an eight-year-long interest in Zen that involved extended periods of time at monasteries in New Mexico and California. During this time, Shane was enrolled in a doctoral program at an Ivy League school on the East Coast, but dropped out after a year and returned to Zen practice.

Over time Shane became disillusioned with Zen. He described it in these words: "Eventually the long, slow failure of not getting anywhere in Zen started to get to me. It lasted for a bunch of years, but in the end there were other reasons. There were sangha politics, and the place wasn't the cleanest in the relative world." In 1995 or 1996 he moved to San Francisco, and in 1999 discovered Insight Meditation and began practicing with a local Insight Meditation organization. Shane fell in love with this tradition and made a serious commitment to it. Since then he has done a two-month-long retreat with his sangha almost

every year, and he was even temporarily ordained as a Buddhist monk in Burma for the four-month-long “rains retreat.” He now teaches meditation in his Insight organization.

When I asked Shane about his psychedelic drug use, he confessed that as a child he had decided that “the world was not a safe place.” Consequently, he felt a strong need to be in control and therefore had been completely “straight-edged” (abstaining from all substances). His lifetime of abstention ended at the age of 28 when he smoked marijuana for the first time. Since then, he has experimented with other substances, such as LSD, MDMA, and psilocybin mushrooms. His experimentation has increased since Shane met his wife-to-be, whom he describes as a “full-on shamanic bohemian.”

When I asked Shane about how he sees his current psychedelic drug use fitting into his Dharma practice, the following conversation took place:

SHANE: I’ve been doing more, and feel like I’m beginning to find my way, primarily with MDMA and psychedelics. LSD and mushrooms have both begun to open up for me as I’ve figured out how to take large enough doses, and both feel useful as Dharma tools. I have a sense that these medicines do have uses for Insight practice, but primarily I’m using them right now as *doorways* into my psychological or emotional process. They seem to make deeper inquiry into emotional material available, especially MDMA, and I feel like they really complement my innate contemplative practice, the thing I do well and habitually. And I just have an intuition that they [psychedelics] are *opening doors* that meditation practice might not for a long time; it might accelerate *the opening of some of those doors* that can then carry over into the unadulterated practice. I kind of want to use the medicine to grease the hinges a little bit of some *inner doors*, and just see what the effect is in my day-to-day or regular, unadulterated retreat practice. And maybe one other thing that I really thought about when you first contacted me that I wanted to say about it is that I am in a tradition now made up of mostly old hippies, which is bizarre. And it is a very pleasant, sober tradition. And a Theravada tradition is extremely . . .

ME: Very straight?

SHANE: I would say not very ecstatic. Although there are some ecstatics who get it through meditation, who are really good concentrators—they have good *samadhis*, but the tradition itself is pretty straight. But at a certain point I had a couple of trips and I was just surfacing, and I thought, “Okay, there is possibility here.” I thought back and I was like, “This is my lineage, dude!” Like, the people who are teaching me—they are sober now—but in 1968 when they were eighteen? They all did this.

Later in the interview, Shane further elaborated on this connection he sees between his teaching lineage and his own psychedelic drug use:

SHANE: And the plain, simple, technology of that thing—of mindfulness, and compassion, and *metta*—it’s great! And for me that realization that mushrooms and psychedelics and entheogens are in my teachers’ practice history, and therefore, it almost, like, gives us permission, like, “Yeah, it’s okay.” Right?

ME: Yes. I see what you mean. So do you see them as part of the Buddhist path?

SHANE: It is actually on the path. It is not separate from the path. So that was just important to me. So where I am now with it is, I’m not a recreational user really. When I have taken something and I am in a public place I get pretty private, tracking my inner process and the external container both. And it turns out one of the best things for me to do is to be holed up in my house alone, or with my sweetheart, whom I trust; and use really good pure stuff and mostly be in contemplation—with sensations and with my practice. And I continue to have an intention to do more; it is only growing for me, basically. I am figuring out how to do what feels harmonious with my ethics and my practice and my psychology, safety, etc. And as I figure that stuff out, I am more and more like, “Let’s do it.” Setting up the container and really take that on even more in my practice.

Shane’s story intrigued me for a number of reasons. First, it runs against the common narrative of psychedelics as an introduction to a

spiritual dimension or realm that is then consolidated through meditation. Shane was already a serious Dharma practitioner before he used any psychedelics. Second, he has reflected on his own American Insight Meditation tradition and realized that many of his teachers are baby boomers who experimented with psychedelics. Thus, he sees psychedelic use as in a way part of his own tradition. Third, he refers to psychedelics as “medicine,” “entheogens,” and “Dharma tools,” demonstrating a syncretistic aspect to his spirituality, combining ideas from (neo-)shamanism and Buddhism. In fact, Shane was explicit about this syncretism being common among his “Dharma friends”:

There is a way in what we are doing—I say it in an irresponsibly overbroad “we,” but what we are doing in American Dharma is this very syncretic practice; even in my conservative Insight Meditation lineage, almost everybody I know who is a teacher of serious students in that lineage is not just doing that. Everybody does that and studies with a Dzogchen teacher, and maybe does Diamond Heart/Ridhwan practice, and the list goes on.

Shane’s spiritual journey offers an excellent window into aspects of a new emerging American Buddhism, wherein some individuals and groups freely employ various spiritual disciplines, including the ritualized or religious use of psychedelics or entheogens, all as types of practice.

#### RYAN

While I was in San Francisco, I interviewed Ryan Brandenburg on October 12, 2010. Ryan, more than anyone else I interviewed, seems to have successfully integrated his practice of Buddhist meditation and his religious use of a psychoactive substance (peyote). Ryan began practicing Zen meditation with Kobun Chino-roshi in 1969. He is an ordained Soto Zen Buddhist priest in the lineage of Chino-roshi and was the director of Jikoji Zen Center near San Francisco for ten years (1993–2003). He is also a ceremonial leader in Native American traditions and “has been integrating earth-based forms of worship and prayer with Zen meditation since 1970.”<sup>17</sup> He has been a board member

of the Center for Sacred Studies (CSS) for many years, is on the teaching staff for the CSS's Ministerial Training Program, and maintains a private practice from his home in California.<sup>18</sup>

In Ryan's response in the survey (mentioned in chapter 4) concerning the compatibility of psychoactive substances and Buddhism, he wrote:

I have found specifically that LSD *opened my mind* to an understanding of reality that I found wonderfully articulated in Buddhism. . . . I find that peyote is a complement to *zazen* practice, as it is a medicine of the heart and so helpful to keeping the balance in what can become a very mental approach (Zen) . . . it also has a way of presenting the Mahayana understanding in relative terms. Likewise, the sitting practice is a critical element in my approach to the use of the peyote, as it provides a platform of equanimity in my experience and a structure for understanding what the medicine has to show me.

At the beginning of our interview, Ryan wanted to make it clear to me that although many people when they first take part in a Native American Church (NAC) ceremony think peyote is going to be all about the visual hallucinations, the "fireworks," as he calls them, this is not the case. According to Ryan, peyote is a sacred medicine that opens the heart. He described his integration of his use of peyote in the NAC and practice of Zen in these terms:

And that's why I find the Native American Church to be the perfect balance to the highly impersonal and structured practice of Zen Buddhism. Because if you just follow the written instructions and you just follow the absolutes that are codified into the practice forms, you can become very isolated and nihilistic. If you think that emptiness is all there is, it leads to a kind of amorality and psychic isolation, because all you are doing is considering the absolute. And while the absolute is the final word, you can't debate the inquiry any further once you have reached the absolute—you've reached the end of the line, right?

So what do you do with that? Does it help you to be a kinder person? Does it help you to be of service in the Creation? Does it help you to heal the lineage wounds that you carry? If used properly, yeah. But

it takes an incredibly skilled master to lead you through that pathway; they're hard to find. Peyote is right here. It has that same kind of intelligence that will encourage you to open up your heart, while you are contemplating the absolute. Because even though that is kind of like the final answer, the dialectic that leads up to that is where we live. . . .

But in the end, it is that simple. It really is that simple. The Buddha's enlightenment was not for his own gratification. Otherwise he would have never taught. So he thought—and this is the bodhisattva vow—"I will engage with the relative world." That's the vow: "I'm going to stay here and I'm going to try to make it better for everybody." It's real simple. It's real simple [laughs]. So that is the way I like to use this peyote in connection with the Buddhism. It helps me to keep my heart open. . . . It helps me to appreciate, respect, and nurture my relationships. As opposed to growing in some relationship with the absolute that doesn't benefit anybody except for me.

Thus Ryan sees peyote as a way of balancing out the absolutism of Zen, because the medicine opens the heart, allowing him to remain connected to people, community, and the relative world, and to live a life of service.

Ryan also believes that his experience with Zen can help people involved in Native American ceremonies, because it teaches a kind of meditative calm that was typical of indigenous peoples of North America prior to the coming of the whites. During our interview, the following exchange took place:

RYAN: So I personally feel a very deep commitment to the people who want to use these ceremonies to try as much as I can to share the Buddha Dharma and the absolute and the quiet serenity of that, because if you don't have it, the ceremonies are off balance.

ME: So you feel that they complement each other?

RYAN: It's an indispensable relationship in my life; it's like left foot, right foot.

Ryan pointed out to me that historically Buddhism has always "made friends with the local spirits," in that Buddhists have always adopted and adapted to native, earth-based indigenous traditions



whenever they moved from one locale to another. In this way, Ryan views his knowledge of Buddhism as an offering to his community:

So I feel like there is a great offering that Buddhism has, because I am involved in this very vibrant Native American worship community, and I feel like I have a responsibility to share what I know, what was shared with me. Not because I know something particularly; that I need a soapbox, or I need to be recognized for my knowledge of Buddhism or something like that, but because I see that it could help people.

At the conclusion of our interview I asked Ryan about people who use other substances, such as LSD or MDMA, as part of their spiritual practice. He replied:

My dad, Henry, said, every time I was in a ceremony with him, when he handled the sacred instruments, the altar, the fire, he'd say, "These things come to us with instructions. We call them the Creator's Original Instructions, a kind of operator's handbook. . . ." He said they are really simple; there are only two: first, worship—that means give thanks, to acknowledge where this comes from. It didn't come from me. Where it comes from is a Great Mystery, but it's worthwhile to acknowledge it, and to give thanks. Second, enjoy. Use it in a good way. I've come to understand that that means anything in this Creation; "all phenomena," as Buddhists would say. First, give thanks; second, use it in a good way.

What does that mean, "in a good way"? In this cultural context it means to support life; to move it forward indiscriminately—not your life as opposed to this life, all life. I want it to just flourish; I want it to be good. So if I am going to pick this up, I am going to use it consistent with that. . . . That's what I would hope for anybody who wants to pick up anything, whether it's a crescent wrench, or a tab of LSD, or a peyote button, or a gun, or an airplane, or their lover's hand. Remember those original instructions. Beyond that, I don't judge people.

In these statements, Ryan made clear that he does not discriminate between "good" and "bad" or between "natural" or "synthetic" sub-

stances. To use something in “a good way” means to use it in a life-affirming, positive way, and therefore it is how a substance is used that matters—not the substance itself.

Ryan has found that the practice of Zen and the religious use of peyote perfectly complement and augment each other, and he hopes others use whatever they use in their lives in “a good way,” and tries not to judge. Thus, Ryan’s spirituality is both highly traditional and innovative. He is a serious practitioner of Zen Buddhism and a committed member of the Native American Church, and for him the two perfectly interpenetrate, just as the relative and absolute realms are thought to interpenetrate in Zen Buddhism. Through a strong ethical commitment to others, Ryan has found a spiritual path that might best be described as “inclusive” rather than syncretistic.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter has investigated those American Buddhists who continue to practice Buddhism and use psychedelics as a spiritual or religious adjunct to it. Some of the people who responded to the survey, although they no longer use psychedelics, see Buddhism and the use of psychedelics as compatible, or psychedelics as having religious value within a Buddhist context. Then there are some people who continue to smoke marijuana and see the use of cannabis as aiding their practice of Buddhism. Another group practices Buddhism and continue to use classic psychedelics such as LSD, mushrooms, and peyote, which they view as spiritually efficacious for breaking habitual patterns in the mind; as portals or doorways to higher states of consciousness; and for realizing certain Buddhist truths and values such as interdependence, emptiness, equanimity and compassion.

The second part of this chapter traced in some detail the spiritual journeys of five “psychedelic Buddhists”: Allan, Tom, Gary, Shane, and Ryan. All five men are deeply committed to the Buddhist path and the practice of meditation, and tend to analyze their psychedelic experiences within this framework. Also, each has his own unique story, and each explained how he sees psychedelics and Buddhism as working together in his chosen spiritual path. Nevertheless, certain themes do

emerge. The understanding that psychedelics are tools or a technology to train the mind and develop insight in Buddhist truths is one. Another theme is the view that psychedelics can act as spiritual medicine or as plant teachers. A third is the belief that the correct context (usually highly ritualized) and the right intention (usually for healing, compassion, or wisdom) are needed so that using these substances will be spiritually efficacious.

The next chapter investigates some of the debates taking place within the American Buddhist and psychedelic communities around the issue of psychedelic drugs. I also explore in detail some of what is philosophically and theologically at stake in the inclusion or exclusion of psychedelic spirituality within a Buddhist practice.

# 7

## ARE PSYCHEDELICS “THE TRUE DHARMA”?

### Debates, Presuppositions, and Philosophical Issues

**T**HIS CHAPTER is an inquiry into the debates, attitudes, and various issues in American Buddhism concerning the use of psychedelics, drug-induced mysticism, and altered states of consciousness. Previous chapters investigated the social demographics of convert Buddhists interested in psychedelics, outlined the history of Buddhism and psychedelics in America, and explored the views and experiences of American Buddhists who have used or continue to use psychedelics and how this relates to their spiritual practice. A broad range of views are represented, from among those Buddhists strongly opposed to the use of any substance to those whose integration of psychoactive substances and Buddhism is central to their religious practice. I have refrained from making any personal judgments and presenting any arguments for or against the use of drugs within a Buddhist context, since this part of the study is a historical and sociological inquiry.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I continue to maintain a neutral stance; however, I do point out what I view as weak argumentation and attempt to expose some of the biases and presuppositions behind it. I do this in order to demonstrate that the use of chemically induced altered states as a part of religious practice has as much or more to do with one’s private experiences, values, personal dispositions, psychology, and presuppositions as with rational arguments. Because of this,

it seems highly unlikely that either camp will gain converts through argumentation, and regardless of the laws of certain governments, some individuals and groups will continue to use psychedelics as part of their Buddhist practice.

## TWO VIEWS ON BUDDHISM AND PSYCHEDELICS

In 1999, the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* published an article titled, “Are Psychedelics Useful in the Practice of Buddhism?” by Myron J. Stolaroff (1920–2013).<sup>2</sup> Stolaroff was a committed psychedelicist and one of the early pioneers of psychedelic research. In 1961, he founded the International Foundation for Advanced Study in Menlo Park, California, “where research with LSD and mescaline was conducted for 3½ years, processing some 350 participants and resulting in six professional papers.”<sup>3</sup> Between 1978 and 1986, Stolaroff conducted additional studies using legal psychoactive compounds, until the passage of the Controlled Substance Analogue Act of 1986 legally required him to stop.<sup>4</sup> Stolaroff authored two books and several articles on psychedelics.<sup>5</sup> One of his main interests during his long career as a researcher was how psychedelics can enhance meditation practice.

In the first half of “Are Psychedelics Useful in the Practice of Buddhism?” Stolaroff answers his rhetorical question in the affirmative and proposes several key factors in determining how psychedelics “can be personally fruitful” and can be integrated into a meditation practice. In the second half, he frames his discussion as a response to *Tricycle’s* special edition on Buddhism and psychedelics. At the beginning of the article, he writes,

Psychedelic agents, when properly understood, are probably one of the most valuable, useful, and powerful tools available to humanity. Yet, their use is extremely complex, which means that they are widely misunderstood and very often abused.<sup>6</sup>

Stolaroff finds one of the greatest benefits of psychedelics to be their ability to allow one to access the unconscious mind. However, “the biggest problem” in uncovering this unconscious material is then to inte-

grate it into “meaningful, enhanced functioning in life.”<sup>7</sup> Here is where the practice of meditation comes in. Stolaroff confesses, “I am an early stage novice in my practice of Buddhism, so there is a great deal about the subject of which I am ignorant.” Nevertheless, he says that in his personal experience, psychedelics “can play a significant role in deepening and accelerating the progress of one’s meditative practice.”<sup>8</sup> Stolaroff elaborates his view that while advanced practitioners of meditation or individuals who have significant time to devote to meditation may have no need for psychedelics, individuals “occupied in the world by earning a living and raising a family” could, through the informed use of these substances, accelerate their level of accomplishment until they reach a point where their practice is “self-sustaining.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, he sees a complementary relationship between psychedelics and meditation whereby the insights gained into the unconscious mind through psychedelics are integrated into daily life through meditation, and meditation practice itself is accelerated through psychedelics.

Next, Stolaroff outlines sound guidelines for the successful use of psychedelics and how it could work together with a meditation practice. These guidelines include having an ethical framework, making the necessary preparations before psychedelic use, employing the correct substance at the proper dose level, developing mental stability while under the influence of a substance, and judiciously spacing out psychedelic experiences to allow their integration into daily life and practice. Stolaroff believes that through proper use of psychedelics, the discoveries made while under their influence can strengthen one’s daily practice. Moreover, he maintains that as the ability to hold the mind steady grows, one becomes more able to contact “the inner teacher—our deepest Self, or Buddha nature, or however one chooses to call the wise, guiding entity within us.”<sup>10</sup> Successful psychedelic experiences combined with daily practice eventually lead to the ability to maintain contact with “the numinous” so that the drugs are no longer required. Stolaroff writes that he likes to call this process “developing a God muscle.”<sup>11</sup>

In the remainder of Stolaroff’s article, he offers his review of the *Tricycle* special edition on Buddhism and psychedelics, wherein he primarily addresses the negative comments about psychedelic use by

Buddhist teachers such as Michele McDonald-Smith and Robert Aitken. One example from this section gives a sense of his critique:

In contrast to McDonald-Smith’s (1996) claim, “I don’t see them [psychedelics] as developing anything” (p. 67), I see them as developing wisdom, heightened perception, self-understanding, energy, and freedom; releasing habitual blocks that interfere with the total response of our senses; facilitating the flow of ideas; releasing intuition and creativity as unconscious blocks are removed and as we become in touch with our inherent faculties; and deepening our meditation practice.<sup>12</sup>

In general, we may view Stolaroff’s article as a religious apology by a psychedelic spiritualist to an American convert Buddhist target audience. There are, however, a number of important reasons this would likely fail to convince converts. Although very few people would question Stolaroff’s authority to speak on psychedelics, many Buddhists committed to a particular lineage, tradition, or teacher might question his authority to speak on Buddhist practice. Both subcultures, American (convert) Buddhists and psychedelic spiritualists, place significant value on personal experience, and Stolaroff, though he knows a lot about drugs, admits not knowing that much about Buddhism. For many committed convert Buddhists, this would automatically disqualify most of what he has to say. Moreover, his primary assertion that psychedelics can be used to accelerate one’s meditation practice (not citing any Buddhist authority to back this up) would carry little weight. As Lama Tsongkhapa stated in our interview (chapter 5), someone (Stolaroff, in this instance) may think he has taken “the HOV lane” and is getting there faster, but actually be going nowhere. Since Stolaroff does not claim to be under the guidance of any qualified teacher or a practitioner of any recognized tradition, how would he know whether he was getting “there” (in a Buddhist sense) at all?

Also, the language Stolaroff uses, such as “the inner teacher—our deepest Self, or Buddha nature” and “developing a God muscle,” appears to assume a kind of perennial philosophy espoused by Huxley and popular among New Age and transpersonal psychology enthusiasts, which likely would not be acceptable to a Buddhist committed

to a particular traditional lineage. Often when speaking of meditation Stolaroff is vague and does not specify the type of practice, or even if the practice is Buddhist. He was definitely an important figure among the psychedelic intelligentsia, but he stood very much on the periphery of the American Buddhist scene. As an "elder" of the psychedelic community, Stolaroff likely would be respected by Buddhists already using psychedelics; however, those already committed to a particular lineage or teacher probably would be unconvinced by his arguments.

A diametrically opposed view is Geoffrey Redmond's review of *Zig Zag Zen* in the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, published in 2004.<sup>13</sup> Redmond makes his position clear early in his article: "Psychedelics impair awareness, as do most other mind-altering substances, and would seem to be exactly the sort of substances specified by the term 'intoxicant' [in the Buddhist fifth precept]."<sup>14</sup> He maintains that the association between psychedelics and Buddhism beginning in the sixties is based on a mistake: "Many Westerners were first drawn to Zen, and Buddhism generally, through a misconception: that meditation would induce a state similar to a drug high. There seems to be near-consensus now that this is not the case."<sup>15</sup> Redmond compares this historical misunderstanding to the Chinese adoption of Buddhist meditation as a means to attain magical powers.<sup>16</sup> Both modern Americans and ancient Chinese misconstrued meditation, but both matured past this misunderstanding as Buddhism became established within its new social and cultural milieus. Redmond maintains that if psychedelics were somehow needed to demonstrate to Westerners that spiritual states of mind actually exist, this is no longer the case.

Toward the middle of his essay, Redmond plainly states, "I am sure it is clear by now that I regard the choice to use mind-altering drugs an unskillful one."<sup>17</sup> This is shortly followed by a disclosure that he has never used mind-altering drugs.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, although he drank alcohol for a while in college and some years after, since that time Redmond claims to have abstained, for three reasons. First is fear of damaging his brain; because he is dependent on his mind to earn a living (he is a physician), he "did not want to take any chances." Second, he fears the legal consequences of being caught using outlawed substances. Third, his meditation practice of the last twenty years led him to give up all



consciousness-altering substances, because he "came to value the natural clarity of the mind."<sup>19</sup>

Redmond's admission is in the confessional mode of writing so common in psychedelic literature, but in reverse: he confesses that he never has taken psychedelics. Ironically, this is likely to be the reason advocates of psychedelic spirituality would reject his views out of hand. Never having undergone the full-blown effects of LSD or DMT, for example, he couldn't possibly understand these substances' spiritual value or power. However, Redmond draws his authority from other sources: his experience as a serious Buddhist practitioner and as a man of science.

When discussing the issue of safety, Redmond writes, "An additional factor in my attitude toward psychedelics derives from my work as a biomedical researcher. It happens that my particular area of specialization is adverse effects of hormones and neuroactive drugs."<sup>20</sup> He then states that because psychedelic advocates are biased toward seeing these drugs as beneficial and safe, they select data that support their biases. Redmond maintains that the benefits from any substance need to be "substantiated by systematic observation rather than mere anecdotes and opinion."<sup>21</sup> In the remainder of the article, he argues that the risks of using psychedelics outweigh the possible benefits. Then he poses the question, "Why do the vast majority of psychedelic drug users not derive any recognizable spiritual benefit?"<sup>22</sup> and answers it, "My contact with regular users has not convinced me that as a group they are particularly spiritual."<sup>23</sup> The irony is that Redmond uses the same kind of anecdotal evidence and opinion he only pages before criticized! He concludes with the statement, "even if we allow that many were helped along by drugs, many, perhaps far more, were harmed either biologically or legally."<sup>24</sup> However, he cites no evidence for this.

Stolaroff and Redmond represent opposite poles in the debate over the role of psychedelics in Buddhism. Yet neither man cites any of the voluminous scientific literature produced about psychedelics before the federal ban on research, or since restrictions have been loosened. Traditionally minded, conservative American Buddhists would likely find much to their liking in Redmond's arguments; however, psychedelic Buddhists would probably remain unconvinced.

Likewise, Stolaroff's arguments would appeal to psychedelic Buddhists, and are unlikely to convince any abstinent American Buddhists to take up psychedelic drug use in order to speed themselves along the Buddhist path.

Ironically, it is the shared valorization of "personal experience" by both American Buddhists and psychedelic spiritualists that would automatically disqualify the opposition's views. Both Stolaroff and Redmond claim the opposition is biased, and both would like to appeal to the authority of personal experience and scientific rationality. However, neither has the type of experience deemed important to the opposition, and neither cites peer-reviewed scientific literature to support his conclusions. Another contrast between the two is that implicit in Stolaroff's position and implied by his use of terms such as "inner Teacher," "deeper Self," and "Buddha nature" is a universalism common to perennial philosophers and transpersonal psychologists; Redmond's Buddhist stance is more traditional and particularist. In the next section, I explore a similar tension in relation to altered states and the practice of Tibetan Buddhism.

### **THE DEBATE OVER ALTERED STATES IN THE PRACTICE OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM**

In 1991, *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* published a paper by Charles Tart titled, "Influences of Previous Psychedelic Drug Experiences on Students of Tibetan Buddhism: A Preliminary Exploration."<sup>25</sup> In it, Tart summarizes a study wherein he surveyed about one hundred participants at the autumn retreat of the Rigpa Fellowship in 1990, held in Oakland, California. The Rigpa Fellowship is led by Sogyal Rinpoche, a well-known lama from the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism. The group was predominately female (75%) with an average of five years of practice in the fellowship, and a history of previous practice. Among the entire group, 77% reported previous experience with psychedelics, although their current drug use was low. "Most of the respondents reported that psychedelics were important to their spiritual life in general, and a fifth that they were specifically important in attracting them to Tibetan Buddhism."<sup>26</sup>

In the introductory material to Tart's article, he states that the "psychedelic revolution" of the sixties and seventies was "quite important for the development of transpersonal psychology,"<sup>27</sup> and that it had a lasting impact on Western culture by opening "many bright minds" to the arbitrary nature of our "normal" state of consciousness, and to the fact that there are many different ways the self and reality can be organized. Tart then states that many people took an interest in psychedelic drugs for transpersonal or spiritual reasons. Here he introduces an important distinction between the "transpersonal" and the "spiritual":

I usually use "spiritual" in conjunction with some particular, historic religion and practice (Buddhism, Christianity or Islam, for example), but I use "transpersonal" in the more general sense of experiences which transcend the boundaries and limitations of the individual ego in a vital way, regardless of the particular historical and religious terminology and conceptual system they may be cast in. The question of whether psychedelically aided experiences are "spiritual" or "genuinely" mystical always implies some historic tradition, with accompanying theology and vested interests, to judge them by. So we may argue endlessly about how spiritual some psychedelic experiences are, but there is no doubt that they can be genuine transpersonal experiences.<sup>28</sup>

After asking several questions in his survey to collect some general demographic data, Tart makes the following request of participants:

Please briefly describe two or three of the most important drug-associated experiences you have had that affected your spiritual perspective. What drug were they associated with? Aside from indicating their general spiritual meaning to you, can you then go on and indicate what specific aspect of Buddhist or Tibetan Buddhist ideas that you associate them with? Might some experience strongly affect your understanding of "emptiness" or "rigpa," for instance?<sup>29</sup>

The remainder of Tart's paper summarizes the responses based on a number of categories, providing something of a catalogue of experi-

ences. First, Tart issues the following caveat: "Note also that in relating the reported experiences to Buddhism, these are the respondents' and my *interpretations* of what various Buddhist concepts are and may be distorted by our Western background as well as various personal idiosyncrasies."<sup>30</sup> The general headings under which he divides these reports give a sense of the kinds of responses received: "Opening to a Wider Perspective"; "Creating Our Own Lives and Karma"; "Going Beyond the Intellect"; "Clarity and Luminosity"; "Illusory, Empty Nature of Phenomena"; "Feeling Connected with the World and Others"; "Union and Harmony"; "Love and Compassion"; "Big Self Beyond Ordinary Self"; "Experiences with Energy"; "Importance of Perfect Environment"; "Reassurance That Consciousness Survives Death"; "Psychedelics as Preparation for Bardos of Death and Dying"; "Relaxed Opened Space of Rigpa"; "Understanding Interdependent Origination"; "Non-Duality"; "Presence"; and "Understanding the Reality of Visualization Practices."

In analyzing his findings, Tart points out that a limiting factor is that the respondents to his survey were only students of Tibetan Buddhism, not experts, and therefore their comparisons of psychedelic experiences to Buddhist experiences and concepts "may not be completely accurate representations of the latter."<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, he claims, "Many of the specific experiences reported are not only transpersonal in a general sense, taking the person beyond the bounds of the ordinary self in a variety of ways, but sound similar (although not necessarily identical) to experiences I believe are valued in Tibetan Buddhism."<sup>32</sup> Tart concludes that transpersonal experiences are important to this group of Tibetan Buddhist students and that the influence of such experiences (good or bad) must be considered as part of the context of their Buddhist practice.

Overall, Tart's study is a thought-provoking investigation of how a particular group of American converts to Tibetan Buddhism view their past psychedelic experiences in relation to Buddhism. Tart is careful to point out the limitations of his findings, but his use of the leading question, "Might some experience strongly affect your understanding of 'emptiness' or 'rigpa,' for instance?" may have skewed the responses somewhat. Also, he assumes a general "transpersonal" interpretation of some altered states of consciousness experienced by

individuals under the influence and distinguishes this from specific “spiritual” experiences. In his understanding, transpersonal experiences represent broader, more universal phenomena, and whether they are deemed “mystical” or “spiritual” depends on the particular interpretations given by various religious traditions. In this way, his view of transpersonalism is not dissimilar to Stolaroff’s implied universalism and Huxley’s perennial philosophy.

In 2011, the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* published a paper by Igor Berkhin and Glenn Hartelius titled, “Why Altered States Are Not Enough: A Perspective from Buddhism,”<sup>33</sup> that directly challenges transpersonal psychology’s tendency to adopt and adapt Buddhist terminology. The authors’ main claim is that such appropriation misrepresents Buddhism in the process. The article begins: “Transpersonal psychology draws on many Buddhist ideas, but it is troubling to note that many of these references represented as authentically Buddhist are in fact superficial or distorted representations of Buddhist theory.”<sup>34</sup> The first author, Igor Berkhin, then states that he has practiced Buddhism for over twenty years and is currently a teacher at the International Dzogchen Community (Donetsk, Ukraine). The second author, Glenn Hartelius, provides his affiliation (as given in the article’s heading) as the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, California.

After setting forth their thesis and giving their credentials, Berkhin and Hartelius begin their critique of transpersonal interpretations of Buddhism. The first misconception they see is that transpersonalism often assumes that “Buddhism is a single, uniform tradition that can be grasped and defined from outside.”<sup>35</sup> The second, related mistake in transpersonalism is its tendency to view Buddhist terms as having “simple, singular definitions that can be equated with concepts from other very different traditions or ideas propounded within transpersonal psychology itself.”<sup>36</sup> These tendencies to “homogenize” and “universalize” are significant themes of the authors’ critique.

Another central argument is that while transpersonalism puts a strong emphasis on “non-ordinary states of consciousness and their transformative effect on the psyche,” Buddhism places more emphasis on “the cognitive aspect of mind.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, according to the authors, “An ecstatic drug-induced state of mind devoid of any increased knowl-

edge or capacity has more in common with getting drunk and having sex with a stranger than it does with the attainment of spiritual practitioners."<sup>38</sup> This is because Buddhism in general does not consider special states of mind by themselves to have transformative value. Rather, Buddhist practice is "designed to cultivate meanings rather than events."<sup>39</sup> Therefore, Berkhin and Hartelius summarize the distinction as an emphasis placed on "events" in transpersonal psychology (particularly altered states), and "meanings" in Buddhism. They then cite an example of how a Buddhist meditation technique such as mindfulness, when taken out of its Buddhist context, can be used by the military to create more ruthless soldiers—a goal entirely opposed to the Buddhist values of compassion and nonharming.

Overall, Berkhin and Hartelius are quite critical of transpersonal psychology and take it to task in an analytically exacting and detailed manner for its superficial adaptation of Buddhism and Buddhist concepts. When juxtaposed with Tart's study of the Rigpa Fellowship students' Buddhist interpretations of their psychedelic experiences, it implies that the students may have entirely missed the mark. In other words, the Western students of Tibetan Buddhism simply misunderstood their psychedelic experiences in Buddhist terms. To be fair to Tart, he explicitly states that these interpretations are from *students* of Buddhism, and he does not claim expert knowledge of Buddhism himself. However, his distinction between "transpersonal" and "spiritual" experiences would be exactly what Berkhin and Hartelius would call the homogenizing and universalizing tendencies of transpersonalism. So does this mean that they have won the debate?

While the arguments of Berkin and Hartelius would appeal to the particularists, those who maintain the distinctiveness of religious traditions, the universalists, especially those of a mystical orientation, might be inclined toward a more perennial philosophy as espoused by adherents of transpersonal psychology. Recall Lama Surya Das's statement in our interview (see chapter 4) that his first psychedelic experience was a genuine vision that showed him that there was a "there there." This statement implies a more universal or perennial outlook, and is supported by Surya Das's use of other terms for the experience such as "seeing God," "the clear light," "bud-dha nature," "nonduality," and "oneness." Surya Das is not a novice

Buddhist practitioner but a respected lineage holder in the Nyingma tradition, so his views cannot be easily discounted as a novice’s misinterpretation of tradition. In contrast is the view of Shugen Sensei, head of the Mountains and Rivers Order of Zen (see chapter 5), who states that he never endowed his psychedelic experiences with any special significance because he knew they were chemically induced. This raises the issue of whether religious or mystical experiences can be chemically induced, and if so, whether such chemically induced spiritual experiences are actually “authentic.”

### THE DEBATE OVER CHEMICAL MYSTICISM

The first strong proponent in the modern Western world of the validity of chemical mysticism was of course Aldous Huxley, as discussed in chapter 2. Huxley interpreted his psychedelic experiences in the context of and as validation of his perennial philosophy. The most outspoken opponent of these views was R. C. Zaehner (1913–1974), who wrote an entire book, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (1961),<sup>40</sup> as an extended critique of Huxley’s position. In his study, Zaehner distinguishes three main types of mysticism: nature mysticism, monistic mysticism, and theistic mysticism. As a Roman Catholic, he viewed the theistic variety to be the highest and most sacred expression of mysticism. Huxley’s experiments with mescaline, according to Zaehner, would constitute a type of nature mysticism. Zaehner argues that drug-induced and manic-depressive states can trigger a feeling of unity with the natural world—a feeling that “all is one,” or a dissolving of one’s ordinary sense of self, so that there is no longer a division between self and world. This feeling may also arise spontaneously, and Zaehner himself claims to have had such a mystical experience in his youth.<sup>41</sup> However, he calls this a type of “profane” mysticism, not to be equated with monistic mysticism or theistic mysticism. Monistic mysticism, such as the Hindu school of Advaita Vedānta, seeks to realize the essential oneness of the soul (*ātman*) and the absolute (*brahman*), and considers the natural world to be illusory. Theistic mysticism, such as found in Christianity, seeks the unity of individual soul with God through an infusion of love while maintaining the ontological distinction between self and God.

According to Zaehner, Huxley and other perennial philosophers throw down a challenge: "that religion is a matter of experience, almost of sensation; that religious experience means 'mystical' experience; and that mystical experiences are everywhere and always the same."<sup>42</sup> According to this view, "the truth itself is that experienced by the mystics whose unity of thought and language is said to speak for itself."<sup>43</sup> Zaehner sees two fundamental problems with this: first, what constitutes a "mystical experience" is rarely, if ever precisely defined; second, careful examination of writings by mystics shows that they are not saying the same things.<sup>44</sup>

Although Zaehner was strongly opposed to both Huxley's chemical mysticism and his perennial philosophy, he nevertheless tried mescaline to experience the effects for himself, and he concludes *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* with an account of his mescaline experience. However, it was quite different from Huxley's. Zaehner concludes:

I would not presume to draw any conclusions from so trivial an experience. It was interesting and it certainly seemed hilariously funny. All along, however, I felt that the experience was in a sense "antireligious," I mean, not conformable with religious experience or in the same category. . . . As far as I am concerned, mescaline was quite unable to reproduce the "natural mystical experience" I have described elsewhere. I half hoped it would. However, once the drug started working and I was plunged into a universe of farce, I realized that this was not to be.<sup>45</sup>

Zaehner's critique did not long remain unchallenged by members of the psychedelic intelligentsia. In 1964, *The Journal of Philosophy* published an article by Huston Smith titled, "Do Drugs Have Religious Import?"<sup>46</sup> In it, Smith investigates the relationship between drugs and religion from several perspectives: history, phenomenology, philosophy, and the practice of religion. Smith's critique of Zaehner's position is strongest in his section on "Drugs and Religion Viewed Phenomenologically." After citing three studies (including the Good Friday Experiment), wherein one fourth to three fourths of individuals surveyed after they were given a psychedelic reported having a "religious experience" (numbers varied according to how religious the individuals were



prior to the experience and whether their setting was a religious context), Smith writes:

Certainly the empirical evidence cited does not preclude the possibility of a genuine ontological or theological difference between natural and drug-induced religious experiences. At this point, however, we are considering phenomenology rather than ontology, description rather than interpretation, and on this level there is no difference. Descriptively, drug experiences cannot be distinguished from their natural religious counterpart.<sup>47</sup>

Smith's statements strike at the heart of some important philosophical issues related to chemically induced religious experiences. Since there is no hard and fast definition to determine what constitutes a genuine religious or mystical experience, if someone claims to have had one and gives a description similar to other people's accounts, what outside authority can claim otherwise? Is there any condition under which one could say, "No, you are wrong, you did not have a religious experience"? So it might be best to accept such personal testimony.

Next, Smith states that "if more rigorous methods are preferred, they exist," and cites Walter Pahnke's Good Friday Experiment, for which he developed a phenomenological typology of mystical experience based on nine categories: unity, transcendence of time and space, deeply felt positive mood, sense of sacredness, objectivity and reality, paradoxicality, alleged ineffability, transiency, and persisting positive changes in attitude and behavior. One of Zaehner's fundamental criticisms is that what constitutes a "mystical experience" is rarely, if ever precisely defined. Pahnke's typology is an attempt to provide a set of phenomena that typify a religious or mystical experience. Thus, by bracketing off ontological and theological interpretations to focus strictly on phenomenological descriptions, Smith attempts to sidestep one of Zaehner's main critiques.

In his section on "Drugs and Religion Viewed Philosophically," Smith states, "I wish to explore the possibility of accepting drug-induced experiences as religious in every sense of the word without relinquishing confidence in the truth claims of religious experience

generally." However, his position is clear: he *does* accept the proposition that drug-induced experiences are religious in every sense of the word. This belief, no doubt, was influenced by his own psilocybin trip during the Good Friday Experiment, which he declared to be "the most powerful cosmic homecoming I ever experienced."<sup>48</sup> Here we see a common rhetorical move among psychedelic spiritualists: first, phenomenological descriptions of drug-induced experiences are said to appear similar to descriptions of religious experiences; then drug-induced experiences are said to be indistinguishable from "natural" religious experiences; and finally, drug-induced experiences are declared to be (in some cases anyway) genuine religious experiences.

In his final section, "Drugs and Religion Viewed 'Religiously,'" Smith asserts, "Drugs appear able to induce religious experiences; it is less evident that they can produce religious lives." He discusses the difference between religious experiences and a religious life, stating that overemphasis on experiences (altered states) rather than the way one lives (altered traits) can be a "snare and a delusion." He suggests that chemicals may aid in the religious life as adjuncts if they are used within the context of faith and discipline (as in the Native American Church). He concludes by advocating for the necessity of religious experience within the religious life: "For if (as we have insisted) religion cannot be equated with religious experience, neither can it long survive its absence."

Smith was part of the Harvard psychedelic "club," and therefore his defense of Huxley's chemical mysticism and perennial philosophy form part of the context for the genesis of the foundational text for psychedelic Buddhism in America, *The Psychedelic Experience*, written by Leary, Alpert, and Metzner. Smith focuses on the idea of "mystical experience" as a special category of experience that is shared universally among the world's religious traditions. This emphasis is a distinctively twentieth-century, Western idea. The sixties counterculture and the alternative spiritualities that emerged in the mid-twentieth century were particularly concerned with "direct experience" as possessing special epistemological status. However, the category of "experience" is not an unproblematic given and is open to interpretation. To this issue we now turn.

## THE PROBLEM OF “EXPERIENCE” AND ITS INTERPRETATION

Thus far we have witnessed a repeating and enduring theme in relation to both contemporary American Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality: the importance placed on the notion of “experience.” For convert American Buddhists, this is often understood as meditative experience, such as years of practice, number of retreats, and length of retreats. In Zen terms, this would be “time spent on the *zafu*” (meditation cushion). The longer the student has practiced, the more meditative experience they have acquired, and in general others in the community would view him or her as possessing more authority to speak on the topic of Buddhism and Buddhist meditation. Moreover, any meditation teacher likely will be assessed by potential students according to her years of meditative experience and intensity of practice during that time. Not only quantity but also quality is valued. For instance, in Rinzai Zen particular importance is placed on the “*kensho* experience,” a sudden flash of awakening; whereas in the modern practice of *vipassanā* as taught by S. N. Goenka, an experience of *bhanga*, or “dissolution,” is valorized.

In the case of psychedelic spirituality, experience has to do with the amount of psychedelic drug use engaged in. How many times someone has “tripped,” what psychoactive substances they have tried, and the dose level are all given consideration as constituting experience. Thus an “experienced tripper” would generally be considered someone with extensive familiarity with such substances as psilocybin mushrooms, LSD, mescaline, and DMT; someone who has tried MDMA or magic mushrooms once would generally not be considered “experienced.” The quality of experience is also important. Recall the emphasis Leary, Alpert, and Metzner placed on the experience of “the clear light” in *The Psychedelic Experience*. Other groups may endow certain experiences with special significance and valorize certain visions (of nonduality, oneness, unity, etc.) or affective states such as universal love, compassion, kindness, etc. as “religious” or “mystical.”

We have seen in this chapter how the category of “experience” is used rhetorically to establish authority. Redmond at the beginning of his review article of *Zig Zag Zen* mentions his over twenty years of

Buddhist meditation. Stolaroff, in turn, speaks with the authority of a psychedelic veteran on the proper use of psychoactive drugs. Neither man would be considered experienced in the other camp. Tart draws on his own experience with psychedelics and Buddhism when he develops his distinction between "transpersonal" experiences and "spiritual" experiences; Berkhin makes recourse to his twenty years of Buddhist study to justify his critique of transpersonalism. Zaehner strategically tried mescaline and included his account in *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* as a way of undermining Huxley's claims for religious insights under the influence. And Smith draws on descriptions of drug-induced experiences first to show how they are similar to mystical and religious experiences, and then to make the stronger claim that such chemically induced religious experiences are just as valid as any other kind of religious experience. He is careful to distinguish between phenomenological descriptions of experiences and their ontological or theological interpretations.

Implicit in much of the discussion by both convert American Buddhists and American psychedelic spiritualists is the assumption that we as human beings have direct access to pristine experience, unmediated by linguistic description or interpretation. The notion that Buddhist meditators have unproblematic access to unmediated experiences, which can then be accurately described, has been challenged by Robert Sharf in two publications from the nineties.<sup>49</sup> While Sharf concedes that Buddhists may have unusual experiences during meditation, he argues that the relationship between Buddhists' experiences and the accounts of those experiences found in the canonical and scholastic sources is problematic. As he states, the central feature of private experience is its very indeterminacy.<sup>50</sup> The implications of such a statement are far reaching when considering the interaction of American Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality.

The origins of Sharf's critique of the category "experience" may be found in Wayne Proudfoot's study *Religious Experience*,<sup>51</sup> wherein Proudfoot argues that all experience is mediated by theory, and therefore there is no such thing as "direct experience."

Religious beliefs and practices are interpretations of experience in that they are attempts to make sense of and to account for the

phenomena and events with which one is confronted, including one's own behavior. They are attempts to understand, where understanding can be construed as seeking the best explanation. It is in this sense that there is no uninterpreted experience. Our experience is already informed and constituted by our conceptions and tacit theories about ourselves and our world. All observation is theory-laden.<sup>52</sup>

Proudfoot argues that by understanding religious experience to be "interpreted *as* religious," we avoid making "religious experience" a *sui generis* category, as proposed by such thinkers as Rudolf Otto<sup>53</sup> and Fredrick Schleiermacher.<sup>54</sup> Proudfoot claims that such attempts are used as protective strategies against reductionism and often mask religious apologetics.

If we accept the proposition that all experience is theory-laden, then the belief that people could simply report their experiences with an unbiased phenomenological account (as Huston Smith claims) is misguided. To describe anything requires interpreting experience using language, which is fundamentally an act of discourse. Discourse always involves personal histories, social and cultural context, hierarchies, power, authority, presuppositions, beliefs, values, etc. Even if we assume that one could have an unmediated direct experience, whether mystical, religious, or ordinary, as soon as that person attempted to understand the experience, it would need to be interpreted and filtered through their language, culture, society, and worldview. Thus someone's presuppositions, whether ontological, theological, or philosophical, will come into play when describing anything. Because all knowledge is acquired through interpreting experience within a preexisting theoretical framework, to a significant extent what is actually perceived is determined by the theory or theories through which one filters experience.

Let us now consider how the rhetorical use of the category "experience" relates to American Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality. In his critique of psychedelic spirituality, G. T. Roche writes,

Watts, Leary, and Huxley all write of the insight acquired through the psychedelic experience as a *direct apprehension* of some deep truth, rather than through *intellectual* insight. Without an argument

as to how such a direct, drug-induced experience can warrant such certainty, Watts, Leary, and Huxley are essentially appealing to their own authority.<sup>55</sup>

Here Roche strikes at the heart of the matter: Watts, Leary and Huxley assert a special epistemological status for the psychedelic experience, which allows for a different way of knowing that is direct, transrational, intuitive, and self-validating. They are able to speak about such issues with authority because they have had "the experience." This rhetorical use of immediate or direct experience is in many ways similar to the modern Buddhist use of meditative experience as outlined in Sharf's critique. Here we have an important rationale for both psychedelicists' and American Buddhists' valorization of direct experience. The rhetorical use of "direct experience" creates a new epistemology whereby a certain type of knowledge is directly and intuitively obtained. Because this knowledge goes beyond ordinary thinking and rationality, and is self-validating, no rational arguments are needed to verify it. Those who have had the experience become authorities in this special type of direct knowing. In this way, a charismatic individual (whether psychedelic guru or Zen roshi) who claims this direct knowledge and can convince others of his authority to verify it in others becomes a new source of religious or mystical authority. The rhetoric of direct experience is employed to establish lineages of authority in a similar fashion to Zen's transmission "outside of words and scriptures," whereby the Zen master verifies and transmits the Dharma to his students.

In fact, it was this very indeterminacy of private experience that allowed psychedelic spiritualists to employ it as an authorizing strategy. In an insightful article titled "Psychedelic Drugs and the Problem of Experience," Sarah Shortall writes,

Rooted in the amorphous category of experience, psychedelics could accrue a wide range of contradictory discursive associations whose aporias frustrated any exclusive appropriation. While critics denigrated the drugs as dangerous, artificial supplements that invaded the natural self-sufficiency of the body and drew users into an unreal world of hallucination, countercultural leaders appealed to the rhetoric of experience to reverse this argument.<sup>56</sup>

Shortall also astutely points out the social control and manipulation involved in mediating the "unmediated" psychedelic experience, highlighting "the remarkable coercive tendencies at work within the communities around Leary and Kesey, focused as they were upon a charismatic leader with virtually unchecked authority over the supply, method, and meaning of drug use."<sup>57</sup> As charismatic leaders, Leary and Kesey were not very different from Charles Manson or other cult leaders, who commonly induce and control altered states in their followers through various methods of consciousness manipulation.<sup>58</sup>

One primary objective of the chemical mysticism found in *The Doors of Perception*, *The Joyous Cosmology*, and *The Psychedelic Experience* is the reenchantment of the world. In order to accomplish this, an alternative epistemology to scientific rationalism was needed. The valorization of personal religious experience within the alternative spiritualities and the academic study of religion during the 1950s and 1960s became the basis of the claim that in the psychedelic experience one had unmediated, direct access to a higher, self-validating truth beyond the limits of language. This higher truth was claimed to be the same truth realized by mystics of the various world religions. Thus Huxley, Watts, Leary, Alpert, and Metzner in their writings espouse a religious universalism as outlined in Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy*. Advocates of this psychedelic universalism claimed that it transcended all religions and all social distinctions based on race, gender, and class. But as Shortall maintains, "Such sweeping claims to universality concealed, however, the distinctly white, male, middle-class bias within countercultural discourses on psychedelics, obscuring how certain power relations and forms of difference affected it."<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Watts and the Harvard psychologists also asserted that the truth revealed by psychedelic experience is not only the same truth experienced by mystics, but also the direct apprehension of the reality being theorized by new science. Thus they viewed psychedelics as the chemical keys that would unify religion and science and bring social equality to men and women of all creeds, colors, and classes in a new reenchanted universe.

The rhetorical use of "experience" was widespread in the cultural and intellectual discourse of North America in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>60</sup> With the subsequent critique of this trope by constructivist and critical

thinkers in the following decades, the notion that one could provide an accurate descriptive account of mystical or religious experience was seriously thrown into question. Providing a strictly phenomenological or neutral *sui generis* description of "religious experience" might be impossible; however, attempting to understand religion without some consideration of subjective, first-person experiences seems equally untenable. Ann Taves in her study *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (2009)<sup>61</sup> offers a possible way forward. Like Proudfoot, Taves suggests that rather than trying to defend a *sui generis* account of "religious experience," scholars of religion should employ an ascriptive model that is used to investigate how certain "things are deemed religious." In this way, rather than attempting to isolate elements that make some experiences religious, scholars should investigate the reasons certain things, events, experiences etc. are deemed "religious" by individuals and communities.

Applying Taves's model to psychedelic spirituality as found in such texts as *The Doors of Perception*, *The Joyous Cosmology*, and *The Psychedelic Experience* allows us to interrogate the ascriptions their authors give to the "psychedelic experience." Both advocates and detractors of psychedelics acknowledge that these chemicals cause profound alterations of consciousness when ingested. A cross-cultural investigation of altered states of consciousness reveals that societies throughout history have often deemed altered states (however induced) as falling within the category of what Taves refers to as "special things."<sup>62</sup> Such anomalous experiences are frequently delineated from "ordinary things" and endowed with special significance, commonly being understood as mystical, spiritual, or religious.

I would assert that Huxley, Watts, Leary, Alpert, and Metzner are "true believers" in the spiritual or religious value of psychedelics and the altered states they induced. Whether we consider their experiences to be truly "religious" or "mystical" is from a sociological and cultural point of view irrelevant. Their texts were widely read by members of the counterculture and became psychedelic classics and foundational for modern psychedelic spirituality. Moreover, these authors' use of Buddhist terminology, their adaptation of a Tibetan Buddhist ritual text, and their rhetorical use of "direct experience" appealed to counterculture Buddhists.



## **GOOD FRIDAY, THE JOHNS HOPKINS AND DMT EXPERIMENTS CONSIDERED**

Huston Smith attempts to bring some scientific rigor to the debate by focusing on the phenomenological descriptions of mystical experiences based on Walter Pahnke’s typology of mystical experience. One of Pahnke’s primary sources was Walter Stace’s study *Mysticism and Philosophy* (1960). Stace was a perennialist, and Pahnke assumed the universal characteristics of mystical experiences. He writes,

Among the numerous studies of mysticism, the work of W. T. Stace (1960) was found to be the most helpful guide for the construction of this typology. His conclusion—that in the mystical experience there are certain fundamental characteristics that are universal and not restricted to any particular religion or culture (although particular cultural, historical, or religious conditions may influence both the interpretation and description of these basic phenomena)—was taken as a presupposition. Whether or not the mystical experience is “religious” depends upon one’s definition of religion and was not the problem investigated. Our typology defined the universal phenomena of the mystical experience, whether considered “religious” or not.<sup>63</sup>

Here Pahnke distinguishes between “mystical” and “religious” in much the same way that Tart distinguishes between “transpersonal” and “spiritual” experiences. As Zaehner has argued, the mystics of the different traditions often give very different accounts of their experiences and use very different language. Even the assumption that there is something such as “mysticism” that can be studied apart from the different religious, social, and cultural contexts in which it is observed is an interpretation based on a perennial philosophy. Thus there is no way to precisely define terms like “religious,” “spiritual,” and “mystical,” or to provide typologies based on interpretation-free phenomenological descriptions.

When we seriously consider that there is no such thing as a value-neutral phenomenological description of experience, we see that the results of the Good Friday Experiment are open to a wide array of different interpretations. For example, drawing on research done by the

social psychologist Stanley Schachter on emotion, Proudfoot offers a different interpretation of the experiment:

Perhaps psilocybin functions only as a rather powerful agent of arousal, differing only quantitatively from the arousal produced by the nicotinic acid [used as the placebo in Pahnke's experiment]. The attributional or interpretative component might then be the crucial factor in those experiences that were reported in terms reminiscent of classical mystics.<sup>64</sup>

Psychedelicists often speak of the importance of set and setting. For the Good Friday Experiment, divinity students were given psilocybin while listening to a religious service performed live above them. Those who received the psilocybin scored significantly higher for mystical experiences, according to Pahnke's questionnaire. The results are hardly surprising (set and setting were carefully engineered for participants to interpret their experiences in mystical/religious terms). However, what do they mean?

Let us make a number of assumptions. First, let us assume that psilocybin is a psychoactive substance that causes profound alterations in perception, emotion, cognition, and memory. Let us call this collection of changes an altered state of consciousness. Second, let us assume that psilocybin has these effects by altering one's brain chemistry. If you are a strict materialist who believes matter is the only reality and the mind is the brain, then one explanation for the Good Friday Experiment is that divinity students, when on a hallucinogen in the right setting, are likely to interpret their experiences in a manner similar to what some perennial philosophers would classify as mystical. Thus, it is proven that mystical experiences described in various religious traditions are nothing more than alteration of consciousness due to profound changes in brain chemistry.<sup>65</sup> However, if you are a devout Catholic and you believe a mystical experience must have some supernatural agency, then the Good Friday Experiment might simply be interpreted as people on drugs misinterpreting changes in brain chemistry as mystical. Possible interpretations are limitless, depending on one's philosophical, ontological, and theological presuppositions.

The more recent studies on psilocybin and spirituality conducted by a team at Johns Hopkins University are just as subject to various interpretations as Pahnke's Good Friday Experiment.<sup>66</sup> In the team's first study, published in 2006,<sup>67</sup> 36 middle-aged, well-educated, hallucinogenic-naïve volunteers, who all indicated some involvement with religious or spiritual activities, were chosen as subjects. Using an updated, modified version of Pahnke's typology for mystical experiences, the Johns Hopkins team determined that 22 of the 36 subjects who received the psilocybin reported "complete" mystical experiences.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, on a follow-up questionnaire conducted two months after the study, "67% of the volunteers rated the experience with psilocybin to be either the single most meaningful experience of his or her life or among the top five most meaningful experiences of his or her life."<sup>69</sup> The researchers conclude:

The present study showed that, when administered to volunteers under supportive conditions, psilocybin occasioned experiences similar to spontaneously occurring mystical experiences and which were evaluated by volunteers as having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance.<sup>70</sup>

One cynical interpretation of these results could be that the Johns Hopkins team learned how to give psychedelic virgins a really good first trip.

In a follow-up dose-related study, the Johns Hopkins team conducted five sessions, spaced one month apart, with 18 participants (17 of whom were hallucinogen-naïve).<sup>71</sup> The results were that, "Psilocybin produced acute perceptual and subjective effects including, at 20 and/or 30 mg/70 kg, extreme anxiety/fear (39% of volunteers) and/or mystical-type experience (72% of volunteers)."<sup>72</sup> Notice the high rate of extreme anxiety/fear at higher doses, even under supportive conditions. However, the authors indicate that even in such cases, individuals did not appear to have long-lasting negative effects. In the discussion section of the paper, the authors offer some suggestions for future studies:

The generalizability of the results of the present study is limited by the study population, a group of hallucinogen-naïve, well-educated, psychologically stable, mostly middle-aged adults, most of whom reported at least weekly participation in religious or spiritual activity. It would

be particularly interesting to determine whether volunteers who identified as atheist or agnostic would be as likely to have mystical-type experiences and whether they would ascribe spiritual significance to such experiences. It would also be interesting to compare hallucinogen-naïve volunteers with past users to provide information about whether the novelty of effects in naïve volunteers contributes to the high persisting ratings of personal meaning and spiritual significances.<sup>73</sup>

If, as the psychedelic folk wisdom suggests, one’s mind-set is crucial to the psychedelic experience, and if we assume that description always implies some type of interpretation, then it makes sense that agnostic or atheist subjects would score lower on the mystical experience questionnaire than subjects who consider themselves to be religious and/or spiritual.<sup>74</sup>

Rick Strassman’s experiments with DMT suggest an answer to the question of naïve volunteers compared to past users. Because of the extreme psychological effects of intravenous DMT injection, Strassman intentionally chose volunteers who were experienced psychedelic drug users as a means of mitigating any possible adverse reactions. From his follow-up study, he concluded that the volunteers who benefited most from their DMT sessions probably would have gotten the most out of any “trip,” drug or otherwise; those who benefited the least were people who were “most novelty saturated.”<sup>75</sup> Thus Strassman determined that what individuals brought to the experience and how they integrated it into their lives were more important than the drug experience itself, and that “without a suitable framework—spiritual, psychotherapeutic, or otherwise—in which to process their journeys with DMT, their sessions became just another series of intense psychedelic encounters.”<sup>76</sup> It appears that there may be diminishing beneficial returns from psychedelics when they are not used within an appropriate framework.

## UNANSWERED AND UNANSWERABLE QUESTIONS

This chapter has looked at some of the debates around the use of psychedelics within the context of Buddhism. These can be summarized as questions: “Are psychedelics useful in the practice of Buddhism?”

(Stolaroff), or "Are psychedelics the true Dharma?" (Redmond). These questions led to others, such as, "Are spiritual experiences simply transpersonal experiences that occur within the context of a religious tradition?" (Tart) or "Is transpersonalism's universalizing, in the case of Buddhism at least, a gross misrepresentation of the tradition?" (Berkhin and Hartelius). More general debates concern questions such as, "Are drug-induced mystical or religious experiences authentic?" (Zaehner and Smith), and if so, "Can psychedelics be used as an adjunct to religious lives?" (Smith). Also, we have interrogated the category of "experience," challenged the idea that neutral phenomenological descriptions of experiences are possible, and investigated some of the "scientific" studies related to psychedelics and spirituality related to some of these questions.

Based on the above observations, the simplest and most accurate answer I can give to these questions (in the spirit of the Indian Jaina philosophers) is "maybe" (*syāt*). Given the entanglement of interpretation and description, any of these questions might be answered in the affirmative or negative, depending on a person's worldview, beliefs, philosophy, theology, or deeply held convictions. I have found in my own fieldwork that the best way to approach statements by participants concerning "religious," "mystical," or "spiritual" experiences is to consider them evaluative and to suspend judgments concerning their truth value. In other words, if someone told me that a particular experience was religious/spiritual/mystical, I would understand them to be saying that it was very *meaningful* to them personally, and that it had a profound impact on the way they view such things as their personal identity, the world, the cosmos, God, etc. For whatever reasons, some people empower certain experiences as deeply significant and charged with meaning, while others do not. For example, Lama Surya Das considers his early psychedelic experience foundational for his later spiritual quest (chapter 4); while Shugen Sensei sees his early psychedelic experiences as insignificant compared to his later Buddhist understandings (chapter 5).

As mentioned in our interview (chapter 4), Rick Strassman noticed a trend in his volunteers' reports of their DMT experiences. Consistently people would insist that what they experienced was "not just in their head" but was "real."<sup>77</sup> This idea, depending on one's ontologi-

cal commitments, is not by itself irrational. For example, some people maintain that brains, rather than generating consciousness, receive consciousness.<sup>78</sup> According to this view, consciousness is infinite and omnipresent throughout space-time. Based on the way one's brain neurotransmitters are "calibrated," one's "wetware" (a term coined for the brain, on analogy with the hardware and software of a computer) will receive different frequencies of consciousness. The bandwidth received determines the specific "reality" one experiences. Therefore, talk about "reality" entirely depends on the current neurochemical modulation of the brain. Thus, beings encountered during DMT experiences are not hallucinations but "free-standing" entities in the sense that they actually "exist" in another dimension of time/space/consciousness, which is accessed through DMT.

Now a materialist would very likely consider DMT experiences to be hallucinations caused by the dramatic changes the drug causes to brain chemistry. However, when Strassman would tell volunteers for the DMT experiments that what they experienced was just "your brain on drugs," they would consistently insist that what they experienced was "real." After meeting with this assertion of reality many times, Strassman, as a thought experiment and so as not to lose rapport with volunteers, began accepting the reality of their DMT experiences without reducing them to psychological, neurophysiological, or Buddhological interpretations.<sup>79</sup>

I would suggest that this overriding sense of the reality of the DMT trip may be a drug-related effect. Since it is not entirely clear how psychedelics chemically affect the brain and the resulting effects on cognition, emotion, perception, etc., it is possible that DMT and other hallucinogenic substances actually engender a sense, feeling, or intuition that something experienced is "real." In other words, the substance might be affecting the part or parts of the brain that provide our intuitive, ontological sense that something perceived is real. If this "intuition of reality" is a possible drug effect, it would explain why early researchers believed that LSD could be used experimentally as a psychomimetic, or psychosis-imitating, agent. If people were convinced their hallucinations were real, the belief was that they must be suffering from delusions caused by the drug. Moreover, this effect might also explain why psychedelic pioneers like Huxley, Leary, and

Watts claimed access to direct, intuitive, and self-verifying knowledge of a higher truth or reality. The “reality effect” could vary considerably from person to person, or from session to session for an individual. Moreover, neurophysiological changes in the brain can interact in complex ways with one’s existing belief and value structures.

We now know that human beings possess endogenous DMT. Strassman has also demonstrated strong similarities in accounts of DMT, near-death, and alien abduction experiences.<sup>80</sup> Thus the “reality effect” of the DMT trip may actually be related to the same chemical changes that take place in the brain during altered states of consciousness in those other experiences. Once again, depending on one’s ontological commitments, this intuition of reality could be the result of actually experiencing a higher or different reality, or merely a delusion.

The use of psychoactive substances in societies and cultures is highly complex. Certain substances, such as the classic psychedelics, can cause profound alterations in consciousness. The reasons people ingest certain substances and the interpretations they give to experiences while under the influence also diverge widely among individuals, cultures, and societies. As powerful consciousness-altering agents, psychedelics have often galvanized opinions in contemporary American society, which has led to reactionary policies and draconian drug laws. There is no philosophical consensus concerning these substances’ spiritual value. Even the attempted scientific studies of psychedelics and mysticism are open to a wide array of interpretations. Thus it seems that the use of chemically induced altered states as a part of religious practice has more to do with one’s values, personal dispositions, psychology, and philosophical/theological presuppositions than with rational arguments. These personal factors are in turn interrelated to social, cultural, and historical trends. In the next and final chapter, I conclude with observations concerning some of the historical, cultural, and sociological reasons some American Buddhists have used and will likely continue to use chemicals to augment their Buddhist practice.

## CONCLUSIONS

**T**HIS STUDY began by tracing from the 1950s up until the first decade of the twenty-first century the emergence in the United States of two distinctively modern religious movements: Western, “convert” or “white” Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality. In the fifties and sixties, significant alterations of consciousness induced by LSD-25, mescaline, and psilocybin in charismatic individuals such as Aldous Huxley, Alan Watts, Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, and Ralph Metzner led to the composition of new texts such as *The Doors of Perception*, *The Joyous Cosmology*, and *The Psychedelic Experience*. These authors associate insights gained through their psychedelically induced altered states with Buddhist ideas and established Buddhist tradition. Subsequently, their views were espoused to varying degrees by some important first-generation American Buddhist teachers, who have been outspoken about the importance of their own psychedelic experiences. While some Buddhists in the sixties gave up using psychedelics, others continued, and Buddhists from subsequent generations have also continued to use psychoactive substances as part of their religious practice.

In the seventies and eighties, the convert Buddhist subculture and the psychedelic spirituality subculture continued to develop separately, becoming more distinct and autonomous movements. As Bud-



dhist groups underwent a painful decade wracked by scandal, the psychedelic community went largely underground to avoid persecution under the federal War on Drugs, intended to combat the rapid increase of addictive drug use. The psychedelic intelligentsia reconceived and rebranded psychedelic drugs as “entheogens,” thereby highlighting their sacred status as sacramental substances engendering the divine and associating the new synthetic drugs like LSD and MDMA with traditional plant and fungal psychotropics. Despite the drug laws and the backlash against psychedelics, the nineties and noughties witnessed a renaissance in interest in psychedelics among both convert Buddhists and the scientific and medical communities.

Examining a range of different views among American Buddhists concerning psychedelics showed that a “door opening” metaphor appears repeatedly in individuals’ personal accounts of their experiences with psychedelics and Buddhism. This metaphor may originate in Huxley’s famous *The Doors of Perception*, but may also have deeper roots in humans’ psycho-physiological response to altered states of consciousness. A cohort of individuals indicate that they had some experience with psychedelics but then gave them up; in other words, they opened the psychedelic door at some point, but then chose to close it. In Joan Halifax’s terms, many of these people could be said to have “graduated” from their psychedelic drug use. Another group of American Buddhists keep the psychedelic door open—they continue to practice Buddhism and use psychedelics as a spiritual or religious adjunct. In the spiritual life narratives of five “psychedelic Buddhists,” each explains how he sees psychedelics and Buddhism as working together in his chosen spiritual path. Certain themes recur: that psychedelics can be tools to train the mind; that psychedelics can act as spiritual medicine or as plant teachers; and that to be spiritually efficacious, psychedelics need to be used with the right intentions and in the right contexts.

In the last chapter, I inquired into the debates, presuppositions, and philosophical issues in American Buddhism concerning the use of psychedelics, drug-induced mysticism, and altered states of consciousness, and investigated some of the scientific studies related to psychedelics and spirituality. Given the entanglement of interpretation and description, no definitive answers can be given. Whether peo-

ple choose to use psychedelics as an adjunct to their religious practice seems to depend more on their personal beliefs, philosophy, theology, or deeply held convictions about the world than on rational arguments. In conclusion, I offer some explanatory models for understanding the social and cultural significance of psychedelics, and speculate on the future of their use by convert American Buddhists.

## EXPLANATORY MODELS

### ALTERED STATES, VISIONARY EXPERIENCE, AND IT-THINKING

Given that the institutionalized employment of altered states appears to be the general rule in societies, Andrew Weil suggests that the drive to alter consciousness may be as basic to human beings as the drive for food or sex.<sup>1</sup> It is plausible that some people (based on different neurophysiological makeup) may have a stronger drive to alter consciousness, and some individuals (due possibly to the preponderance of naturally occurring neurochemicals such as DMT) may be more prone to enter altered states spontaneously. From historical and sociological perspectives, such people may have become the mystics, seers, and shamans in traditional societies. Why certain social groups would valorize particular altered states of consciousness (ASCs) while others would ignore or demonize them are questions for anthropology or sociology. Thus, an approach to the study of ASCs should be “psycho-social” or “biocultural” in the sense that it aims to investigate the possible psychological and biological bases of altered states in the human brain, but also how these states are interpreted, described, valorized, developed, induced, ignored, and demonized by different societies and cultures.

Modern Western society has been described as “monophasic” in that it valorizes the waking, or problem-solving, state of consciousness as the only “rational” and acceptable state.<sup>2</sup> Given this attitude, the culture shock and social dislocation caused by the profound alterations in consciousness induced by LSD and psilocybin mushrooms is not surprising, and the social panic, phobic reaction, and

legal backlash against these substances by the status quo were practically inevitable. It may be a quirk of history that at the same time these powerful psychoactive substances were being explored by the counterculture, Asian religions (especially Hinduism and Buddhism) were becoming better known in America. These religions, with their centuries-old meditative traditions, are more polyphasic in that altered states of consciousness induced through meditative technologies are better integrated into their worldviews. Thus the hippies who “blew their minds on acid” found in “the East” some explanation for the ASCs they were experiencing.

Thus we may view the counterculture’s valorization of certain altered states as a particular cultural manifestation of an underlying biological drive. Does this mean that irrationality is a characteristic feature of humanity? I suggest that this drive may in fact be our attempt to transcend the limits of rationality. Anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere, in *The Awakened Ones: Phenomenology of Visionary Experience*, addresses this issue and an alternative epistemology to rational knowing. Obeyesekere states that the main objective of his study is restorative: “to bring back forms of knowing that surely existed in elementary form from the time that *homo* became *sapiens*, if not before.”<sup>3</sup> Borrowing a phrase from Foucault, he maintains that this might be viewed as “an insurrection of suppressed knowledge . . . in this case visionary knowledge that tends to be suppressed when hyperrationality holds sway over our lives.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, Obeyesekere’s primary objective is an epistemological reassessment of what he views as the overly restrictive emphasis on “Reason” and rationality in Western scholarship since the rise of Enlightenment “Euro-rationality.” According to Obeyesekere, overreliance on Reason leads to the occlusion of certain forms of life and the possible insights gained from them. His theory is that during visions, dream visions, trances, and “aphoristic thinking,” consciousness is dimmed, and there is an absence of the active thinking “I” or ego of rational consciousness.<sup>5</sup> With the suspension of the “thinking-I,” there occurs what Obeyesekere calls “passive cerebration,” “passive cognition,” or “It-thinking.”<sup>6</sup> Following the return of I-thinking and rationality, certain religious virtuosos are able to integrate such experiences into their lives in a more rational manner. Thus for Obeyesekere, I-thinking and It-thinking are two different forms of knowledge acces-

sible to human beings, and their interplay is the primary subject of his book. Based on Obeyesekere's theory, cognition during altered states of consciousness (induced by whatever means) would clearly at times turn to "It-Thinking." This, in turn, forms the basis for new ways of knowing beyond the current limitations of reason.

#### REENCHANTMENT AND THE AUTHORITY OF THE IRRATIONAL

Historically, Buddhism and psychedelics converged in America most thoroughly in the counterculture of the 1960s. From a social and cultural perspective, one way to interpret this convergence is through the lens of "reenchantment." In his two-volume study, *The Re-enchantment of the West*,<sup>7</sup> Christopher Partridge argues that the secularization of the West with the advent of modernity and scientific rationalism, while leading to a decline in some traditional forms of religion, has also resulted in the emergence of new alternative spiritualities. Thus, according to Partridge, disenchantment acts as a precursor to reenchantment.<sup>8</sup> This is so because, "regardless of the progress of the rational in the modern world, the authority of the irrational seems to be a perennial feature in human societies."<sup>9</sup> Since the religious appetite appears to be irremovable, secularization "will always be accompanied by the formation of sects, or increasingly, cultic networks of individuals . . . and small localized groups, which are, in turn, the beginnings of new forms of supernaturalistic religion."<sup>10</sup>

If we accept that the drive toward altered states is innate within human beings and that it leads to a different type of cognition outside of reason, then when a society has reached its limit of rationality, as in the modernity of America's 1950s disenchanted scientific worldview, the drive to reenchanted the world will likely assert itself. The 1960s counterculture discovered the promise of direct experience in altered states of consciousness through psychedelic substances and Buddhist meditation. Partridge views both "Easternization" (the Western neo-Romanic appropriation of Eastern religious ideas) and the sacralization of psychedelics as aspects of what he terms "occulture" (occult culture); in the sixties they were connected and both part of the reenchantment of the West.<sup>11</sup> Partridge also views the New Age emphasis on "self-

authority” as the result of an epistemology of experience wherein “Only personal experience, it is argued, can provide immediate and uncontaminated access to truth, particularly in the sphere of the spiritual/transpersonal.”<sup>12</sup> We have seen how both American convert Buddhists and psychedelic spiritualists emphasize direct, immediate experience as a source of truth.

If Partridge’s thesis is correct, both American convert Buddhists’ drive for meditative experience and psychedelic spiritualists’ drive for psychedelic experience have emerged as a response to the disenchanting influence of a secularized, rationalistic worldview. Given the two subcultures’ shared epistemological assumptions, for many in the counterculture, Buddhism and psychedelics seemed to naturally fit together. In the intervening decades Americans have become much more sophisticated about their knowledge and practice of Buddhism, and their knowledge and use of psychedelics. However, if the “authority of the irrational,” as Partridge calls it, or a drive to transcend rationality, as I understand it, is a perennial feature of human society, the more rational and secular American society becomes, the greater the drive for reenchantment.

#### PSYCHEDELIC BUDDHISM AS TANTRA

Outside of a small group of outspoken advocates, most psychedelic Buddhists prefer to remain anonymous. The United States’ War on Drugs and lengthy jail sentences for those found in possession of illegal substances doubtlessly has contributed to this desire for anonymity. Nevertheless, self-identified Buddhists continue to use psychedelics or entheogens as part of their spiritual practice. Erik Davis’s reference to psychedelic use among American Buddhists as a type of “home-grown American Tantra” may have some merit, if we understand “Tantra” in the sociological sense of an esoteric religious orientation that involves the secret use of transgressive substances. During a Skype interview with Davis on March 7, 2011, we had a chance to discuss the topic.

ME: There is a question that I have been just dying to ask you about. In your essay, “The Paisley Gate,” you make reference to psyche-

delic Buddhism as a kind of “home-grown Tantra.” Is that how you envision it? Or how you saw other people envisioning it? Because for me, I see it as a very fertile idea from a sociological point of view, because you have these transgressive substances combined with a level of secrecy for obvious reasons to protect against social censure; and those are two hallmarks of Tantra. So do you want to talk about that?

ERIK: Sure! I am glad you are excited by that concept. It is a concept that excites me, and I would like to see people pursue that, because I was definitely always aware sociologically about that metaphor. It wasn't just a metaphor for energy or for visionary experience—those things were going on there too—obviously if you get into the discourse around phenomenological energetics of psychedelic experience and how it relates to images of the body and to geometries, you inevitably start getting to this weird place where you're sure that, “This looks a hell of a lot like that fifteenth-century tantric diagram I saw.” Where does that map come from? And how much of that is in human culture? That is a whole too philosophical discussion for where we are now. That was certainly part of it, but it was just as much the fact that I could tell within Buddhism, within American Buddhism, it was obvious to me that it was a secret subject. So I really had these direct experiences in the way that side of the story—which as a historian, and someone who thinks that psychedelic culture is extremely valuable and a very important aspect of contemporary spirituality, contemporary consciousness, whatever you want to call it—but to see that story kind of squelched in this particular way, which nonetheless still gave it some power, so you could still have the occasional conversation with somebody, but it was always on the D.L. [down low], you know?

ME: I see what you mean.

ERIK: So it was definitely out of my own experience sociologically, if you can say that. My own awareness of how that particular world was drawing boundaries and hiding things that made me interested in the tantric metaphor. And that is why I think the analogy has legs, because it is not just an energetic, phenomenological, erotic, West Coast thing. It is actually true. It is still true.

I mean, you're asking me these questions now, and I am a little uncomfortable about it.

ME: Yes. I can see that. Why?

ERIK: Why? Because it is a secret. Well, should it be a secret? I don't know. Maybe yes, maybe no. It's like, that is a different question. But I guess I would feel the same if you were asking about intimate sexual experiences; I would feel another kind of reticence, but it would be a different kind of reticence.

According to Davis, psychedelic Buddhists not only keep their use of psychoactive substances a secret from the legal authorities and wider community, but also may keep such activities secret from their own Buddhist community. This has been confirmed in my interviews and informal discussion during the course of my research. Without the limitations of time and financial resources imposed on the current study, I would have liked to pursue this aspect of secrecy in much more detail. It is not unlikely that my research has only just sampled a very small segment of a much larger sociological phenomenon. Whether we apply the term "Tantra" or "psychedelic Buddhism" to the practice of a form of Buddhism augmented with the spiritual or ritualistic use of psychoactive substances, it appears that such a heterodox praxis, which began in the 1960s, has continued into the early twenty-first century.

Davis also mentions in "The Paisley Gate" that American psychedelic Buddhism and Indian Buddhist Tantra share an "esoteric perception of a liminal realm generated through the imagination" (see chapter 1).<sup>13</sup> He again refers to this in the excerpt from our interview above. I would maintain that liminality, imagination, visions, energetic metaphors, and altered states may also be features that create nontrivial connections between ancient Indian Buddhism and contemporary psychedelic Buddhism.

Arguably, the relationship of Buddhism and altered states of consciousness goes right back to the experience of the Buddha's enlightenment under the bodhi tree (at Bodh Gaya in present-day Nepal), sometime probably in the fifth century B.C.E. Traditional sources such as the Pāli *Bhayaḥherava Sutta* state that on the evening of the Buddha's awakening, during the first watch of the night he experienced a vision of his countless past lives in detail.<sup>14</sup> Following this, during

the second watch, he had another vision with his “Divine Eye” of the passing away and rebirth of numberless beings according to the law of karma. Finally, in the third watch, he realized the Four Noble Truths and became the “Awakened One” (Buddha). The Buddha was believed to have attained these powers through the practice of concentrative meditation (*samādhi*) leading to various stages of meditative trance (Pāli: *jhāna*). When the Buddha combined this concentration with special insight (*vīpassanā*), he was believed to have gained the realizations leading to his final release from the painful cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*). While there is no way to prove that this religious narrative is based on a “real” historical event, it is not improbable that the Buddha (like other religious teachers before and after) experienced some profound alterations of consciousness through his meditative practice, which became valorized by the Buddhist tradition.

It appears that in pre-Mahāyāna and mainstream (non-Mahāyāna) Buddhist sources the Buddha’s experience of *samādhi* was generally understood to be a type of single-pointed concentration of the mind leading to the standardized list of meditative stages attained by the Buddha and subsequent followers. However, the meaning of *samādhi* underwent significant transformation sometime around the beginning of the first millennium, with the advent of the Mahāyāna sūtras. *Samādhi* in early Mahāyāna sūtras appears often as a type of mental transformation or altered state, distinctive from the usage of *samādhi* in the mainstream Buddhist sources. In Mahāyāna sources *samādhi* is often equated with a trancelike state that induces visions of infinite buddhas, bodhisattvas, and jewel-encrusted pure lands, all interpenetrating and pervading all space and time. Moreover, numerous Mahāyāna sūtras emphasize the particular importance of attaining this new type of *samādhi*, “as the ideal form of spiritual cultivation or cognitive perfection.”<sup>15</sup>

As mentioned in chapter 1, one of the most visionary of Mahāyāna sutras is the *Avataṃsaka* (commonly known in English as the “Flower Ornament Scripture,” based on Thomas Cleary’s English translation).<sup>16</sup> The worldview of the *Avataṃsaka* (and the *Gaṇḍavyūha* as its concluding section) represents the cosmological apogee of Mahāyāna thought, and may well have functioned as a template for Buddhist tantric practitioners of an awakened vision of reality.<sup>17</sup> Thus the goal of Buddhist



tantric practice became the visionary transformation of the mundane world into the magical worlds of the advanced Mahāyāna through various technologies such as *mudra* (hand gestures and postures), *mantra* (recitation of sacred sounds and formulas), and *maṇḍala* (sacred diagrams representing the cosmos). Moreover, scholars of Tantra such as David Gordon White, Ronald Davidson, and David Gray have established that at least some Indian tantrics used mind-altering plants such as cannabis and datura to enable this transformation.<sup>18</sup>

Based on the above observations, I suggest that there is in fact a connection between American psychedelic Buddhists and ancient Indian Mahāyāna and tantric Buddhists: a mutual interest in and valorization of certain kinds of altered states of consciousness. Such trance states open up a liminal space outside of everyday consensual reality wherein largely unconscious imaginal forces are released. The words of anthropologist Bruce Kapferer on magic, sorcery, and witchcraft are instructive in this regard: “they may yet elaborate further what can be called their own phantasmagoric space, an imaginal field whose force derives not so much by what it is representative of external to itself, but in the potentialities, generative forces, linkages and redirections that it opens up within itself.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Lewis-Williams’s model reveals a hidden architecture to the inner depths of these states (entoptic phenomena, iconic forms, iconic hallucinations, and the sensation of being transported to other realms), which appears cross-culturally and is likely hardwired into the human nervous system. The social, cultural, and religious significance of these imaginal realms resides primarily in their transformative potential. What makes these spaces “Buddhist” are the “set and setting” of the people who use them—in other words, their religious goals, philosophies, ethical systems, and rituals. Such a context appears to result for some in imaginal spaces not unlike the infinitely vast, inter-reflecting and interpenetrating jeweled realms of the Mahāyāna.

Altered states of consciousness seem to play a central role in visionary-based religions throughout the world. To the extent that such religions alter consciousness in order to reveal the phantasmagoric realms and the hidden architecture of the mind (recall that the meaning of “psychedelic” is “revealing the psyche or mind”), we may refer to them as “psychedelic religions.” This study has shown that some American

convert Buddhists use psychedelics in order to induce altered states of consciousness. When such substance use is considered socially transgressive and done secretly, we may say they practice a form of heterodox, esoteric religion, which for centuries in certain parts of the world has been called “Tantra.” Therefore, I propose that “Tantra” or “tantric religion” can productively be employed cross-culturally as sociological terms in the study of religions for individuals and groups that practice the secret ingestion of transgressive substances for religious/spiritual purposes. “Tantra” in this sociological sense can be applied more broadly to religious practices outside of the term’s historical and cultural connections to particular traditions originating in South Asia.<sup>20</sup>

### **THE FUTURE OF PSYCHEDELIC BUDDHISM IN AMERICA**

An unasked and possibly unanswerable question thus far in this study is, “What is the future of psychedelic Buddhism?” As I write these final pages, humanity is undergoing such rapid technological and social change that even short-term forecasts of religious trends are likely to miss the mark. However, I feel that there are some trends in American society, beginning in the counterculture, that have continued and will continue to influence contemporary spirituality. Moreover, assuming that our basic human drives will continue at least into the near future, some predictions based on those might be worth making.

Within the framework of Obeyesekere’s theory, cognition during altered states of consciousness would clearly at times turn to “It-Thinking.” Lewis-Williams’s typology of altered states shows that different levels of inwardly turned consciousness appear to occur universally in human beings based on our shared neurophysiology. Regardless of the particular mechanism—peyote, LSD, psilocybin, fasting, sensory deprivation, intense concentration—these stages of entoptic phenomena, iconic hallucinations, and experiences of being “transported” to other places and encountering other beings occur cross-culturally. One could argue that “It-thinking” during altered states is “irrational,” or as Roche would say, “delusional”;<sup>21</sup> however, one could also call cognition in altered states “nonrational,” “suprarational,” or “transrational.” Are

then the New Age spiritualists and psychedelicists correct when they claim to have a special, direct, and intuitive knowledge through immediate experience? Or is this the “reality effect” of the altered state or drug? Once again we fall into the hermeneutical circle of interpretation. Supposing that the visionary or mystic does enter “It-thinking” in an altered state, upon returning to “ordinary” consciousness, the rational “I-thinking” will interpret the experience as best as it can according to preexisting notions, beliefs, presuppositions, etc. If life transcends the bounds of human reason, then perhaps altered states are one of humanity’s means of reorienting ourselves when current rationality has reached its limit. There is no reason to think that such a drive toward transcendence will end any time soon for human beings; and drugs have always been one method that people have used in seeking such transcendence.

There are other reasons to believe that psychedelics and Buddhism will continue to mix, at least for certain members of the population. In the process of Buddhism’s adoption in the West it has gone through psychologization,<sup>22</sup> whereby Buddhism is viewed as psychology and its mythological and traditional aspects are either downplayed or ignored. This has in turn led to the “Buddhicization of psychology.”<sup>23</sup> Erik Braun describes this in the following way: “At present, a large and growing number of psychologists and therapists, including many without Buddhist allegiances, study and use Buddhist concepts and techniques of mental cultivation.”<sup>24</sup> We have already discussed transpersonal psychology’s adoption of Buddhist ideas; however, the psychologizing trend has progressed further and led to Buddhist ideas and techniques such as “mindfulness” entering mainstream psychology. Thus a detraditionalized, psychologized Buddhism is now firmly entrenched within the American medical and psychotherapeutic communities.

Jeff Wilson eruditely details the emergence of the mindfulness movement in the United States and the mutual transformation of Buddhist meditation and American culture that has resulted.<sup>25</sup> According to Wilson, mindfulness is “an expression of both Buddhism and of American metaphysical religion: it is an American Buddhist metaphysical religion.”<sup>26</sup> The term “metaphysical religion” is borrowed from Catherine Albanese’s study *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, wherein she characterizes American metaphysical religion as possessing four key

characteristics: a focus on the mind and its powers; attention to correspondences between inner and outer, microcosm and macrocosm; a preference for concepts and metaphors of movement and energy; and a therapeutic soteriology based on a model of healing.<sup>27</sup> I would suggest that both convert Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality also fit nicely into this larger matrix of American metaphysical religion. Thus, along with mindfulness, convert Buddhism, psychedelic spirituality, and psychedelic Buddhism are likely to continue to develop and interact within the context of metaphysical religion.

A number of other social and cultural factors have paved a way for further developments of psychedelic Buddhism. The serotonin revolution and the renaissance in scientific research on psychedelics in the nineties have influenced social awareness and attitudes toward the potential of certain psychoactive substances. Also, the exponential increase of knowledge about the brain and neurochemistry and the liberalization of the drug laws in some U.S. states appear to have lessened reactionary attitudes toward psychedelic drugs. New venues like Burning Man and the international psy-trance music scene create new opportunities for entheogenic exploration and new entheologies, which no doubt will continue to combine aspects of shamanism, digital shamanism, neo-shamanism, and Buddhism. Thus the social and cultural conditions are ripe for individuals and groups to continue to practice psychologized types of Buddhism chemically augmented by psychedelics, or new Buddhistically informed chemical spiritualities.<sup>28</sup>

## FINAL REMARKS

Throughout this study I have, to the best of my ability, maintained a disinterested approach to my field of inquiry. The methodological justification for this was a desire to understand as best I could the historical, cultural, and societal connections and associations between the practice of Buddhism by American converts and the use of psychoactive substances for religious/spiritual purposes. Two primary questions have been, "Are the practice of Buddhism and the spiritual use of psychedelics compatible?" and the corollary, "If so, in what way?" Given the controversial nature of the subject, I felt it necessary to

maintain a dispassionate but empathetic approach, particularly while listening to and analyzing the narratives, views, and opinions of the participants. Thus as a good phenomenologist of religion, I tried to “bracket out” (*epoché*) my particular religious, ethical, and philosophical views. For the comparative study of religions, this method is definitely commendable in theory, if not executable in practice.

I believe that not having a theoretical “axe to grind” is a good approach to fieldwork, especially when trying to understand a culture, subculture, or group. Likewise, a “beginner’s mind” (in Suzuki Roshi’s Zen sense) is a valuable skill whenever endeavoring to learn something new. However, as mentioned in the introduction, I am in many ways a “cultural insider”; because I have practiced Buddhist meditation my entire adult life and experimented with psychedelics, my personal experiences could not but inform my interactions with participants and my analysis of the data. I felt that it was important not to foreground my own subjectivity for fear of lapsing into tedious autobiographical narrative, but claiming complete disinterest, dispassion, or even worse, “objectivity” (as if one could magically inhabit that mystical view from nowhere) would be disingenuous. So, not wishing to act in bad faith, I feel it necessary to reveal here at the end of our story a bit more of my subjective positioning vis-à-vis my current field of inquiry.

#### THE APORIA BETWEEN INTERPRETATION AND EXPERIENCE

Throughout this study I have emphasized a number of times that pure description of experience is not possible. All description involves interpretation, and therefore all of our accounts of experience will always already be filtered through our worldviews, philosophies, value systems, and prejudices. Even if we assume that there is immediate or direct experience, as soon as we attempt to express it, we are already interpreting it. This is a paradox and a possible irresolvable aporia between experience and interpretation. I think it necessary to assume that people do have “experiences,” and in some philosophical circles “experience” is more or less equated with “conscious experience” or simply “consciousness” itself. In other words, there is such a thing as first-person accounts, or “what it feels like” to subjectively experi-

ence the world. My experience of pain, sadness, orgasm, or the color red cannot simply be reduced to interpretation. Thus, no matter how vivid my account of hitting my thumb with a hammer may be, it will never seem to you as if it were *your* thumb! Nevertheless, experience cannot be comprehended, related, analyzed, or recounted outside of some interpretative scheme. In this way interpretation depends on experience and experience depends on interpretation; neither makes any sense without the other; nor can either be reduced to the other.

Similar aporias have been identified between “story” and “discourse” by literary theorist Jonathan Culler<sup>29</sup> and between “gender” and “sex” by gender theorist John MacInnes.<sup>30</sup> All three paradoxical relations involve the same dilemma: the tension between constructivism and objectivism, interpretation and “the world.” It serves no purpose to ignore through some philosophical myopia the paradoxes that lie at the core of our thinking for fear the cracks in the walls will grow bigger if we pay them attention. The cracks are already there; and they are in reality gaping abysses with only the thinnest of threads strung across constituting our gossamer “worldviews,” which we cling to like baby spiders, thus avoiding both the sublime and the grotesque for fear of losing our rationality, our minds, and our very “selves.”

#### ASCS, DISCOURSE, AND FIRST-PERSON ACCOUNTS

Any serious discussion of psychedelics must involve the role of altered states of consciousness (ASCs) in society and culture. But when we examine ASCs analytically and with an unflinching gaze, we soon realize that not only do we not really understand what “altered states of consciousness” are, we do not even understand what “consciousness” is. The issue of consciousness has been called “the hard problem”<sup>31</sup> in contemporary philosophy of the mind for this simple fact—for all of our so-called “knowledge” and “science,” we still cannot give a meaningful account of consciousness, that first-person, subjective awareness of “what it is like to be a bat.”<sup>32</sup>

Discourse limits speech. And first-person accounts of altered states of consciousness (drug induced or otherwise) are usually excluded from the more formalized discourse in modern society. Modernism’s scientific worldview (the dogmatic adherence to “scientific realism”

and “materialism”) has medicalized large spheres of experience like birth, death, and most altered states to such an extent that any experience that is not publicly verifiable and does easily fit into a materialistic, Euro-rational, Newtonian physicalist worldview is likely to be deemed the product of an unbalanced, unhealthy mind, most likely due to some underlying chemical imbalance or brain abnormality. Thus modernist discourse sets strict if implicit “rules” that limit “acceptable” discourse on ASCs. It is my belief that many people, therefore, do not speak of their experiences for fear of violating the rules and facing the social prejudice and possible stigmatization that would result. This conviction was further substantiated and sustained during the course of my research on altered states of consciousness in early Mahāyāna Buddhism and the relationship between Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality in America.

During the last five years of my research (2010–2015), while I was presenting papers at conferences on the topics of ASCs in the early Mahāyāna and the connections between American Buddhism and psychedelics, two events were common. First, at the beginning of one of my talks someone from the audience typically would crack a joke along the lines that the audience should be, would be, or had been dosed with LSD or magic mushrooms. This would be followed by awkward laughter from those in attendance. At first I shrugged off such events, but then I began telling the jokes myself, as a preemptive strike against anyone who might thus diminish in my mind the seriousness of my presentation (I wanted to present myself as a “serious scholar”). I came to realize, however, that this joke telling and awkward laughter were symptoms of the social discomfort people felt in an open discussion about altered states of consciousness in an academic forum (reminiscent, I imagine, of what sexologists must have experienced when they began speaking openly about human sexual behavior to their peers). Thus the jokes and laughter functioned as signifiers of the socially taboo nature of open discourse on altered states and the psychoactive substances that induce them.

The second common occurrence during these conferences and seminars was that at social events such as coffee breaks, day meals, parties, and dinners, when discourse was informal and “off the record,” people (academics, students, and interested members of the general public) would approach me and relate to me personal narratives about

various nonordinary experiences they had had while in altered states of consciousness. By presenting on the topic, I had somehow broken the code of silence around the disclosure of such experiences. I was often deeply moved by the trust complete strangers showed in telling me these intimate and most personal events in their private lives, and amazed at the detail, intensity, and vividness of their tales about experiences that were very often not induced through any foreign chemical agent. Likewise, in my interviews with participants while researching for this book (again often during the informal moments of discourse), some truly amazing experiences were related to me. I will mention here only three to illustrate.

Once at a Buddhist studies conference I was sharing evening drinks with two fellow scholars and Buddhist practitioners. One of these, a woman about my age, related to me how during an illness when she was running a high fever, an image of the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī appeared to her and continued to hover in the upper left-hand corner of her visual field for several days until her illness had passed. There was no interaction with this vision; however, it was clear and distinct, and she had no doubt that it was of this Mahāyāna holy being. The other scholar with me that evening was a man, also about my age, who is a serious practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. He related to me that many years ago while a graduate student doing research in Asia he undertook an intensive practice of a Tārā *sadhana* for many days in seclusion. Toward the end of his devotional and visualization practices, the Bodhisattva and Savioress Tārā herself appeared! This was a fully interactive vision wherein Tārā actually spoke to him and foretold in detail many events that would happen to him in the future, including whom he would marry and the children he and his future wife would have. These events, the man claimed, all came to pass just as Tārā had said they would. On another occasion I was interviewing a white female convert to Tibetan Buddhism in Seattle. She related that once as a young woman in her twenties, several years before she began practicing Buddhism, she suddenly lapsed into some type of trance. During this altered state she had an extremely detailed and vivid vision of a holy being she later identified as the Buddha Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), legendary founder of the Nyingma School, who appeared to her and imparted special teachings through a ritualized dance.



These are only three of several stories that were shared with me during the course of those five years. The majority of the people who told me these stories are very successful academics and professionals; they did not appear to be suffering from any mental illnesses or psychosis. Therefore, I find any materialist and naïve realist worldview that would attempt to reduce such visionary accounts to mere symptoms of mental illness entirely unconvincing. So how do I interpret these and other stories I heard? First, these experiences, of course, have already been interpreted by the people who had them and were then filtered through their accounts and my own interpretation/recollection/reconstruction of the narratives as they were told to me. There is no pure description outside of interpretation. Nevertheless, I maintain that these stories we co-constructed are about “something” (that is, that they have real experiential content irreducible to simply discourse or interpretation) and that first-person accounts of experiences are valid sources of data about our world and worthy of our scholarly attention.

#### A CONTEMPORARY MAHĀYĀNA VIEW OF TRUTH, REALITY, BRAINS, AND CONSCIOUSNESS

My view on ASCs, as a Mahāyāna Buddhist, is based on a deep intuition of the truth of emptiness (*śūnyatā*); in other words, I view all phenomena as “empty” of any inherent nature or essence. Because every “thing” is dependent on or interdependent with everything else, under analysis any discrete phenomenon will dissolve, or reveal its emptiness. This does not mean everything is an illusion or unreal; nor does it mean that everything is real. Rather, emptiness inhabits that space between real and unreal, such that all phenomena are ephemeral and dreamlike. The philosophy of emptiness informs my view concerning dreams, visions, and altered states by “leveling the playing field” with so-called ordinary reality, or everyday, publicly verifiable experience. Private, subjective, first-person experience is no more or less real than public, intersubjective (often called “objective”), third-person experience. In this regard, everyone lives in their own reality, their own world. Our collective karma may allow for intersubjective overlap in our realities, but there is no one definable “objective” reality outside the ultimate emptiness of all phenomena. In and of itself,

ultimate reality is, as *The Supreme Array Scripture (Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra)* is fond of saying, “far, far beyond description; limitless; inconceivable; immeasurable, etc.” When people tell me about their visions, I am not really concerned whether these visions are “real” or “unreal” in an “objective” sense, because they are definitely “real” to the tellers in the subjective sense. Rather, I am more concerned with what such a vision means to the person who experienced it; how she understands this experience and narrates it as a part of her lifeworld, philosophy, religion, and ethics. Often it is the private, subjective experiences that radically transform one’s entire life. As a Mahāyāna Buddhist, I attempt as best as I can to enter with compassion and understanding into the other’s reality, so that I may more fully comprehend the world that she inhabits. I try to do this in a respectful and empathic way that allows me to engage in dialogue with the other (Buber’s “I-Thou relationship”),<sup>33</sup> which, if it is authentic, makes me vulnerable enough to be transformed in the process.

Although I reject the concept of an “objective” reality, I find the Buddhist distinction between conventional and ultimate truth useful for making sense of experience. Ultimate reality lies beyond thoughts, words, and concepts; it is ungraspable, unspeakable, and inconceivable. Ultimate truth is the direct apprehension of ultimate reality, which is nonconceptual and nondual. It cannot be described and is not subject to analysis. As a Buddhist, I take the existence of this reality as an object of faith; thus this conviction at its core is theological. Conventional truth consists of our worldviews, religions, philosophies, and theologies. Conventional truths are both useful and necessary, but necessarily limited, finite, imperfect models of something that goes beyond our comprehension. In this regard, science (real science as opposed to scientism, or scientific materialism) has evolved into an extremely useful and powerful approach for describing and predicting experience. Through empirical procedures and measurements, repeatable experiments, and the application of the extremely precise language of mathematics, scientific investigation has led in the last two centuries to quantum leaps in our knowledge about the universe and our development of technology. Probably one of the greatest strengths of science is its methodological falsifiability. We should be able to continually revise our models and theories and completely overthrow or

revise older theories if/when needed (Einsteinian physics superseding Newtonian physics at velocities approaching the speed of light is one prominent example). Scientific inquiry should allow us to continually move forward in our knowledge of the universe and adapt and adopt our views accordingly, without becoming dogmatically stuck in any particular theory or view.

Recent innovations in brain-imaging technologies offer new avenues to investigate “the hard problem” of consciousness. Nevertheless, there still appears to be an unbridgeable gap between our first-person, subjective experiences of “what it is to be like” and third-person, scientific accounts of what is going on in our brains. However, I believe there is an overwhelming amount of data to support the idea that there is at least a correlation between different states of consciousness and different brain states. In other words, a dramatic alteration of consciousness should correlate with some significant changes in one’s brain chemistry. Mapping these correlations will be the task of today’s scientists and will no doubt lead to findings that philosophers of mind and consciousness find useful.

However, although I think there are real correlations between conscious states and brain states, I do not believe that consciousness is necessarily reducible to brain states. It is entirely plausible that consciousness, like matter, time, space, and gravity, might be a fundamental property of reality that pervades all time and space, and that brains may be very sophisticated devices for receiving and manipulating consciousness. Moreover, we cannot ignore first-person subjective experience or pretend that it does not happen. The future of consciousness studies will lie in overcoming “the taboo of subjectivity”<sup>34</sup> that has reigned in science and bridging the gap between first- and third-person accounts. As our knowledge advances, we may find that the hard and fast line between “inner space” and “outer space” begins to dissolve. Indeed, the latticelike structure of the billions of galaxies in the known universe bears a striking resemblance to the neural network of the human brain. Once again the ancient homology between microcosm and macrocosm appears in a new (scientific) incarnation. Perhaps the unification of science and religion is not just a psychedelic pipe dream after all. We live in exciting times.

## POSTSCRIPT

**G**IVEN THIS book's emphasis on subjectivity and narrativity in the creation of worldviews, philosophies, theologies, etc., I feel a short autobiographical sketch here would be appropriate. The following story focuses on my own subjective experiences in relation to altered states, Buddhism, and psychoactive substances, in an effort to locate the current study vis-à-vis my own subjectivity. Like all stories, it is in essence a creative act of fiction; not in the sense that I intentionally make things up, but in that, constructed as it is through my limited memory, interpretation of events, and editorial decisions, it is only *a version* of my life, which inevitably excludes more than it includes. Throughout this book, I have generally avoided "trip reports" from participants, being primarily concerned with their understanding of the relationships between Buddhism and psychoactive substances. Trips, like dreams, are often more significant to those who have them than to anyone else. Nevertheless, I have included some of my own reports in the following pages to illustrate my experiences and to show how they have shaped my life and views. I do not draw a sharp line between altered states of consciousness induced through drugs versus by other means, because in my own experience they have been phenomenologically similar, and I believe both types of altered states likely correlate with similar changes in brain chemistry.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

I was born in 1967, and spent the first eighteen years of my life in Redding, Connecticut. Redding is a small, affluent town dating back to the colonial period, located in Fairfield County, which is largely a bedroom community for commuters to New York City. Much of the area was initially cultivated by early settlers as farmland. However, after most of the agriculture in the United States shifted to the Midwest during the industrial revolution, remnants of Redding's old New England forest were allowed to reclaim much of the local terrain. My early years were largely spent playing in "The Woods," as my sisters and I called it, climbing rocks and trees, playing in streams, and swimming at the local pond in the summer. In many ways, it was an idyllic childhood.

My two sisters and I were raised Catholic. Although we went through the formal Catholic education and sacraments from baptism to confirmation, my Italian-American family was not "religious" in a strict sense; nor was I particularly devout in my belief or practice. Even as a child, I found the theistic view of a personal creator God somewhat incomprehensible and nonsensical. My first experience of an altered state of consciousness was dreaming. One particular dream from my childhood stands out in my memory. One night when I was about ten years old, I dreamed I was at home in my bedroom and suddenly noticed somehow that I was dreaming (I didn't know at the time that this is called "lucid dreaming"). Once I realized that I was asleep, everything in the dream became extremely vivid and seemed to sparkle with its own inner light. I ran out of my room, down the stairs, and out the front door. I felt so weightless and free, and all the trees, leaves, flowers, and rocks seemed intensely alive. I ran to the side of the house and looked out over the lawn. There I saw every single blade of grass, each one distinctly as if I were holding it in front of me, and all of them simultaneously with the same clarity. I knew this should not be possible, and yet this is what I saw.

My fascination with altered states of consciousness, Asian religions, and philosophy began while I was still a student in high school. When I was sixteen, I found a little book in our basement about self-hypnosis called *Scientific Autosuggestion*.<sup>1</sup> According to this book, hypnosis is based on the principle that when a suggestion or idea enters the mind

unconsciously or consciously under favorable conditions of susceptibility or suggestibility, the person given the suggestion will carry it out automatically, as if by compulsion, as long as the suggestion does not run contrary to that person's ethical code or deep-rooted convictions. Self-hypnosis or autosuggestion occurs when someone creates a favorable condition in his or her own mind and plants a suggestion. I decided to conduct some of the experiments in the book with my best friend Bob. We took turns hypnotizing each other until we could make the other think his hands were stuck together or that they were stuck to the surface of a table. Although these little experiments were exciting, they were only warm-up exercises for my first journey into a different dimension of consciousness.

One Sunday night after conducting our experiments for hours, after Bob had left, I stayed awake, sitting completely still and staring at various objects around my room. By the time I finally fell asleep, I had entered the deepest level of trance I had yet reached. The next morning when I awoke, I felt incredibly relaxed and stress free, as if a giant weight had been lifted off me. Also, everything looked different, as if I were in a dream. Objects appeared brighter and their edges more distinct, yet at the same time less real. Just as in a lucid dream, the objects around me seemed to lack substantiality outside of my own consciousness. This strange feeling of relaxation and heightened awareness lasted three days. Once I "came down" from my experience, I was somewhat relieved to be back in the "ordinary world," although I remained extremely curious about the world beyond the mundane and held on to my memory of the experience. Eight years later I would return to that world, this time while on a little island in the Indian Ocean called Sri Lanka.

My introduction to the practice of meditation occurred a year later, when once again I found a book in the basement, this one called simply *TM*, on the practice of Transcendental Meditation.<sup>2</sup> This book fascinated me; reading about higher states of consciousness and all the benefits that could be attained through the practice of TM motivated me to track down a local teacher to acquire my own special mantra. I vividly remember the day I received my mantra and how relaxed I felt after my first twenty minutes of meditation. It was a perfect spring day, and I felt so peaceful and physically relaxed that, walking down the

street afterward, I felt as if I were floating two feet off the ground. I started practicing TM every day, twice a day for twenty minutes. After two years of diligent practice, I had had some interesting experiences, but had not attained the promised “cosmic consciousness” the Maharishi spoke of and began to lose some enthusiasm for the technique.

During this time, while still in high school, I discovered Buddhism. I clearly recall reading a short essay on the Mahāyāna notion of “emptiness” and feeling an immediate intuitive connection to it. Shortly afterward, I was introduced to Zen Buddhism through Alan Watts’s *The Way of Zen* and then Philip Kapleau’s *The Three Pillars of Zen*. During the summer vacation of 1987, before heading off to college, I had my first formal experience: a friend and I spent a weekend at Dai Bosatsu Zendo Kongo-ji, a Rinzai Zen monastery located in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York.

It was also during my high school years that I learned about LSD. Our school library had on its shelves a small book called *LSD, Visions or Nightmares*, part of a series to promote drug awareness and reduce drug abuse through education.<sup>3</sup> While the book contained some obvious scare tactics (such as mentioning that LSD could alter the chromosomes in your DNA and cause permanent brain damage), it also described in detail the various effects of LSD, such as synesthesia, vivid visual hallucinations, auditory hallucinations, alterations of mood, and distortions of body awareness. I was fascinated; so much so that I wrote a short story for the high school magazine about a teenage boy who committed suicide while tripping on LSD.<sup>4</sup>

In the autumn of 1987, I began attending Grinnell College, a private liberal arts college located in the middle of the cornfields of Iowa. Grinnell (in those days at least) was a “hippie college,” and I lived my first year on the south campus, or “hippie side” (because the physical education complex was located on the north campus, the “jocks” tended to live there). As at most liberal arts institutions in the United States, there was plenty of marijuana being smoked, and occasionally magic mushrooms were available during special events such as the annual “Alice in Wonderland” weekend party. By my sophomore year, I decided that I would study and practice Buddhism, earn a Ph.D. in religious studies specializing in Buddhism, and teach at the university level. This was largely due to the influence of Dan Lusthaus, who was a

visiting professor at Grinnell for the 1988–89 academic year. During my undergraduate years, I had some minimal experience with Zen, sitting infrequently with a small, informal Zen group in town consisting of Grinnell professors, students, and friends. Also, during my junior year studying abroad at Durham University, I continued my informal study of psychedelics. During this time I read *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* by Jay Stevens, and Aldous Huxley’s classics, *The Doors of Perception*, *Heaven and Hell*, and *The Perennial Philosophy*. I was also strongly influenced by R. C. Zaehner’s critique of Huxley in *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane*.

In between my undergraduate degree and first master’s degree, I studied Buddhism on a Fulbright scholarship in Sri Lanka (1991–92) under the gifted and talented program for graduating seniors. While at Peradeniya University, I studied under Gunapala Dharmasiri, a professor of philosophy specializing in Buddhism, and spent many hours in lively discussion with him. I had tracked down Dharmasiri because as a student at Grinnell I had read *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God*,<sup>5</sup> his Theravādin Buddhist assault on contemporary Anglophone conceptions of the Christian deity. At this stage of my spiritual development, I was interested in a modern form of Theravāda Buddhist philosophy as typified by Walpola Rahula’s apologetic tract *What the Buddha Taught*.<sup>6</sup> I also wanted to purge myself of any remaining vestiges of my Catholic upbringing, so Dharmasiri’s Theravādin pedigree as a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and his anti-Christian stance seemed to offer the perfect combination.

When I arrived in Sri Lanka, I discovered that Dharmasiri had disrobed as a Theravāda monk and now was a Mahāyāna layman and married with four children! This was both quite shocking and unusual for Sri Lanka, where Theravāda Buddhism has been firmly entrenched for many centuries. However, I was quickly charmed by Dharmasiri’s good nature, compassion, quick wit, and humor. Soon after our first meeting and Dharmasiri’s acceptance of me as his student, he suggested that I read *Entering the Path of Enlightenment*, Marion Matics’s translation of the Mahāyāna Buddhist poet Śāntideva’s classic *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.<sup>7</sup> While reading this book I underwent an intense cathartic experience that I can only describe as a “conversion” to the Mahāyāna Buddhist path.



Also while in Sri Lanka, I was very fortunate to meet Godwin Samararatne (1932–2000),<sup>8</sup> a lay meditation teacher. Godwin radiated gentleness, kindness, warmth, and compassion. His teachings and his gentle nature had a profound effect on my understanding of Buddhism and Buddhist meditation. While practicing meditation at Nilambe, Godwin’s meditation center up in the tea plantation country of central Sri Lanka, I had a most profound “breakthrough” experience. After about a month there, on February 26, 1992, I was engaged in walking meditation alongside the meditation hall when I looked up to see three white butterflies fly past and under a vine with white flowers blossoming on it. Immediately it was as if a mirror shattered and I stepped through the looking-glass into a different dimension. Everything appeared clear, bright, and sparkling as if illuminated by an interior light, yet at the same time all phenomena took on a dreamlike appearance. Everything was crystal clear, hyper-real, and simultaneously unreal, or illusory. In many ways, this experience was very similar to the one I had undergone through hypnotic trance as a teenager, and some previous mushrooms experiences. However, the sheer wonder was much more intense, and also accompanied by a sense of fear and isolation. In retrospect, I think this was most likely due to my ego’s illusion of control being shattered. An experience of emptiness had undermined my sense of separation between my “self” and an objectively solid external “world.” However, unlike my childhood experience, the effects of this experience lasted for several months.

After my time at Nilambe I underwent a difficult period, suffering from amoebic dysentery, intestinal salmonella, and typhoid fever, and lost about twenty-five pounds. Also, I was suffering from psychological distress due to separation from my American girlfriend and the onset of culture shock. During this time, I had a number of encounters with baby-boomer Buddhists who sang the praises of psychedelic illumination. Being somewhat suggestible due to my already altered state from meditation, I began to ponder seriously for the first time the validity of psychedelic spirituality in relation to Buddhism. As a Generation Xer, I had not been “turned on” to Buddhism through LSD. Rather, my experiences with hypnosis and TM had convinced me at an early age of the power of the mind and our ability to transform ourselves through meditation. And although I had experimented with

mind-altering substances (cannabis and mushrooms), as many other college students did, it was really for recreational rather than spiritual purposes. However, I was feeling somewhat “stuck” in my meditation and had a strong desire to “break on through” (as Jim Morrison put it) to a higher reality, or even possibly to the mystical state of “enlightenment.” What I did next, anyone experienced in mind-altering technologies will immediately recognize as extremely foolish.

I knew that marijuana has hallucinogenic properties if taken in large enough quantities. I also had discovered that a local Ayurvedic medicine called *Madana Modaka* contained cannabis prepared in ghee paste. However, what I did not know at the time is that when cannabis is orally ingested in large enough quantities, it can lead to psychosis. After procuring some *Madana Modaka* from an Ayurvedic dispensary through a friend, I proceeded to take a massive overdose while completely on my own. Needless to say, I did not attain enlightenment! I did, however, definitely “trip.” I saw visual hallucinations, shape-shifted, and experienced the union of opposites—male and female, dark and light, good and evil—inside my own body; I also intuited a connection between psychoactive substances and the practice of magic and witchcraft, and underwent what I can only describe as “possession.”<sup>9</sup> But it was all too much; the center could not hold, and the classic “bad trip” began, complete with extreme fear and paranoia. After several days of not sleeping, I realized I was in a bad way and flew home to the States. By the time I arrived at JFK, I had literally “lost my mind.” It took several months of hard work and professional help to completely regain my physical and psychological equilibrium.

This experience now reminds me of Huxley’s comment (mentioned in chapter 2) that if someone’s trip through a chemical door was terrifying, “it would be unfortunate but probably salutary.” From my “bad trip” I learned many things, but probably the three most important insights were 1) that my body and mind have real limits that I must respect; 2) a better understanding of mental illness; and 3) greater empathy with the mentally ill. Having gone “over the edge,” or crossed the limits of rationality, into the realm of insanity and then returned, I was no longer afraid of or judgmental toward people who were “mad” or from a clinical point of view were in a “psychotic state.”

This increased empathy and understanding served me well when I was employed as a mental health worker later on.

From the spring of 1992 to the autumn of '93, I was at home in Connecticut, working, writing, and applying to graduate programs to study Buddhism. By the spring of 1993, I had been accepted into the Master of Theological Studies program at Harvard Divinity School (HDS) of Harvard University. While a student at HDS (1993–95), I had the fortunate opportunity to work closely with the venerable Masatoshi Nagatomi. Through a seminar he was teaching on “Maitreya in the Buddhist Traditions,” he introduced me to the Mahāyāna Buddhist scripture known as the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*. I vividly recall purchasing Thomas Cleary’s 1,500 page, single-volume edition of *The Flower Ornament Scripture* (his English translation of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*) from the Divinity School bookstore. I immediately read its final chapter (the *Gaṇḍavyūha*) and was enthralled by the sūtra’s vision of the universe as an inter-reflecting, interpenetrating organic totality wherein each point in space-time contains the whole of space-time. I could not help but be reminded of my childhood dream of seeing every single blade of grass on the lawn stretched out before me. The following spring, I began independent study with Professor Stephanie Jamison, working on the Sanskrit *Gaṇḍavyūha*. Reading the scripture in Sanskrit filled me with indescribable joy. To me the text was a doorway to a magical, infinitely vast universe filled with limitless wonders.

By the time I reached Harvard, I self-identified as a Buddhist, and while at HDS I was active in the Harvard Buddhist Students group. I also became part of a small group of divinity students and friends who were interested in the spiritual use of entheogens.<sup>10</sup> Members were from both the baby-boomer generation and Generation X. A key figure in the group and close friend of mine, John,<sup>11</sup> was an experienced entheogen user from the older generation and a member of the psychedelic intelligentsia. John became my mentor and, among other things, taught me the importance of set and setting during entheogenic exploration. It was also during this time that I gained some understanding of the psychedelic subculture in the United States from the days of its beginnings in the psychedelic sixties, including the biographies of some of its founding fathers such as Albert Hoffman, Gordon Wat-

son, Ken Kesey, and Harvard's own Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (Ram Dass). During the 1994–95 academic year, our Harvard group would gather often to discuss our philosophical and religious views, share our writings, and explore consciousness. As Fate would have it, one such gathering on January 21, 1995, became known as the “Harvard Agape”<sup>12</sup> and has gained some scholarly notice.<sup>13</sup>

From my point of view, the so-called “Harvard Agape” was not particularly significant or unusual when compared to the other activities of our group. However, since it has attracted some attention in the academy, I have decided to mention it here. Our group that day consisted of five men and three women, with ages ranging from mid-twenties to mid-forties. Five of us were Harvard Divinity students. Our “sacrament” was MDMA, although not everyone present took the drug. I was the only self-identified Buddhist in the group. I began our gathering by reading a scene from the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* about the hero Sudhana's encounter with the Bodhisattva Maitreya at the entrance to Maitreya's Tower. In this passage Sudhana praises Maitreya as his “good friend” (Skt: *kalyāṇamitra*), or spiritual guide. After the reading, I gave a short “sermon,” which I reproduce here:

We have gathered here today as spiritual friends to take part in this sacrament. It is called MDMA, ecstasy, X, Adam, and other names. What it is called is not important. What it does, is. Although some call it an “entheogen,” meaning that it possesses a “god within,” I prefer to call it an “entactogen,” meaning that it gets us in touch with the “Within.”

Because this substance is what Big Brother [John] calls “a nonspecific amplifier,” how we interact with it depends a lot on us. How we approach the substance, what we hope to get out of it, and its place in our spiritual path all affect how it will interact with us.

This sacrament is a drug. As a drug, it can be a medicine or a poison. Drugs can lead us to bliss or send us to hell. Therefore, we must use it carefully and with responsibility.

What I feel is most important about this substance is that once we take it the time will be NOW. NOW is the most powerful time in which to be. Because the NOW is so powerful, it is good that we have gathered here together as friends to share this NOW.

According to Buddhism, all things are impermanent. But because being in the NOW together is so powerful, we do not know how long its effects will last. It may last ten hours, ten days, ten weeks, ten months, ten years, one hundred years, one thousand years, one million years, or one billion years. We do not know.

With this in mind, I would like to invoke my goddess one more time and make a dedication. Anyone who would like to make it with me can repeat it after I do. Also, anyone who wants to make a personal dedication out loud or in silence should feel free.

I then chanted, “*Oṃ Maṇi Padme Hūṃ,*” and said, “May any insight I gain from this substance be used for the benefit of all beings!” which everyone repeated after me. The remainder of the Agape included readings, songs, poems, storytelling, music, dancing, and a shared meal. It was ecumenical, loosely structured, and a “love feast” in the sense that it was a warmhearted gathering of spiritual friends. It was truly a magic moment in our lives and a testament to the ability of these experiences to form strong bonds.

The multiple contexts, or “set and setting,” of the Harvard Agape were complex and varied for all of us. I can only give here an account of my own situation. Prior to the Agape, in the autumn of '94, I had a number of positive entheogenic experiences with the help and guidance of John. Like others in our group, I often would write about my experiences and share them with our band of psychonauts. Here is an excerpt from a piece I wrote titled “Acid Trip #2: The Infinite Love Experience.”

With my eyes closed I began to see millions of dots of color swirling around and around and spinning off into Infinity. I called to Kitten<sup>14</sup> and she sat down next to me.

I opened my eyes just for a few seconds and looked deeply into Kitten's big beautiful eyes—they were the most amazing hazel color. . . . When I closed my eyes I saw a billion trillion of Kitten's eyes all spinning around and around and swirling off into Infinity. My body felt dissolved into endless Space; my consciousness was consumed by the swirling, throbbing lights spinning and dancing into a limitless abyss . . .

“Do you love me?” I asked Kitten.

“YES,” I heard a voice respond. But it wasn’t just her voice—it was as if the Universe had answered back. As if the COSMIC MOTHER-SISTER-LOVER had answered me. The voice echoed limitlessly in my mind and I felt INFINITE LOVE. It was not just that I felt loved or I felt love for someone, it was just LOVE. Love without limit, without boundaries, without duality—consuming everything—it was EVERYTHING—the very stuff of existence. . . .

The first time I did X, I felt an emotional melting away and a warm compassionate love for my girlfriend, and I thought, “This is how a Buddha must feel,” but this experience on acid was on an entirely different order—this was metaphysical and cosmic—there were NO LIMITS. Kitten’s YES was the Eternally Infinite YES of the COSMOS. . . . And it was only because she meant it. For as little time as we had known each other and as finite, frail, and mundane as her love might be, when she said it, she meant it, and that made all the difference.

One could comment here on the typical appearance of entoptic phenomena as described by Lewis-Williams in his stage 1, or about “Kitten’s eyes” generating the iconic images of stage 2. Dilations and distortions of time and space are also indicative of Lewis-Williams’s stage 3. But the overwhelming sense of the experience was not its visual quality but its emotional tone (“INFINITE LOVE”). Love became limitless, metaphysical, and cosmic. Such an experience could not help but alter the deep structure of my psyche and worldview.

The first time I did ecstasy was one of the most profound and life-changing events of my life. Unlike the metaphysical quality experienced on acid, “E” was not visionary but purely sensual, erotic, and emotional. The pure love and total absence of fear made me think that this was how a buddha must feel. Nothing in my life prior to this event came close to the quality and intensity of those feelings. Unfortunately, my girlfriend had a panic reaction and I had to “talk her down.” Once she calmed down, she was fine, but pretty traumatized by the experience for some time afterward. This brought home to me just how differences in individual physiology and mental “set” can lead to drastically different experiences. There is no such thing as a normal or typical reaction. Idiosyncratic responses to any drug are always possible. After my MDMA-assisted experience of unconditional love and total absence of fear while

helping her, I realized I could “be present” for and assist someone in crisis. This led to my decision to follow John’s advice to take a part-time job as a mental health worker on the Secure Assessment Unit, or “S.A.U.” (a locked psychiatric unit), at Cambridge Hospital.<sup>15</sup>

After the heady Harvard years, I moved out west to Seattle in the autumn of 1995. For a year I worked as an assistant teacher at a private school for children with learning differences on Mercer Island. While at the University of Washington (1996–2000), I wrote a study and translation of the final prose section of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* for my M.A. in Asian languages and literature. Also during the time I was living in Seattle, I sat two ten-day courses of *vipassanā* meditation in the tradition of S. N. Goenka at the Dhamma Kuṅja Center and gained some valuable insights. One significant effect from my first ten-day was a deep releasing and cleansing of the negative experiences I had undergone in Sri Lanka. Another was the intense clarity of mind and perception attained as a result of practice. I clearly remember on Christmas Eve in 1995, while midway through a course, standing in the cold night air listening to a coyote howl as I watched an orange crescent moon setting behind the mountain pines, with the backdrop of the Milky Way stretched across the cloudless night sky. My mind was clear as a diamond and still as a mountain lake. While living in Seattle, I also practiced some “Mudra Space Awareness,” developed by Chögyam Trungpa and taught at the Seattle Shambala Meditation Center.

During this time in Seattle, my old friend John from Harvard (who also had moved out west) recommended to me Paul Stamets’s *Psilocybin Mushrooms of the World*.<sup>16</sup> This book was a game-changer for me. Stamets demonstrates how ubiquitous psilocybin mushrooms are throughout the world, and how easy they are to identify, given a bit of knowledge. That such fungi should be illegal to possess or consume seemed absurd. Also in *Psilocybin Mushrooms of the World* Stamets recounts an experience he had after ingesting psilocybin mushrooms, a precognitive dream that “shattered” his concept of linear time.<sup>17</sup> Not long after reading this book, I also had a chemically assisted vision of the future that came to pass two weeks later. Like Stamets, this caused me to seriously question my existing view of linear time. But once again I found a solution to my quandary within the pages of *The Supreme Array*. The *Gaṇḍavyūha* describes a vision of reality wherein

past, present, and future all interpenetrate and simultaneously coexist. Since the future does in some sense “exist” in the present, under certain conditions, such as in an altered state of consciousness, it is possible to “perceive” future events. How this interpenetration of the space-time continuum relates to issues of free will and determinism continues to puzzle me to this day.

Between 2000 and 2004, I continued my studies of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, completing my dissertation in 2004. During the 2004–05 year, I was a teaching fellow in the Study of Religions Department. Living in East London for five years exposed me first-hand to the darker side of psychoactive substances. Alcoholism and drug abuse were rampant in the London slums. People were not interested in the spiritual use of “entheogens.” Inhabitants of East London’s Hackney and Tower Hamlets districts used drugs to get high, to “numb out,” to party, and to escape the mundane drudgery, dirt, noise, pollution, poverty, crime, and violence of the urban jungle. My goals were to survive, get my Ph.D., and get out. When not studying, teaching at SOAS, or working at the British Museum and British Library, I generally gave myself over to socializing in the SOAS bar (where marijuana was openly smoked) and hedonistic pursuits.

While I was living in London, for a short period of time fresh psilocybin mushrooms were legally sold by vendors and could be purchased at shops on the High Street. Not that any Londoner with the know-how needed to buy them. London’s wet weather and woodchip-landscaped parks, like the national arboretum Kew Gardens, create perfect conditions for magic mushrooms to grow. It was during this brief time of capitalist exploitation of ambiguous UK legislation that I experienced, with fungal assistance, the so-called “clear light” that Leary et al. make such a big deal about in *The Psychedelic Experience*. At a certain point in “the trip”<sup>18</sup> everything became very still and “bright”; this brightness kept increasing in intensity until time, space, and self completely melted away. It was not nothingness, or some void; it was full and complete, but empty of objects. Perhaps an Advaitin would describe it as “Being, Consciousness, Bliss” (*saccidānanda*). It was nondual in the sense that there were no things; it was a seamless unity outside space-time-self. It lasted maybe ten minutes; it lasted eons. There was awareness, but not of anything in particular; “clear light” is only a visual metaphor. It



wasn't a visual experience. It's hard to even call it an "experience," but it wasn't unconsciousness either. Words fail here. I would describe this event as interesting and philosophically profound; but I was certainly not "enlightened" or "awakened" (*bodhi*) in the Buddhist sense.

My practice of Buddhism during my time in London was primarily solitary meditation or sitting with my close friends Natasha and Jonathan. I vividly recall practicing *zazen* under a tree in Finsbury Park during the summer heat wave of 2003.<sup>19</sup> I felt like I was trapped in an oven being purged of my negative karma in one of the Buddhist hells.<sup>20</sup> My contact with formal Buddhist organizations was minimal. After a short involvement in East London with what I can only call a "tantric Buddhist cult" in 2002,<sup>21</sup> I had one other significant encounter with the living tradition while in London. In the autumn of 2003, I requested and received a formal student-teacher interview with Dharmavidya (David Brazier), a Buddhist author, teacher, and founder of Amida-shu, a UK-based Pure Land tradition. Although brief, this meeting made a strong impression on me and led to my hosting David during his visit to New Zealand several years later.

In 2005, Massey University in Palmerston North, New Zealand, hired me to teach Asian religions in their Religious Studies Programme. During my first year, I was actively involved with the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) through their Amitabha Centre. After a sex scandal occurred among the monastic leadership of the New Zealand NKT, I lost interest and discontinued my association with the organization.<sup>22</sup> After this, I began attending a small weekly meditation group in Palmerston North hosted by the local chapter of the Mountain and Rivers Order (MRO) of Zen Buddhism. (As mentioned in chapter 3, the MRO is an American-based contemporary Zen movement with headquarters at the New York Zendo in New York City and its main monastery, Zen Mountain Monastery, in upstate New York.) At the time of writing this, I have sat three weekend retreats and two week-long retreats (*sesshin*) with the MRO, both led by Shugen Arnold Sensei in Christchurch.

In 2008, my first book, based on my Ph.D. research, was published: *Power, Wealth and Women in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*.<sup>23</sup> Also, since 2008, I have been teaching a nonsectarian mindfulness meditation class at the Theosophical Hall in Palmerston North every Tuesday evening. The group is nonsectarian in that

it does not promote one particular religion or meditation technique as superior to others. The group's main focus is on the practice of mindfulness of breathing to promote physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. The meetings are walk-in, free of charge, and open to any person interested in meditation.<sup>24</sup> I offer these classes as a community service, and the loose-knit group of regulars are my spiritual friends and constitute my own ecumenical and theological community.

These days my interest and enthusiasm for psychedelic exploration are not what they used to be. As a full-time university lecturer and father of four, I devote most of my time and effort to research and teaching, paying the bills, and trying to be a good father to my children. Teaching and parenting constitute the core of my spiritual practice. However, during the course of my research I did have one psychedelic experience worth mentioning.

While researching for this book in the southwestern United States in October 2010, I made a detour on the way back to Phoenix, Arizona, from New Mexico and stopped at the Peyote Way Church of God. The existence of this church is possible because the bona fide religious use of peyote by someone of any race is protected by law in five states, including Arizona. The Peyote Way Church of God describes itself as "a non-sectarian, multicultural, experiential, Peyotist organization located in southeastern Arizona, in the remote Aravaipa wilderness."<sup>25</sup> Its primary ritual is the "Spirit Walk." This consists of fasting on church land for twenty-four hours and then going out alone into the desert at night to your own fire with a jar full of peyote tea.

I arrived at about 3:30 pm on October 7, 2010. I first met Rabbi Matthew Kent and his son Tristan. Tristan showed me around to the peyote greenhouses and the different fire sites for the Spirit Walk. I also picked out my site, on the west side of the property facing the mountains to the northwest. Tristan then showed me to my room. That night I went to bed early and did not sleep much. The next day I had some green tea in the morning and just hung out. I had a long talk with Matthew about Reverend Immanuel Trujillo, the founder of Peyote Way, who had only just passed away in June. Immanuel, or "Mana," as he was called, was half Apache, half Jewish, and was adopted by Irish Catholic parents. At the age of sixteen he ran away from home and joined the British Merchant Marine. He had fought for the British in

World War II and was wounded in combat. Matthew told me that Mana knew the Beats, hung out with Timothy Leary and the Harvard gang, and was in the Native American Church for ten years before founding the Peyote Way Church of God.

That evening four of us visiting the church prepared for our Spirit Walks. I describe this in my field notes:

At close to 5 p.m., I sat down with Reverend Anne L. Zapf and signed some papers and talked about the Spirit Walk. Annie said we should sip the tea once every 20 minutes and don't rush things. The medicine, she told us, comes on slow. Also, she said the peyote will give us what we need, not necessarily what we want or expect. She said in the Spirit Walk, we are our own shamans. The experience empowers you to be your own healer; the Medicine is a plant teacher, a goddess, and a helper. She and Matthew (her husband) would be in the Prioery if we needed them. Also, we could have the whole jar of peyote tea (about 15 buttons worth), or as little as we felt like. We should trust our bodies and develop a relationship with the Medicine.

Then I went down to my site with the peyote, some water (not to be drunk until I was finished drinking the tea), several layers of clothes, a flashlight (so as not to step on any rattlesnakes!), and a lighter. I said several *Oṃ Maṇi Padma Hūṃs* and dedicated any insight from the experience to family, friends, and all beings. Then I started sipping. Slowly the sun went down and the mountains changed colors as the sun set. The evening desert was beautiful beyond words. When it was starting to get dark, I lit the fire and listened to the crickets chirping. When the stars came out, the Milky Way was beautifully displayed in all its glory—I marveled at the Big Dipper, which I cannot see in the Southern Hemisphere—no Southern Cross up here! Far off and then nearby I heard coyotes howl.

My Spirit Walk was like seven years of therapy in seven hours. My father had passed away in 2004, and I did not know it before this event, but there was much unresolved psychic material kicking around in my unconscious mind about my relationship with him. Not only did the medicine show these things to me, but it also helped resolve and release most of them. I write about this event in my field notes in the following words:

During this time, I cried and shouted and pounded the earth with my fists, smashed rocks together, and hit my legs. I shouted at the sky and swore I would be a better man. I felt the Medicine was with me. Not just in me, but around me. It was a Goddess, a Teacher, a Guide, and a Friend. It was Nature. When I looked at the sky, it was the Peyote, when I looked at the ground, it was Peyote. When I looked at the Fire, it was Peyote. Not that I saw the plant, but the Spirit of the Plant was fused with Nature and everything around me. I felt held and protected by it, like I was in the womb of the Great Earth Mother.

As Ryan Bradenburg later explained to me, I had healed deep ancestral wounds. I came away from this experience with a profound respect for peyote and the traditions that employ its healing spiritual powers.

## PARTING THOUGHTS

My aim in the above sketch was to locate as briefly as possible my own subjectivity in order to allow you, the reader, to gain some understanding of how my life experiences influenced the cocreation of the narratives in this book and the overall narration of this particular text.

As mentioned in the introduction, I believe in every individual's right to religious freedom, absolute sovereignty over her own body, and personal conscience as the final arbiter in ethical decisions. I have found that certain people are drawn to psychedelics like moths to the flame. Perhaps these are our modern-day mystics, seers, and shamans. If you are such a person, then I advise you to become as informed as possible about the potential physical, mental, and legal consequences of your actions and exercise caution whenever exploring psychoactive materials. Contrariwise, you may be someone who has never been interested in trying a psychedelic substance and is repulsed or terrified at the very thought. My sense is that people generally possess a good instinct as to their own psychological limits, and you should follow your intuitions in this regard. Like Lama Surya Das, I take an inclusive and universalistic view: there are many paths to the real, and psychedelic Buddhism can be one among them. Thus there is no reason to shut the Dharma door to those modern mystics, tantrics, shamans, Zen lunatics, holy

madmen, and crazy wise women who are willing to risk the agonies and ecstasies of what Dale Pendell calls “the poison path”<sup>26</sup> for a glimpse into other worlds and the insights possibly gained.

It seems that I am, according to my own definition, a psychedelic Buddhist. However, given the possible dangers, I have never promoted the religious use of psychoactive substances. Psychedelics are powerful medicine and not to be taken lightly. It seems that one of their primary effects is to “defamiliarize” one’s everyday perceptions of the world. This allows one to see the world with “fresh eyes” and step outside of what Charles Tart calls “consensus trance”<sup>27</sup>—the commonly worn and comfortable ways we are conditioned to interpret our experience of the world. This gap or “doorway” into the novel, different, and strange may allow for valuable insights into one’s own psychology, life, reality, the universe, etc. However, I have found that the use of all drugs (including coffee, alcohol, sex, and television) follows the same principle of diminishing returns. Human physiology and psychology quickly adapt to new stimulation, such that overuse of certain chemicals or stimulation leads to habituation and “the new normal.” The grosser aspects of this habituation are what we commonly call “addiction.” Even the craving for novel, exciting, unusual “mystical” or “religious” experiences can be its own form of addiction. Thus my motto is “less is more,” and my drugs of choice these days are coffee and chocolate. Every drug can be poison or medicine, and therefore needs to be used, as Ryan Brandenburg states, “in a good way.” In Buddhist terms this would be in a skillful way, as a “skillful means” (*upāya-kauśalya*). My attitude is to let each individual follow her own path and make her own choices. Buddhas and bodhisattvas acting out of fathomless wisdom and universal compassion possess methods that are beyond the comprehension of this mere mortal.

As I have mentioned several times in this book, there are real limits to rationality and rational arguments; much of the meaning-making we as humans undertake revolves around the crafting of stories from our subjective experiences of “the world.” However, these tales will forever only represent conventional truths, and reality will always exceed the bounds of the myths we make about it. Certitude is the harbinger of madness; so, dear reader, take all dogmas, proofs, arguments, and philosophies with a grain of salt and be ready, if need be, to cast them all to the wind in the wake of a beatific vision.

# NOTES

## PREFACE

1. Thomas Jefferson, "Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptist: The Final Letter, as Sent (Jan. 1, 1802)," *The Library Congress Information Bulletin* 57, no. 6 (June 1998), accessed April 7, 2015, <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html>.

## INTRODUCTION

1. Sarah Shortall, "Psychedelic Drugs and the Problem of Experience," *Past and Present*, Supplement 9 (2014): 187–206.
2. "Entheogenic" is the adjectival form of the word "entheogen," used in some circles to indicate a psychoactive substance that is thought to "engender the divine," and therefore is used for spiritual/religious purposes. I discuss the origin and use of this term in detail in chapters 1 and 2.
3. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Entheogenic Esotericism (2012)," 395, accessed on April 7, 2015, [https://www.academia.edu/3461770/Entheogenic\\_Esotericism\\_2012\\_](https://www.academia.edu/3461770/Entheogenic_Esotericism_2012_).
4. For example, see Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America, Third Edition Revised and Updated* (Boston: Shambala, 1992); Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West; The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture: 543 BCE–1992* (London: Aquarian, 1994); Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds., *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Richard Hughes

- Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Duncan Ryūken Williams and Christopher S. Queen, eds., *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999); Charles Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Charles Prebish, *Buddhism: The American Experience* (Journal of Buddhist Ethics Online Books, 2003); and David L. McMahan, *The Making of Modern Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For more recent specialized studies, see for examples Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), esp. 150–69; and Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and America Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
5. Two of the best accounts of LSD and the “psychedelic revolution” are Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (New York: Grove Press, 1987); and Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams, The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, The Sixties, and Beyond* (New York: Grove Press, 1985). For an in-depth investigation of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters and their impact on the popularization of LSD in the sixties, see Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Picador, 1968). Two recent books on the Harvard psychedelic pioneers are Don Lattin, *The Harvard Psychedelic Club: How Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, and Andrew Weil Killed the Fifties and Ushered in a New Age for America* (New York: HarperOne, 2010); and Ram Dass and Ralph Metzner with Gary Bravo, *Birth of a Psychedelic Culture: Conversations About Leary, the Harvard Experiments, Millbrook, and the Sixties* (Santa Fe: Synergetic Press, 2010). For more general discussions of psychedelics and contemporary spirituality, see Nicholas Saunders, Anja Saunders, and Michelle Pauli, *In Search of the Ultimate High: Spiritual Experience Through Psychoactives* (London: Rider, 2000); Daniel Pinchbeck, *Breaking Open the Head: A Psychedelic Journey Into the Heart of Contemporary Shamanism* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002); Huston Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals* (Boulder: Sentient Publications, 2002 [2000]); and Lynne Hume, *Portals: Opening Doorways to Other Realities Through the Senses* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), esp. 117–36.
  6. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey, eds., *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2002). Much of the content in the *Tricycle* volume is simply reproduced in *Zig Zag Zen*. Unfortunately, the current study was already in production when the new edition of *Zig Zag Zen* (2015) was released, and there was insufficient time to consult it.
  7. Erik Davis, “The Paisley Gate,” in *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2002), 162–63.

8. I am borrowing this term from Erik Davis, who uses it casually once or twice in “The Paisley Gate” (see *ibid.*, 157). Here I develop the term and add more historical, sociological, and cultural nuance to it.
9. Jan Nattier uses “Elite Buddhism.” See Jan Nattier, “Who Is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America,” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Prebish and Tanaka, 183–95.
10. Phillida Salmon (“Looking Back on Narrative Research: An Exchange,” in *Doing Narrative Research*, ed. Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire, and Maria Tamboukou [London: Sage, 2008], 80) writes:

All narratives are, in a fundamental sense, co-constructed. The audience, whether physically present or not, exerts a crucial influence on what can and cannot be said, how things should be expressed, what can be taken for granted, what needs explaining, and so on. We now recognize that the personal account, in research interviews, which has traditionally been seen as the expression of a single subjectivity, is in fact, always a co-construction.

11. As McMahan has pointed out, these features are distinctive of Buddhist modernity in the West. See McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*.
12. See Douglas Osto, “Altered States and the Origins of the Mahāyāna,” in *Early Mahāyāna*, ed. Paul Harrison (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, forthcoming 2016).

## 1. BUDDHISM AND THE PSYCHEDELIC CONNECTION

1. Allan Hunt Badiner, ed., “Psychedelics: Help or Hindrance?” *Tricycle* 6, no. 1 (fall 1996): 33–109.
2. *Ibid.*, 44.
3. *Ibid.*, 33.
4. James Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
5. James William Coleman, “The New Buddhism: Some Empirical Findings,” in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, ed. Duncan Williams and Christopher Queen (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), 91–99.
6. Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 10 and 201.
7. As cited in *ibid.*, 201.
8. Charles T. Tart, “Influences of Previous Psychedelic Drug Experiences on Students of Tibetan Buddhism: A Preliminary Exploration,” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 23, no. 2 (1991): 139–73.
9. *Ibid.*, 150.
10. Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 10.
11. The exact URL (no longer active) was: <http://www.squidoo.com/american-buddhism-research-project>.



12. Charles Prebish, "The Academic Study of Buddhism in America: A Silent Sangha," in *American Buddhism*, ed. Williams and Queen, 183–214.
13. See Coleman, "The New Buddhism" (1999), 94–95, and Coleman, *The New Buddhism* (2001), 192–93. The results of the 1999 article were preliminary findings of the same survey discussed in the 2001 book. Where figures vary slightly, I have used those published in 2001.
14. Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 152–53.
15. Sarah Shortall, "Psychedelic Drugs and the Problem of Experience," *Past and Present*, Supplement 9 (2014): 187–206.
16. See Susan J. Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994); Cynthia Palmer and Michael Horowitz, eds., *Sisters of the Extreme, Women Writing on the Drug Experience: Charlotte Brontë, Louisa May Alcott, Anaïs Nin, Maya Angelou, Billie Holiday, Nina Hagen, Diane di Prima, Carrie Fisher, and Many Others* (South Paris, ME: Park Street Press, 2000); and Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Daughters of Aquarius: Women of the Sixties Counterculture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).
17. Joseph Gelfer, "Gender, Sexuality and Psychedelic Spirituality," accessed April 12, 2012, <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2012/04/gender-sexuality-and-psychedelic-spirituality-joseph-gelfe/>.
18. Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams, The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 113.
19. Gelfer, "Gender, Sexuality and Psychedelic Spirituality."
20. Ibid.
21. *Tricycle* had in the 1990s a readership of about 60,000. See Thomas A. Tweed, "Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures: Sympathizers, Adherents, and the Study of Religion," in *American Buddhism*, ed. Williams and Queen, 71–90.
22. Helen Tworokov, "Psychedelics: Help or Hindrance?" *Tricycle* 6, no. 1 (fall 1996): 4.
23. Ibid. This phrase, "just say maybe," is an obvious reference to the "Just Say No" slogan made popular in the eighties by First Lady Nancy Reagan as a part of the Reagan administration's antidrugs campaign. Thus an implicit rhetorical strategy of "just say maybe" is to challenge the silencing of public discourse on psychedelics attempted by the Reagan-Bush administrations' War on Drugs. The antidrugs rhetoric of the federal government in the eighties and early nineties is fairly straightforward: all illicit "drugs" are bad, and to use them is morally wrong. "Drugs" are bad by definition, and those who use them are morally degenerate. Therefore, any discussion of the potential uses or benefits of any illegal psychoactive substance is beside the point. Such rhetoric of course ignores legal drugs such as nicotine, alcohol, and caffeine, and prescribed pharmaceuticals. *Tricycle's* "just say maybe" challenges this position and may be viewed as politically subversive

However, except for the essay by John Perry Barlow, political and legal issues are largely sidestepped by the *Tricycle* issue.

24. *Ibid.*, 33.
25. Badiner's use of the term "psychedelic" ("mind-manifesting") to refer to this general class of psychoactive substances, rather than the more clinical term of "hallucinogens," is intentional. Substances that manifest the mind can potentially reveal our hidden mental architecture, which would then allow us to "free our minds." However, it seems highly implausible that substances that cause us to "hallucinate" could have the same effect. If anything, substances that cause hallucinations could well be thought of as further entrapping or imprisoning our minds within their own false perceptions.
26. Allan Hunt Badiner, "Domains of Consciousness: An Interview with Jack Kornfield," *Tricycle* 6, no. 1 (fall 1996): 34–40. This interview was first conducted by Robert Forte on February 3, 1986, in San Anselmo, California, and revised for *Tricycle* in 1996. Forte is a crossover figure within the American Buddhist and psychedelic subcultures. See "Robert Forte," accessed January 15, 2013, <http://ciis.academia.edu/RobertForte>.
27. For more information on Jack Kornfield, see "Jack Kornfield," accessed January 15, 2013, [www.jackkornfield.com](http://www.jackkornfield.com).
28. Badiner, "Domains of Consciousness," 35.
29. Badiner, "Domains of Consciousness," 36.
30. *Ibid.*; italics in original.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, 39; my brackets.
33. *Ibid.*, 40.
34. Rick Fields, "A High History of Buddhism," *Tricycle* 6, no. 1 (fall 1996): 45–59. Fields's most important scholarly work is *How the Swans Came to the Lake* (Boston: Shambhala, 1992).
35. Robert Jesse, "Entheogens: A Brief History of Their Spiritual Use," *Tricycle* 6, no. 1 (fall 1996): 60–64.
36. See "Erowid Character Vaults: Robert Jesse," Erowid, accessed January 17, 2013, [http://www.erowid.org/culture/characters/jesse\\_robert/](http://www.erowid.org/culture/characters/jesse_robert/).
37. "About CSP," Council on Spiritual Practices, accessed January 17, 2013, <http://csp.org/about.html>.
38. For more information on Jesse, see "Robert Jesse," Erowid. I discuss the Johns Hopkins studies in chapter 7.
39. Jesse, "Entheogens." He has actively promoted the name "entheogens" for this class of psychoactive substances; the term has been adopted by a number of members of the psychedelic intelligentsia, such as Gordon Watson, Huston Smith, and Robert Forte. Under this category, Jesse lists and briefly discusses peyote, psilocybin mushrooms, ayahuasca, the Vedic soma, the Greek Eleusinian mystery rites' keykeon, cannabis, LSD, and MDMA (ecstasy). For more on the origin and use of the term "entheogen,"

- see “On Nomenclature,” Council on Spiritual Practices, accessed January 17, 2013, <http://csp.org/practices/entheogens/docs/nomenclature.html>. See also chapter 2.
40. Badiner, “Sacred Antidotes: An Interview with Terence McKenna,” *Tricycle* 6, no. 1 (fall 1996): 94–97. McKenna died of cancer in 2000.
  41. *Ibid.*, 95; italics in original.
  42. *Ibid.*
  43. *Ibid.*
  44. *Ibid.*, 96.
  45. *Ibid.*, 97.
  46. *Ibid.*; italics his; brackets mine.
  47. *Ibid.*
  48. Allan Hunt Badiner, “Help or Hindrance? The Roundtable with Ram Dass, Joan Halifax, Robert Aitken, Richard Baker,” *Tricycle* 6, no. 1 (fall 1996): 101–109.
  49. For some of Grof’s work on psychedelics, spirituality, and psychology, see Stanislav Grof and Christina Grof, *Holotropic Breathwork: A New Approach to Self-exploration and Therapy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010). The foreword is by Jack Kornfield. See also Stanislav Grof, *Psychology of the Future: Lessons from Modern Consciousness Research* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); *The Cosmic Game: Explorations of the Frontiers of Human Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); *Books of the Dead: Manuals for Living and Dying* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994); *The Adventure of Self-Discovery* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); and *Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death, and Transcendence in Psychotherapy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985); and Stanislav Grof and Joan Halifax, *The Human Encounter with Death* (New York: Dutton, 1977).
  50. Grof and Halifax, *The Human Encounter with Death*, 109.
  51. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey, eds., *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2002).
  52. For example, included in this volume are: the interview with Jack Kornfield; “A High History of Buddhism in America” by Rick Fields; the survey of entheogens by Robert Jesse; the article by Rick Strassman on DMT; Badiner’s account of his yagé experience; the essay by John Perry Barlow; Badiner’s interview with Terence McKenna; and the roundtable interview with Joan Halifax, Robert Aitken, and Richard Baker.
  53. In all fairness, Badiner does include his interview with Michele McDonald-Smith, but her antidrug stance makes even less of an impact here than in the *Tricycle* issue—a sour note in an otherwise psychedelic concert. This interview comes immediately after the McKenna interview, which supports my view that McDonald-Smith and McKenna represent polar opposites on a spectrum of opinions about Buddhism and psychedelics.

54. For a critical review, see Geoffrey Redmond, "Are Psychedelics the True Dharma? A Review Essay of *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 11 (2004): 78–97. A medical doctor who has never tried psychedelics, Redmond asserts that "even if we allow that many were helped along by drugs, many, perhaps far more, were harmed either biological or legally." For my detailed analysis of Redmond's review article, see chapter 7.
55. Erik Davis, "The Paisley Gate," in *Zig Zag Zen*, ed. Badiner and Grey, 151–63.
56. *Ibid.*, 157.
57. In ancient India, "left-handed" Tantra was so-called because it used ritual substances that were considered highly polluting from a Brahmanical point of view, such as the traditional list of five Ms: 1. wine (*madya*), 2. fish (*matsya*), 3. meat (*māṃsa*), 4. parched grain (*mudrā*), and 5. sexual union (*maithuna*).
58. Davis, "The Paisley Gate," in *Zig Zag Zen*, ed. Badiner and Grey, 157–58.
59. *Ibid.*, 158.
60. *Ibid.*
61. Douglas Osto, "Proto-Tantric" Elements in The *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*," *Journal of Religious History* 33, no. 2 (2009): 165–77.
62. Paul Williams and Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2000), 225.
63. *Ibid.*, 168.
64. Alex Grey, "Vajravisian," in *Zig Zag Zen*, ed. Badiner and Grey, 101–102.
65. Davis, "The Paisley Gate," in *Zig Zag Zen*, ed. Badiner and Grey, 163.
66. *Ibid.*
67. A question thus far not answered is: How "Buddhist" does one have to be to be considered a "Buddhist"? Given the vast diversity in beliefs, practices, rituals, cultures, histories, and narratives, determining religious identity is always difficult in the study of religions. So as not to prioritize or essentialize any particular definition of Buddhism, I have chosen to consider as Buddhist anyone who self-identifies as a Buddhist. This doubtlessly solves certain problems and creates others. On the far right of the imagined spectrum are people who are committed to psychedelic exploration, know a lot about Buddhism, and perhaps even practice Buddhist meditation, but may not currently self-identify as Buddhists, such as Rick Strassman, Erik Davis, and Charles Tart. However, given their experience in both areas, these individuals do have important things to say on the topic of Buddhism and psychedelics. To avoid mislabeling and pigeonholing individuals, I make it clear as needed that while certain individuals might be interested in Buddhism and even practice Buddhist meditation, they do not self-identify as Buddhist.
68. For some recent studies, see my introduction, note 5.
69. For an excellent study of ayahuasca shamanism, see Stephan V. Beyer, *Singing to the Plants: A Guide to Mestizo Shamanism in the Upper Amazon*

- (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010). For a brief account of Santo Daime and UDV churches, see Nicholas Saunders, Anja Saunders, and Michelle Pauli, *In Search of the Ultimate High: Spiritual Experience Through Psychoactives* (London: Rider, 2000), 50–68.
70. The creation of these new compounds is largely due to the experimentation of Alexander Shulgin, a genius chemist and one of the most important figures among the psychedelic intelligentsia. Shulgin and his wife, Ann Shulgin, have written two books about their personal experiences with these compounds, which include the chemical formulas and methods for synthesizing these drugs in the laboratory. See Alexander Shulgin and Ann Shulgin, *Pihkal: A Chemical Love Story* (Berkeley, CA: Transform Press, 1991); and *Tihkal: The Continuation* (Berkeley, CA: Transform Press, 1997).
  71. For a recent study, see Lee Gilmore, *Theater in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). Unfortunately, Gilmore consciously chooses to ignore the centrality of psychoactive substance use at Burning Man. For a critique of her book, see my review of Lee Gilmore, *Theater in a Crowded Fire*, in *Religion* 41, no. 3 (November 2011): 499–503.
  72. See for example, “Society for Shamanic Practitioners,” accessed February 5, 2013, <http://www.shamansociety.org>.
  73. For an excellent overview of peyote’s religious use, ceremonies, pharmacology, and botany, see Edward F. Anderson, *Peyote: The Divine Cactus* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980). For a detailed history of peyotism and the Native American Church, see Omer C. Stewart, *Peyote Religion: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

## 2. THE PSYCHEDELIC REVOLUTION

1. Rick Fields, “A High History of Buddhism,” *Tricycle* 6, no. 1 (fall 1996): 45–59.
2. Rick Fields, “A High History of Buddhism,” in *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), 33–49.
3. *Ibid.*, 33.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams, The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 46–49.
7. Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1970 [1945]).
8. Fields, “A High History of Buddhism,” in *Zig Zag Zen*, 35.
9. Huxley titled this essay after a line in William Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to

man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern." See William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Deluxe Edition, ed. Michael Phillips (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2011 [1790–93]), xxii. The idea that psychedelics somehow “open a door” in one’s mind/psyche/perception appears as a recurring trope in psychedelic literature and also in the interviews conducted for this study. It may have its cultural origins in Huxley’s essay, but could also represent a metaphor found cross-culturally for a common experience in altered states. For more on this, see chapter 5.

10. Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1963 [1956]), 18–19.
11. It is tempting to assume that Huxley is employing poetic hyperbole here, although he does not indicate such use of poetic license. Nevertheless, it would be difficult for anyone with even rudimentary knowledge of Advaita Vedānta or Mahāyāna Buddhism to accept this claim at face value. For example, *sat-cit-ānanda* (being-consciousness-bliss) is the complete nondual nature of *Brahman*, or ultimate reality. In such a state, there could be no apprehension of any object of consciousness, or even the awareness of possessing a separate identity. In other words, there would be no flowers to perceive and no Huxley to perceive them.
12. Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 22–23.
13. Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, xxii. The title of Huxley’s essay in turn became the inspiration for the name of the 1960s band The Doors.
14. *Ibid.*, 74, 77–78.
15. *Ibid.*, 78.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. James Fadiman, *The Psychedelic Explorer’s Guide: Safe, Therapeutic, and Sacred Journeys* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2011), 49.
19. The most sustained attack on Huxley’s views of mescaline and his perennial philosophy can be found in R. C. Zaehner’s *Mysticism Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry Into Some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961). As a devout Catholic, Zaehner places what he sees as a theistic mysticism above other types of mysticism, such as nature mysticism and monistic mysticism. Unlike many critics of psychedelics, Zaehner actually tried mescaline (for his account, see *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane*, 212–26), but felt that it was not even able to reproduce the “natural mystical experience” he describes in his book. Instead, he found himself plunged into a “universe of farce,” which he felt was completely different from any kind of mysticism. Zaehner’s final assessment of psychedelic spirituality is moral condemnation: “the more the [mescaline] experience fades into the past, the clearer does it seem to me that, in principle, artificial interference with consciousness is, except for valid medical reasons, wrong” (*ibid.*, 226; my brackets). See chapter 7 for more on Zaehner’s views.

20. Fadiman, *The Psychedelic Explorer's Guide*, 46, 49–51.
21. Christopher Partridge, *Re-Enchantment of the West, Volume II: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture* (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), 93. Here Partridge cites Peter Haining, “The Psychedelic Generation: A Retrospective Introduction,” in *The Walls of Illusion: A Psychedelic Retro*, ed. Peter Haining (London: Souvenir Press, 1998), 8.
22. See J. Christopher Brown, “R. Gordon Wasson: Brief Biography and Personal Appreciation,” in Thomas J. Riedlinger, ed., *Sacred Mushroom Seeker: Essays for R. Gordon Wasson* (Portland: Dioscorides Press, 1990), 20. For an account of Valentina’s experience on mushrooms, see Valentina Pavlovna, “I Ate the Sacred Mushrooms,” in Cynthia Palmer and Michael Horowitz, eds., *Sisters of the Extreme: Women Writing on the Drug Experience: Charlotte Brontë, Louisa May Alcott, Anaïs Nin, Maya Angelou, Billie Holiday, Nina Hagen, Diane di Prima, Carrie Fisher, and Many Others* (South Paris, ME: Park Street Press, 2000). See also the account of Masha Wasson Britten (Gordon and Valentina’s daughter) immediately following in the same volume. Fields mistakes the date of the Wassons’ sacred mushroom ritual. He writes, “in July 1953, the ex-banker ethnomycologist Gordon Wasson and his wife, Valentina, had reached the Mazatec village of Huautla de Jiménez, where they discovered the magic psilocybin mushrooms . . . and managed to take part in an all-night *velada*.” See Fields, “A High History of Buddhism,” in *Zig Zag Zen*, 35–36.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Valentina Pavlovna Wasson and R. Gordon Wasson, *Mushrooms, Russia, and History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957).
25. R. Gordon Wasson, “Seeking the Magic Mushroom,” *Life* (May 13, 1957): 100–20. Lattin mistakenly cites this as the June 10, 1957, issue. See Don Lattin, *The Harvard Psychedelic Club: How Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, and Andrew Weil Killed the Fifties and Ushered in a New Age for America* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 38.
26. For an account of Leary’s first experience, see *ibid.*, 37–41.
27. *Ibid.*, 41.
28. See Lattin’s account in *The Harvard Psychedelic Club* of Weil’s use of the undergraduate magazine the *Harvard Crimson* to expose Leary and Alpert, which led to their dismissal from Harvard in 1963.
29. According to Lattin (*The Harvard Psychedelic Club*, 82), he borrowed the idea of Leary as trickster from Ralph Metzner. Others have been less generous in their assessment. For example, Daniel Pinchbeck refers to Leary’s approach as “The Pathetic Clown Act” in *Breaking Open the Head: A Psychedelic Journey Into the Heart of Contemporary Shamanism* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 181–88.
30. Lattin, *The Harvard Psychedelic Club*, 46.
31. Fields, “A High History of Buddhism,” in *Zig Zag Zen*, 36.

32. Pahnke wrote up his results in his dissertation, "Drugs and Mysticism: An Analysis of the Relationship Between Psychedelic Drugs and the Mystical Consciousness" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1963). He also published a summary in Walter N. Pahnke, "Drugs and Mysticism," *The International Journal of Parapsychology* 8, no. 2 (spring 1966): 295–313. Lattin provides a good overview and discussion of the Good Friday Experiment in *The Harvard Psychedelic Club*, 73–84. For Huston Smith's recollections, see Huston Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals* (Boulder: Sentient Publications, 2003 [2000]), 99–105.
33. Lattin, *The Harvard Psychedelic Club*, 75.
34. See Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception*, 100–101.
35. *Ibid.*, 107.
36. Pahnke, "Drugs and Mysticism."
37. *Ibid.*
38. See Rick Doblin, "Pahnke's 'Good Friday Experiment': A Long-term Follow-up and Methodological Critique," *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 23, no. 1 (1991): 1–28.
39. Pahnke's greatest omission that he did "not report anywhere is that one subject was actually given a shot of thorazine as a tranquilizer during the course of the experiment" (see Doblin, "Pahnke's 'Good Friday Experiment,'" 22).
40. For two recent accounts of their exploits, see Lattin, *The Harvard Psychedelic Club*, and Ram Dass and Ralph Metzner with Gary Bravo, *Birth of a Psychedelic Culture: Conversations About Leary, the Harvard Experiments, Millbrook, and the Sixties* (Santa Fe: Synergetic Press, 2010).
41. See Alan Watts, *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness* (New York: Vintage, 1965 [1962]). See also Fields, "A High History of Buddhism," in *Zig Zag Zen*, 41–42.
42. Watts, *The Joyous Cosmology*, 1. This claim that psychedelic experience transcends language is repeated numerous times by Leary and Alpert in the foreword.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*, 2.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*, 3.
48. *Ibid.*, 5.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*, 7.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, 8.
53. *Ibid.*, 7.
54. *Ibid.*, 10.



55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 13.
58. Ibid., 31.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., 32. Also in his epilogue, Watts mentions the need for times of completely spontaneous movement and play, and a breaking down of the overly rigid dichotomy between formal friendship and genital sexuality to allow for a new erotic intimacy among members of organic social groups. In this way, Watts appears to conceptualize psychedelics as a catalyst for reconnecting with the social group reminiscent of the early Christian “love feasts” (*agapes*) and anticipating the rave culture’s use of ecstasy (MDMA) at electronic dance-party venues.
61. Ibid., 34.
62. David L. Smith, “The Authenticity of Alan Watts,” in *American Buddhism As a Way of Life*, ed. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 31–32.
63. Lattin, *The Harvard Psychedelic Club*, 46–47.
64. Ibid., 47.
65. Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 56–58.
66. Donald S. Lopez Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 47–71.
67. Ibid., 72.
68. Daniel Pinchbeck, “Introduction (2007),” in Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New York: Citadel Press, 2007 [1964]), xiii.
69. Leary, Metzner, and Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience*, 5.
70. Ibid., 27.
71. Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, 76.
72. Leary, Metzner, and Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience*, 19–20.
73. Pinchbeck, “Introduction (2007),” xii.
74. Ibid., xiii.
75. Compare W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead, or The After-Death Experiences on the Bardo Plane, according to Lāma Kazi Dawa-Samdup’s English Rendering* (London: Oxford, 1960 [1927]), 86n2, to the extended quote of this note by Leary, Metzner, and Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience*, 6. How these scholars were in good conscience able to alter Evans-Wentz’s words to such an extent without mentioning it is beyond this reader. Perhaps they felt their greater esoteric insight into the true meaning of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* allowed them to disregard standard citation procedures and take liberties with Evans-Wentz’s original words.
76. Fields, “A High History of Buddhism,” in *Zig Zag Zen*, 38.
77. Leary, Metzner, and Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience*, 3.

78. See Dass, Metzner, and Bravo, *Birth of a Psychedelic Culture*, 107ff.
79. *Ibid.*, 107.
80. See Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, 113–18.
81. Joanna Harcourt-Smith, *Tripping the Bardo with Timothy Leary: My Psychedelic Love Story* (North Charlestown, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013).
82. Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Picador, 1968).
83. Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: Viking, 1962).
84. Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* (New York: Viking, 1964).
85. Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 40. See also Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, 119ff; and George Walker, “Bus Story #1: Definitely the Bus,” in *Spit in the Ocean, no. 7: All About Ken Kesey*, ed. Ed McClanahan (New York: Penguin), 44.
86. Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 104–107. See also Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 235–36. For the other side of the story from the Millbrook residents’ point of view, see Dass, Metzner, and Bravo, *Birth of Psychedelic Culture*, 132–38.
87. Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 126–27. Emphasis in original.
88. See Stevens, *Storming Heaven*, 309–19.
89. See Nicholas Schou, *Orange Sunshine: The Brotherhood of Eternal Love and Its Quest to Spread Peace, Love, and Acid to the World* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2010).
90. Schou, *Orange Sunshine*.
91. For example, in an interview with Lynn (a 57-year-old white female), she told me, “Well, the best description I ever read about it is that the atomic weapons that were invented in our time caused great negativity to be introduced into the world, and that LSD was the antidote.”
92. Fields, “A High History of Buddhism,” in *Zig Zag Zen*, 37.
93. Ram Dass, *Be Here Now* (San Cristobal, NM: Lama Foundation, 1971). He begins this book with an account of his trip to India and transformation from Richard Alpert into Baba Ram Dass.
94. For the role of the *Oracle* in the counterculture of San Francisco, see Nadya Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope: Musical and Cultural Perspectives on Late Sixties San Francisco* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).
95. Fields, “A High History of Buddhism,” in *Zig Zag Zen*, 37.
96. For a sympathetic firsthand account of life in the Haight during this time, see Helen Perry, *The Human Be-In* (London: Allen Lane / The Penguin Press, 1970).
97. For more on the Human Be-In, see Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope*, 7–10.
98. *Ibid.*, 7.
99. For an account with particular reference to the political aspects, see Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, rev. ed. (London: Bantam 1993), 210–14.

100. See Perry, *The Human Be-In*.
101. On political activism, see Gitlin, *The Sixties*.
102. In viewing the Manson murders as a symbolic ending of the psychedelic revolution, I am in agreement with Christian Elcock's view put forth in "American Shamanism: From LSD to Entheogens," M.A. thesis, Université Lumière-Lyon2, 2010, 13; and Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope*. A number of authors have also pointed out the deaths during the Rolling Stones concert at the Altamont Festival as another significant event in the demise of sixties' counterculture idealism. See Partridge, *Re-Enchantment of the West*, vol. 2; Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope*; and William L. O'Neill, *Dawning of the Counter-culture: The 1960s* (Now and Then Reader, 2011).
103. For recent bibliography, see Andrew J. Atchison and Kathleen M. Heide, "Charles Manson and the Family: The Application of Sociological Theories to Multiple Murder," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 55, no. 5 (June 2011): 771–98.
104. Paul Roland, *In the Minds of Murderers: The Inside Story of Criminal Profiling* (Elsternwick, Melbourne: Ice Water Press, 2011 [2009]), 99.
105. Atchison and Heide, "Charles Manson and the Family," 777.
106. See Vincent Bugliosi with Curtis Gentry, *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders with a New Afterword by Vincent Bugliosi* (London: Norton, 1994).
107. Atchison and Heide, "Charles Manson and the Family," 772. For a discussion of this topic and a different opinion, see Bugliosi, *Helter Skelter*, 638–40.
108. Bugliosi, *Helter Skelter*, 638.
109. *Ibid.*, 637.
110. G. Geis and T. L. Huston, "Charles Manson and His Girls: Notes on a Durkheimian Theme," *Criminology* 9 (1971–1972): 342–53, as cited in Atchison and Heide, "Charles Manson and the Family," 774.
111. *Ibid.*
112. Elcock, "American Shamanism," 13.
113. Dass, Metzner, and Bravo, *Birth of a Psychedelic Culture*, 214.
114. Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 178–79.
115. "II. America's Drug Abuse Profile," National Criminal Justice Reference Service, accessed April 17, 2013, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/htm/chapter2.htm>.
116. Fadiman, *The Psychedelic Explorer's Guide*, 52.
117. "Alexander Shulgin," Wikipedia, last modified April 3, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander\\_Shulgin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Shulgin).
118. Fadiman, *The Psychedelic Explorer's Guide*, 52–53.
119. "MDMA Timeline," Erowid, last modified April 11, 2010, [http://www.erowid.org/chemicals/mdma/mdma\\_timeline.php](http://www.erowid.org/chemicals/mdma/mdma_timeline.php).
120. Alexander Shulgin and Ann Shulgin, *Pihkal: A Chemical Love Story* (Berkeley, CA: Transform Press, 199), 69.

121. These qualities of MDMA and other similar compounds led Ralph Metzner in 1983 to call them “empathogens,” rather than hallucinogens. See “Definitions of Empathogen,” Definitions.net, accessed April 10, 2013, <http://www.definitions.net/definition/EMPATHOGEN>.
122. Ibid., 73. In this account, Shulgin refers to Zeff as “Adam.” See also Myron Stolaroff, *The Secret Chief Revealed* (Sarasota: Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, 2004); accessed online from MAPS (Multidisciplinary Association of Psychedelic Research), April 17, 2013, <http://www.maps.org/books/scr/noframes.html>.
123. Shulgin and Shulgin, *Pihkal*, 74.
124. See Des Tramacchi, “Entheogenic Dance Ecstasies: Cross-Cultural Contexts,” in *Rave Culture and Religion*, ed. Graham St John (London: Routledge, 2004), 125–44.
125. See St John, *Rave Culture and Religion*; and Nicholas Saunders, Anja Saunders, and Michelle Pauli, *In Search of the Ultimate High: Spiritual Experience Through Psychoactives* (London: Rider, 2000), 166–89.
126. Aline M. Lucas, “Entheology,” *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 27, no. 3 (1995): 293–95. Lucas writes, “The term ‘entheology’ was coined by a group of religious thinkers at Harvard Divinity School last year, in the course of an informal discussion that the present author attended” (ibid.). See also Aline M. Lucas, “What Is Entheology,” in *Psychoactive Sacramentals: Essays on Entheogens and Religion*, ed. Thomas B Roberts (Council on Spiritual Practices), 2001; reprinted in Thomas B. Roberts, ed., *Spiritual Growth with Entheogens: Psychoactive Sacramentals and Human Transformation* (South Paris, ME: Park Street Press, 2012). For a response to Lucas’s article in *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, see Marlene Dobkin de Rios, “A Response to Lucas’s ‘Entheology,’” *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 27, no. 3 (1995): 297.
127. Carl Ruck, Jeremy Bigwood, Danny Staples, Jonathan Ott, and Gordon Watson, “Entheogens,” *Journal of Psychedelic Drugs* 11, no. 1–2 (January–June 1979): 145–46.
128. For more about this term, see “On Nomenclature,” Council on Spiritual Practices, accessed April 11, 2013, <http://csp.org/practices/entheogens/docs/nomenclature.html>.
129. See Elcock, *American Shamanism*, 105; and “Terminology,” Erowid, last modified April 29, 2009, [http://www.erowid.org/psychoactives/psychoactives\\_def.shtml](http://www.erowid.org/psychoactives/psychoactives_def.shtml).
130. Lucas, “Entheology.” See also the follow-up article by Jonathan Ott, “Entheogens II: On Entheology and Entheobotany,” *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 28, no. 2 (1996): 205–209, DOI: 10.1080/02791072.1996.10524393.
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132. Mary Bellis, “Prozac: The Making of a Miracle Cure?—The History of Prozac,” About.com Inventors, accessed June 29, 2014, <http://inventors.about.com/library/weekly/aa980225.htm>.

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136. For a recent study of ritual and spirituality at Burning Man, see Lee Gilmore, *Theater in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
137. See Gilmore, *Theater in a Crowded Fire*, and the review of the book by Douglas Osto in *Religion* 41, no. 3 (November 2011).
138. As cited in Osto's review of Gilmore in *Religion* 41, no. 3 (November 2011).
139. For an illuminating first-person account of Burning Man and psychedelic use, see James Oroc, *The Tryptamine Palace: 5-MeO-DMT and the Sonoran Desert Toad* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2009), esp. chapter 8, "Burning Man."
140. Anthony D'Andrea, "Global Nomads in Ibiza and Goa," in *Rave Culture and Religion*, ed. St John, 247. Italics in original.
141. See Gilmore, *Theater in a Crowded Fire*, 21–22; Saunders, Saunders, and Pauli, *In Search of the Ultimate High*, 178; D'Andrea, "Global Nomads in Ibiza and Goa," 247.
142. For brief descriptions of these churches, see Saunders, Saunders, and Pauli, *In Search of the Ultimate High*, 51–76.
143. For a recent detailed study, see Stephan Beyer, *Singing to the Plants: A Guide to Mestizo Shamanism in the Upper Amazon* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010).
144. Saunders, Saunders, and Pauli, *In Search of the Ultimate High*, 110–45.
145. For a detailed study of neoshamanism in relation to healing and re-enchancement, see Shelly Beth Braun, "Neo-shamanism as a Healing System: Enchanted Healing in a Modern World" (Ph.D. diss., University of Utah, 2010). See also Brian Morris, *Religion and Anthropology: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 34–37.
146. See Kocku von Stuckrad, "Reenchanting Nature: Modern Western Shamanism and Nineteenth-Century Thought," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70, no. 4 (December 2002): 771–99. See also the website of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, accessed April 16, 2013, <http://www.shamanism.org/index.php>.

147. For examples, see R. Stuart, "Ayahuasca Tourism: A Cautionary Tale," *MAPS* 12, no. 2 (summer 2002): 36–38, accessed April 16, 2013, <http://www.maps.org/news-letters/v12n2/12236stu.pdf>; and Kelly Hearn, "The Dark Side of Ayahuasca," *Men's Journal* (March 2013), accessed April 16, 2013, <http://www.mensjournal.com/magazine/the-dark-side-of-ayahuasca-20130215>.
148. See "Board of Directors," Society for Shamanic Practitioners, accessed April 16, 2013, <http://www.shamansociety.org/directors.html>.
149. See "About the Society," Society for Shamanic Practitioners, accessed April 16, 2013, <http://www.shamansociety.org/about.html>.
150. For neoshamanism's connection to deep ecology, see von Stuckrad, "Re-enchanting Nature: Modern Western Shamanism and Nineteenth-Century Thought," 782–784.
151. D'Andrea, "Global Nomads in Ibiza and Goa," 248.
152. *Ibid.*, 247.
153. Elcock, "American Shamanism," 107–109.
154. Needless to say, this rebranding has legal implications, for as sacred substances, entheogens and their use (it is argued) should be protected by the constitutional freedom to practice religion.
155. See, for example, the website "Erowid: Documenting the Complex Relationship Between Humans & Psychoactives," accessed April 16, 2013, <http://www.erowid.org/>.

### 3. THE BUDDHIST REVOLUTION

1. See, for examples, Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America, Third Edition Revised and Updated* (Boston: Shambhala, 1992); Duncan Ryūken Williams and Christopher S. Queen, eds., *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999); Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds., *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Charles Prebish, *Buddhism: The American Experience* (Journal of Buddhist Ethics Online Books, 2003); Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); and James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). For more general studies on modern, Western Buddhism, see Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West, The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture: 543 BCE–1992* (London: Aquarian, 1994); and David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
2. Erik Davis, "The Paisley Gate," in *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), 151–63. For more on this idea of psychedelic Buddhism as a type of Tantra, see Conclusions.

3. The life and influence of D. T. Suzuki on Americans' perceptions of Buddhism have been the subjects of numerous studies. For some recent examples, see Jane Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 23–62; Carl T. Jackson, "D. T. Suzuki, 'Suzuki Zen,' and the American Reception of Zen Buddhism," in *American Buddhism as a Way of Life*, ed. Gary Storhoff and John Whalen-Bridge (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 39–56; and Judith Snodgrass, "Publishing Eastern Buddhism: D. T. Suzuki's Journey to the West," in *Casting Faiths: Imperialism and the Transformation of Religion in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Thomas David DuBois (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 46–72.
4. Jackson, "D. T. Suzuki," 40.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Jackson, "D. T. Suzuki," 42 and 44.
8. Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 25.
9. Jackson, "D. T. Suzuki," 46.
10. Ibid., 47.
11. Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 61.
12. Ibid.
13. For an illuminating discussion of Suzuki's particular understanding of Zen and a response to some of the more recent detractors, see Jackson, "D. T. Suzuki," 47–53.
14. Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 61.
15. For studies on the Beats' interest in Buddhism, see Carole Tonkinson, ed., *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995); Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 195–224; and Michael K. Masatsugu, "'Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence': Japanese Americans, Dharma Bums, and the Making of American Buddhism During the Early Cold War Years," *Pacific Historical Review* 77, no. 3 (August 2008): 423–51.
16. Masatsugu, "Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence," 441.
17. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 213.
18. Ibid.
19. Tonkinson, *Big Sky Mind*, 172.
20. Ibid., 90.
21. See Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 310; Tonkinson, *Big Sky Mind*, 91.
22. Ibid., 187.
23. Ibid., 188–90.
24. See Masatsugu, "Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence," 437; Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 215.
25. Masatsugu, "Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence," 437.
26. Ibid.

27. Reprinted as Alan Watts, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen," *Chicago Review* 42, no. 3-4 (1996): 49-56.
28. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 221.
29. Esalen Institute was founded in 1962 by Michael Murphy and Dick Price. As an alternative and experiential education center, Esalen is thought to be the birthplace and Mecca of "the human potential movement." Throughout the decades it has hosted lectures, workshops, and retreats on such diverse topics as world religions, the occult, Zen, yoga, mysticism, tantric sex, psychedelics, psychic phenomena, and science. For some recent studies, see Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Walter Anderson, *The Upstart Spring, Esalen and the Human Potential Movement: The First Twenty Years* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2004); and Marion Goldman, *The American Soul Rush: Esalen and the Rise of Spiritual Privilege* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).
30. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 239.
31. Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 93.
32. R. H. Blyth, *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics* (N.p.: The Hoku-seido Press, 1942).
33. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 201.
34. See Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 202-3; Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 94.
35. Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 90-91.
36. *Ibid.*, 91.
37. G. Victor Sōgen Hori, "Japanese Zen in America," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 52.
38. Both would be accused of sexual misconduct several decades later. See below.
39. Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 95.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. See Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 67; Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 96.
43. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 226.
44. Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 98.
45. *Ibid.*, 97.
46. As cited in Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 98.
47. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 230.
48. See Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 70-71.
49. See, "About Tassajara: History," San Francisco Zen Center, accessed July 26, 2013, <http://www.sfzc.org/tassajara/display.asp?catid=4,35&pageid=2604>.
50. "San Francisco Zen Center: City Center," San Francisco Zen Center, accessed July 27, 2013, <http://www.sfzc.org/cc/default.asp>.



51. Shinryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, ed. Trudy Dixon and Richard Baker (New York: Weatherhill, 1970).
52. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 230.
53. Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 100.
54. "The Venerable Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi Roshi, Founder of White Plum Asanga," White Plum Asanga, accessed June 27, 2013, [http://www.whiteplum.org/maezumi\\_roshi.htm](http://www.whiteplum.org/maezumi_roshi.htm).
55. Ibid.
56. See Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 101. Seager refers to the organization as the "White Plum Sangha." See also the White Plum Asanga's official website, accessed July 27, 2013, <http://www.whiteplum.org/index.html>.
57. White Plum Asanga, "The Venerable Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi Roshi, Founder of White Plum Asanga," accessed June 27, 2013, [http://www.whiteplum.org/maezumi\\_roshi.htm](http://www.whiteplum.org/maezumi_roshi.htm).
58. See "About Shasta Abbey," Shasta Abbey Buddhist Monastery, accessed April 5, 2015, <http://www.shastaabbey.org/about.html>.
59. See Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 68–69.
60. Fields, "A High History of Buddhism," in *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), 40.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 41.
64. Ibid., 43.
65. Ibid.
66. As cited in Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 295.
67. Ibid.
68. Amy Levine, "Tibetan Buddhism in America: The Development of American Vajrayāna," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 99–115.
69. Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 113.
70. The following outline of early Tibetan Buddhist teachers in the United States is based on Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 304–38; Levine, "Tibetan Buddhism in America"; and Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 72–77.
71. See "A Complete History of TBLC," Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center, accessed July 4, 2013, <http://www.labsum.org/history.html>.
72. Levine, "Buddhism in America," 102.
73. "About The Nyingma Institute," Tibetan Nyingma Institute, accessed July 4, 2013, <http://www.nyingmainstitute.com/page/about-nyingma-institute>.
74. "Our History: Fulfilling a Vision," Dharma Publishing, accessed July 7, 2013, <http://dharmapublishing.com/about/our-history/>.
75. Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 74.

76. Chögyam Trungpa, *Born in Tibet* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966).
77. Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 74.
78. Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 250.
79. Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 74.
80. Fields, "A High History of Buddhism in America," 44.
81. *Ibid.*, 45.
82. *Ibid.*
83. Sylvia Boorstein and Ruth Denison are also well-known figures in the Insight Meditation movement in the United States. See Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 249–50, 251–52.
84. See Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 78; Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 318.
85. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 318.
86. Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 80.
87. Jack Kornfield, *Bringing Home the Dharma: Awakening Right Where You Are* (Boston: Shambhala, 2011), 235–44.
88. Rita M. Gross, "Helping the Iron Bird Fly: Western Buddhist Women and Issues of Authority in the Late 1990s," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 238–52.
89. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 362–63.
90. See Dale Wright, "Humanizing the Image of a Zen Master: Taizan Maezumi Roshi," in *Zen Masters*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 239–66; and Kristen Mitsuyo Maezumi, "A Letter From Kristen Mitsuyo Maezumi," accessed July 10, 2013, <http://sweepingzen.com/a-letter-from-kirsten-mitsuyo-maezumi/>.
91. See Mark Oppenheimer, "Sex Scandal Has U.S. Buddhists Looking With-in," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2010, accessed April 9, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/21/us/21beliefs.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/21/us/21beliefs.html?_r=0); Vladimir K. and Stuart Lachs, "The Aitken-Shimano Letters," accessed July 10, 2013, [http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Aitken\\_Shimano\\_Letters.html#\\_edn3](http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Aitken_Shimano_Letters.html#_edn3); and Christopher Hamacher, "Zen Has No Morals!—The Latent Potential for Corruption and Abuse in Zen Buddhism, as Exemplified by Two Recent Cases," paper presented on July 7, 2012, at the International Cultic Studies Association's annual conference in Montreal, Canada, accessed July 10, 2013, [http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Zen\\_Has\\_No\\_Morals.pdf](http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Zen_Has_No_Morals.pdf).
92. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 365.
93. See "Teachers," Shambhala, accessed April 9, 2015, <http://shambhala.org/teachers/>. See also Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 366. Fields, however, records the death of Tendzin as August 25, 1991 (not 1990).
94. Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 257.
95. *Ibid.*
96. *Ibid.*, 103.

97. "Teachers in the Mountains and Rivers Order," Zen Mountain Monastery, accessed July 10, 2013, <http://zmm.mro.org/about/teachers-at-zen-mountain-monastery/>.
98. As cited in Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 373.
99. For examples, see Leonore Friedman, *Meetings with Remarkable Women*, rev. ed. (Boston: Shambhala, 2000).
100. See Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
101. For recent studies on engaged Buddhism, see Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 201–15; and Donald Rothberg, "Responding to the Cries of the World: Socially Engaged Buddhism in North America," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 266–86.
102. For some recent studies on Buddhism and ecology, see Allan Hunt Badiner, ed., *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1990); Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams, eds., *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Daniel H. Henning, *Buddhism and Deep Ecology* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2002); and Thich Nhat Hanh, *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2008).
103. For some recent studies, see Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 185–200; Coleman, *The New Buddhism*, 139–84, and Gross, "Helping the Iron Bird Fly," 238–52.
104. See Roger Coreless, "Coming Out in the Sangha: Queer Community in American Buddhism," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 253–64.
105. Wilson, *Mindful America*, 38–39.
106. Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 252.
107. Upaya Zen Institute and Zen Center, "About Us," accessed July 11, 2013, <http://www.upaya.org/about/index.php>.
108. Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 133.
109. Lama Surya Das, "Bio," accessed July 15, 2013, <http://www.surya.org/bio/>.
110. Lama Surya Das, "The Zen Commandments," in *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), 179–88.
111. "Brief Background of the Shamarpa Lineage," Bodhi Path Buddhist Centers, accessed July 15, 2013, [http://www.bodhipath.org/shamarpa\\_lineage/](http://www.bodhipath.org/shamarpa_lineage/).
112. "Natural Bridge, Virginia," Bodhi Path Buddhist Centers, accessed July 15, 2013, <http://www.bodhipath.org/naturalbridge/>.
113. These biographical details were obtained at "Tsony," Bodhi Path Buddhist Centers, accessed July 15, 2013, <http://www.bodhipath.org/tsony/>.

## 4. OPENING THE DOOR

1. Erik Davis, "The Paisley Gate," in *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), 162–63.
2. Names are made up unless the respondent stated that their real name could be used. The number assigned indicates the chronological order in which the respondent answered the survey.
3. For more on Ryan, see below; and for my interview with him, see chapter 6.
4. For more on Gary, see chapter 6.
5. Stone is Canadian; however, since he often teaches in the United States, I have included him in this study.
6. "About Michael," Centre of Gravity, accessed April 10, 2014, [http://www.centreofgravity.org/michael\\_stone/](http://www.centreofgravity.org/michael_stone/).
7. "Michael Stone Books," Centre of Gravity, accessed April 10, 2010, <http://www.centreofgravity.org/books/>.
8. "Rick Strassman MD," accessed July 3, 2014, <http://www.rickstrassman.com/>.
9. Rick Strassman, Slawek Wojtowicz, Luis Eduardo Luna, and Ede Freeska, *Inner Paths to Outer Space: Journeys to Alien Worlds Through Psychedelics and Other Spiritual Technologies* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2008).
10. "Rick Strassman MD."
11. Rick Strassman, "Sitting for Sessions: Dharma and DMT Research," *Tricycle* 6, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 81–88.
12. Rick Strassman, "DMT Dharma," in *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), 105–12.
13. Strassman, "Sitting for Sessions: Dharma & DMT Research," 88; Strassman, "DMT Dharma," 112.
14. However, Strassman and a team at the Cottonwood Research foundation have recently discovered DMT in the pineal gland of rats. See Steven A. Barker, Jimo Borjigin, Izabela Lomnicka, and Rick Strassman, "LC/MS/MS Analysis of the Endogenous Dimethyltryptamine Hallucinogens, Their Precursors, and Major Metabolites in Rat Pineal Gland Microdialysate," *Biomedical Chromatography* 27, no. 3 (2013): 1690–1700.
15. "About Sean Murphy," Murphy Zen, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.murphyzen.com/bio.htm>.
16. Ibid.
17. Sean Murphy, *One Bird, One Stone: 108 American Zen Stories* (New York: Renaissance Books, 2002).
18. "About Sean Murphy."
19. In the Zen tradition there is a set of ten oxherd images said to represent the path to enlightenment. Sean's reference to "seeing the ox" is most likely a reference to the third image, called "First Glimpse of the Ox." For

a reproduction by the modern master Gyokusei Jikihara (1904–2005), see Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 313–25; and John M. Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007), 327–31.

20. This is a reference to a saying by the ninth-century Chinese Zen (Ch'an) master 青原惟信 Qingyuan Weixin (Ch'ing-yüan Wei-hsin; Japanese: Seigen Ishin):

Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it's just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters.

For this translation, see Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon, 1957), 126.

21. "CTT Brief Bio," Charles T. Tart Home Page and Blog, accessed July 3, 2014, <http://blog.paradigm-sys.com/brief-bio/>.
22. "Charles T. Tart Home Page and Consciousness Library Online," accessed July 3, 2014, <http://www.paradigm-sys.com/>.
23. "CTT Brief Bio."
24. For more information on Sogyal Rinpoche, see "About Sogyal Rinpoche," Rigpa Foundation, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://www.rigpa.org/about-sogyal-rinpoche.html>. For a detailed analysis of Tart's study of psychedelic experiences among members of the Rigpa Foundation in relation to Tibetan Buddhism, see chapter 7.
25. For more information on Shinzen Young, see "Shinzen Young," accessed July 4, 2014, <http://www.shinzen.org/>.
26. This same view of Strassman and Tart was expressed to me by Liz, a twenty-something participant in my study who is seriously involved in Burning Man, psychedelic use, yoga, and Zen. She wrote to me in an e-mail the following:

i think there are a lot of people in the zen community who kind of look down their nose at psychedelic use like it's cheating, like it's a way to skip straight to enlightenment or something. but i see it as more of a spring-board. it definitely gives you a glimpse, but that's not a permanent mindset. in my experience it just gave me more of a desire to meditate on my own so i'd be able to find that mindset myself.

27. "Teacher," Dragons Leap, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://www.dragonsleap.com/teacher.html>.
28. "Zen Teachers and Practice Teachers at City Center: Shosan Victoria Austin," San Francisco Zen Center, accessed July 5, 2014, <http://www.sfzc.org/zc/display.asp?catid=2,297,298&pageid=177>.

29. See Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1970 [1945]).
30. David Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002). For a popular adaptation of Lewis-Williams' ideas, see Graham Hancock, *Supernatural: Meetings with the Ancient Teachers of Mankind* (London: Century, 2005).
31. For an example induced by psilocybin mushrooms, see Paul Stamets, *Psilocybin Mushrooms of the World: An Identification Guide* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1996), 6.
32. Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave*, 127.
33. For examples, see Terrance McKenna, *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 230–31; and Edward F. Anderson, *Peyote: The Divine Cactus* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980), 81–83, 85.
34. Erika Bourguignon, ed., *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1973), 11.
35. Examples from the ethnographic literature are too numerous to cite. I will include one to illustrate. The use of the psychoactive cactus peyote in Mesoamerica dates back as far as 5000 B.C.E. (Stacy B. Schaefer, "The Crosses of the Souls: Peyote, Perception, and Meaning Among Huichol Indians," in *People of the Peyote: Huichol Indian History, Religion and Survival*, ed. Stacy B. Schaefer and Peter T. Furst [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996], 141). The Huichol Indians of Mexico continue to ingest peyote for religious purposes. The following is a description of the Huichol experience:

Within three hours of ingestion, endlessly repeated geometric patterns such as *mandalas* and latticework designs, as well as imagery of elements such as flowers, animals, people, and scenery, appear in vibrant colors. These are typical designs that arise from the stimulation of the central nervous system discharging neurons into structures of the eye. . . . The luminosity and fluidity of such designs can vary with dosage taken. Huichols consider these designs to be a form of communication with the gods, and individuals actively strive to receive these visions. . . . Huichols have integrated these designs into their cultural worldview and endowed them with special meaning and significance. (Schaefer, "The Crosses of the Souls," 156; my emphasis)

36. For a discussion of some of the early research, see Charles T. Tart, ed., *Altered States of Consciousness: A Book of Readings* (New York: Wiley, 1969), 377–483.
37. See for example R. R. Griffith, W. A. Richards, U. D. McCann, and R. Jesse, "Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Significance," *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 187 (2006): 268–83 (DOI 10.1007/s00213-006-0457-5); and R. R.

Griffith, W. A. Richards, M. W. Johnson, U. D. McCann, and R. Jesse, “Mystical-Type Experiences Occasioned by Psilocybin Mediate the Attribution of Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance 14 Months Later,” *Journal of Psychopharmacology* OnlineFirst (2008): 1–11 (DOI:10.1177/0269881108094300). These researchers from John Hopkins, after administering high doses of psilocybin to thirty-six hallucinogen-naïve volunteers who regularly participate in religious or spiritual activities, conclude that “When administered under supportive conditions, psilocybin occasioned experiences similar to spontaneously occurring mystical experiences” (2006, 268). Their follow-up study fourteen months later concluded that “58% and 67%, respectively, of volunteers rated the psilocybin-occasioned experience as being among the five most personally meaningful and among the five most spiritually significant experiences of their lives” (2008, 1). See chapter 7 for more about these experiments.

38. Rick Strassman, *DMT: The Spirit Molecule, A Doctor's Revolutionary Research Into the Biology of Near-Death and Mystical Experiences* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 200).
39. Many of Strassman's participants in the DMT study, in addition to experiencing the classic entoptic phenomena, claimed to have encountered other intelligent beings, and many were convinced that their experiences of these beings were “real.” DMT is endogenous to numerous plants and animals, including humans. Strassman even speculates that near-death and alien abduction experiences may be triggered in some individuals through the accidental release of excessively high levels of endogenous DMT. See Strassman, *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, 310–28. For more analysis of Strassman's study, see chapter 7.
40. See Douglas Osto, “Altered States and the Origins of the Mahāyāna,” in *Early Mahāyāna*, ed. Paul Harrison (Sheffield, England: Equinox, 2016).
41. I am borrowing this expression from Paul Harrison. See Paul Harrison, “Mediums and Messages: Reflections on the Production of Mahāyāna Sūtras,” *The Eastern Buddhist*, New Series, 35, no. 1–2 (2003): 115–51.

## 5. CLOSING THE DOOR

1. The HOV lane is a “high-occupancy vehicle lane,” also known as the “car-pool lane,” “diamond lane,” or “transit lane.” For the exclusive use of vehicles with a driver and one or more passengers, it is often thought of as “the fast lane,” because the reduced traffic on it allows for more rapid travel. Here Tsony is employing the HOV lane as a metaphor to criticize the idea that someone could use psychedelics to accelerate their progress on the Buddhist path. Some psychedelic spiritualists like Myron Stolaroff maintain such a view. See chapter 7 for a discussion.

2. “Teachers in the Mountains and Rivers Order,” Zen Mountain Monastery, accessed April 10, 2014, <https://zmm.mro.org/about/teachers-at-zen-mountain-monastery/>.
3. Melvin McLeod, ed., *The Best Buddhist Writing 2009* (Boston: Shambhala, 2009).
4. Geoffrey Shugen Arnold, *O, Beautiful End: Memorial Poems* (Mount Tremper: Dharma Communications, 2012).
5. “Teachers in the Mountains and Rivers Order.”

## 6. KEEPING THE DOOR OPEN

1. See figure 4.2.
2. He is first mentioned in chapter 4.
3. See also the quote from Logan above.
4. See quote from the interview with Bart in chapter 4.
5. For a definitive history see Omer C. Stewart, *Peyote Religion: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987); see also Edward F. Anderson, *Peyote: The Divine Cactus* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980).
6. See Anderson, *Peyote*; Stewart, *Peyote Religion*.
7. For a description of *terma*, see Janet Gyatso, “Genre, Authorship, and Transmission in Visionary Buddhism: The Literary Traditions of Thang-stong rGyal-po,” in *Tibetan Buddhism: Reason and Revelation*, ed. Steven D. Good and Ronald M. Davidson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 95–106.
8. For a recent study see Maxwell Irving, *The Ritual of Chöd in Tibetan Religion* (N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2006). Irving (p. 2) describes *gcod* in these words:

*gcod* is a Tibetan form of religious praxis that is more akin to sorcery than orthodox Buddhism. The gist of *gcod* ritual is the administration of a feast composed of the presiding ritualist’s corpse, which is fashioned through a series of tantric and shamanic manipulations to be fit for demonic consumption. This is done in order to convince malevolent beings to desist in harming humans and become perpetrators of *chos* (Skt. *dharma*).

9. Allan Hunt Badiner, ed., *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays on Buddhism and Ecology* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1990).
10. Allan Hunt Badiner, “Sacred Antidotes: An Interview with Terence McKenna,” *Tricycle* 6, no. 1 (fall 1996): 94–97; reprinted as “Buddhism and the Psychedelic Society,” in *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), 189–94.
11. Allan Hunt Badiner, “Yagé and the Yanas,” *Tricycle* 6, no. 1 (fall 1996): 72–77; reprinted in *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), 135–42.



12. For more about Alex Grey, see his website, accessed July 5, 2014, <http://alexgrey.com/>.
13. Since our interview, Allan has taught a course at the California Institute of Integral Studies titled "Buddhism and Psychedelics." For another interview with Allan Badiner, see Danny Fisher, "On the Buddhism Beat—Studying American Buddhism and Psychedelics," posted on September 8, 2010, <http://shambhala-sun.com/sunspace/on-the-buddhism-beat-studying-american-buddhism-and-psychedelics-keep-on-truckin%E2%80%99allan-hunt-badiner/>.
14. See Gerald Moore and Larry Schiller, "A Remarkable Mind Drug Suddenly Spells Danger," *Life* 60, no. 12 (March 25, 1966): 28–33.
15. For a detailed study of 5-MeO-DMT and developed entheology around the substance, see James Oroc, *The Tryptamine Palace: 5-MeO-DMT and the Sonoran Desert Toad* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2009).
16. "Erowid Character Vaults: Salvador Roquet," Erowid, accessed April 5, 2015, [https://www.erowid.org/culture/characters/roquet\\_salvador/roquet\\_salvador.shtml](https://www.erowid.org/culture/characters/roquet_salvador/roquet_salvador.shtml).
17. "About Ken McLeod," Unfettered Mind, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.unfetteredmind.org/ken-mcleod>.
18. "Centre for Sacred Studies: About Us," Center for Sacred Studies, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://centerforsacredstudies.org/about-us/>.

## 7. ARE PSYCHEDELICS "THE TRUE DHARMA"?

1. However, in order to locate my own subjectivity in relation to the topic, I discuss my own views and experiences for the interested reader in some detail in the Postscript.
2. Myron Stolaroff, "Are Psychedelics Useful in the Practice of Buddhism?" *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 39, no. 1 (winter 1999): 60–80.
3. *Ibid.*, 60. See also "Myron Stolaroff," Center for Cognitive Liberty and Ethics, accessed May 8, 2014, [http://www.cognitiveliberty.org/pressroom/myron\\_stolaroff.htm](http://www.cognitiveliberty.org/pressroom/myron_stolaroff.htm).
4. Erowid, "Erowid Character Vaults: Myron Stolaroff," accessed May 8, 2014, [http://www.erowid.org/culture/characters/stolaroff\\_myron/](http://www.erowid.org/culture/characters/stolaroff_myron/).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Stolaroff, "Are Psychedelics Useful in the Practice of Buddhism?" 61.
7. *Ibid.*, 62.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 68.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 69–70.

13. Geoffrey Redmond, "Are Psychedelics the True Dharma? A Review Essay of *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 11 (2004): 94–113.
14. *Ibid.*, 97.
15. *Ibid.*, 100–101. Redmond gives no evidence to support this statement about consensus.
16. *Ibid.*, 100.
17. *Ibid.*, 103.
18. *Ibid.*, 104.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 105.
21. Redmond particularly criticizes Myron Stolaroff's essay in *Zig Zag Zen*. *Ibid.*, 107. See Myron Stolaroff, "Do We Still Need Psychedelics?" in *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), 201–10.
22. Redmond, "Are Psychedelics the True Dharma?" 108.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, 111.
25. Charles Tart, "Influences of Previous Psychedelic Drug Experiences on Students of Tibetan Buddhism: A Preliminary Exploration," *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 23, no. 2 (1991): 139–73.
26. *Ibid.*, 164.
27. *Ibid.*, 139.
28. *Ibid.*, 142.
29. *Ibid.*, 151.
30. *Ibid.*, 152. *Italics in original.*
31. *Ibid.*, 164.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Igor Berkhin and Glenn Hartelius, "Why Altered States Are Not Enough: A Perspective from Buddhism," *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 30, no. 1–2 (2011): 63–68.
34. *Ibid.*, 63.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, 65.
39. *Ibid.*, 66.
40. R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry Into Some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).
41. *Ibid.*, xiii.
42. *Ibid.*, 26–27.
43. *Ibid.*, 27.

44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 226.
46. Huston Smith, “Do Drugs Have Religious Import?” *Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 18 (1964): 517–30.
47. Notice also that Smith assumes it is possible to separate out three different factors involved: the experience, the description, and the interpretation.
48. Huston Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals* (Boulder: Sentient Publications, 2003 [2000]), 101.
49. Robert Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience,” *Numen* 42, no. 3 (1995): 228–83; Robert Sharf, “Experience,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94–116.
50. Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 268.
51. Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
52. Ibid., 43. Proudfoot’s attributive model has gained some traction in the study of religion in recent decades and has been adopted by Ann Taves, who avoids the expression “religious experience” in favor of “experiences deemed religious.” See Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
53. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. J. W. Harvey (New York: Macmillan, 1958).
54. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultural Despisers*, trans. J. Oman (New York: Harper and Row, 1958).
55. G. T. Roche, “Seeing Snakes: On Delusion, Knowledge and the Drug Experience,” in *Cannabis—Philosophy for Everyone: What Were We Just Talking About?*, ed. Dale Jacquette (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 43.
56. Sarah Shortall, “Psychedelic Drugs and the Problem of Experience,” *Past and Present*, Supplement 9 (2014): 200.
57. Ibid.
58. See for example Marc Galanter, *Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion*, 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 60–76.
59. Ibid., 201.
60. Shortall, “Psychedelic Drugs.”
61. Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*.
62. Ibid., 28 ff.
63. Pahnke, “Drugs and Mysticism.”
64. Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 106.
65. For a similar argument, see Roche, “Seeing Snakes,” 44.
66. See “Psilocybin Research,” Council on Spiritual Practices, accessed April 5, 2015, <http://csp.org/psilocybin/>.

67. R. R. Griffith, W. A. Richards, U. D. McCann, and R. Jesse, "Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Significance," *Psychopharmacology* 187 (2006): 268–83 (DOI 10.1007/s00213-006-0457-5).
68. *Ibid.*, 9.
69. *Ibid.*
70. *Ibid.*, 15.
71. R. R. Griffith, M. W. Johnson, W. A. Richards, B. D. Richards, U. D. McCann, and R. Jesse, "Psilocybin-Occasioned Mystical-Type Experiences: Immediate and Persisting Dose-Related Effects," *Psychopharmacology* 218 (2011): 649–65 (DOI 10.1007/s00213-011-2358-5).
72. *Ibid.*, 649.
73. *Ibid.*
74. However, anecdotally, Huston Smith reported in an interview that he knew a few logical positivists who were converted into mystics through their psychedelic experiences. See Huston Smith, Robert Jesse, C. Grob, A. Agar, and R. Walsh, "The Oral History of Psychedelics Research Project II: Do Drugs Have Religious Import? A 40-Year Retrospective," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 44, no. 2 (2004): 135.
75. Rick Strassman, "DMT Dharma," in *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), 110.
76. Rick Strassman, *DMT: The Spirit Molecule, A Doctor's Revolutionary Research Into the Biology of Near-Death and Mystical Experiences* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2001), 276.
77. *Ibid.*, 200–201.
78. *Ibid.*, 311.
79. *Ibid.*, 201. See also our interview in chapter 4.
80. Strassman, *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, 310–28.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. Andrew Weil, *The Natural Mind: A Revolutionary Approach to the Drug Problem*, rev. ed. (Boston: Mariner, 2004).
2. See C. Laughlin, J. McManus, and E. d'Aquili, *Brain, Symbol and Experience: Toward a Neurophenomenology of Human Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), as cited in Charles Whitehead, "Altered Consciousness in Society," in *Altering Consciousness: Multidisciplinary Perspectives, Volume 1: History, Culture, and the Humanities*, ed. Etzel Cardeña and Michael Winkelman (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 181.
3. Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Awakened Ones: Phenomenology of Visionary Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 4.

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 5–6.
6. Ibid., 7, 44.
7. Christopher Partridge, *Re-Enchantment of the West, Volume I: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004); Christopher Partridge, *Re-Enchantment of the West, Volume II: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture* (London: T & T Clark International, 2005).
8. Partridge, *Re-enchantment of the West, Vol. I*, 43.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 87–118.
12. Ibid., 75.
13. Erik Davis, “The Paisley Gate,” in *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), 163.
14. For a recent discussion, see Obeyesekere, *The Awakened Ones*, 27–29.
15. See Florin Deleanu, “A Preliminary Study on Meditation and the Beginnings of Māhāyāna Buddhism,” *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism at Soka University* 3 (1999): 65–113.
16. Thomas Cleary, trans., *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra* (Boston: Shambhala, 1993).
17. As mentioned in chapter 1, Anthony Tribe maintains that the Caryā Tantras, such as the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, “took the luminous, translucent, magical world of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* as the measure for how awakened cognition would perceive the world.” See Paul Williams and Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2002), 25.
18. See David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 119, 286, 412n220; Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 191, 201, 267–68; and David Gray, *Cakrasamvara Tantra: A Study and Annotated Translation* (New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2007), 106. See also RC Parker and Lux, “Psychoactive Plants in Tantric Buddhism: Cannabis and Datura Use in Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism,” *Erowid Extracts* 14 (June 2008): 6–11, [http://www.erowid.org/spirit/traditions/buddhism/buddhism\\_tantra\\_article1.shtml#ref14](http://www.erowid.org/spirit/traditions/buddhism/buddhism_tantra_article1.shtml#ref14) (accessed April 15, 2010).
19. Bruce Kapferer, “Outside All Reason: Magic, Sorcery and Epistemology in Anthropology,” in *Beyond Rationalism: Rethinking Magic, Witchcraft and Sorcery*, ed. Bruce Kapferer (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), 22.
20. In an analogous manner, modern linguists have adopted the Sanskrit word *sandhi* (union)—a technical term used by Sanskrit grammarians for millennia

to represent euphonic combination of sounds in Sanskrit—to represent such euphonic combinations in any language.

21. Roche, “Seeing Snakes: On Delusion, Knowledge and the Drug Experience.” In *Cannabis—Philosophy for Everyone: What Were We Just Talking About?* ed. Dale Jacquette (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 35–49.
22. David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 52–59.
23. Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 166.
24. Ibid.
25. Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
26. Ibid., 192.
27. Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), as cited in Wilson, *Mindful America*, 190.
28. For a recent example of the latter, see James Oroc, *The Tryptamine Palace: 5-MeO-DMT and the Sonoran Desert Toad* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2009).
29. See Jonathan Culler, *Structural Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975); and Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).
30. The theorist John MacInnes, in his study *The End of Masculinity* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998), claims that the relationship between sex and gender is a paradox that cannot be rationally resolved. He states:

But there is something profoundly paradoxical about the historical consciousness of gender. To the extent that we become aware that gender is something that is socially constructed and not naturally ordained, then we must also become aware that it is not determined by sex. At its simplest level this means recognizing that both males and females possess both “masculine” and “feminine” attributes, or that there is a difference between being “masculine” and being “male.” If we follow through this awareness to its logical conclusions . . . then we must realize that if [it] is not determined by sex, then gender, at least in the sense of properties possessed by men and women *because* of their biological sex, *cannot exist*. (64, emphasis his)

31. See David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
32. See the now famous article by Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (October 1974): 435–50.
33. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

34. See Alan Wallace, *The Taboo of Subjectivity: Toward a New Science of Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

### POSTSCRIPT

1. Alfred E. John, *Scientific Autosuggestion for Personality Adjustment and Development: Your Key to Mental and Physical Health* (Westport, CT: Associated Book Sellers, 1957).
2. Harold Bloomfield et al., *TM: Discovering Inner Energy and Overcoming Stress* (New York: Dell, 1975).
3. Michael E. Trulson, *LSD, Visions or Nightmares* (New York: Chelsea House, 1985).
4. I was not myself suicidal. Trulson's book on LSD claims that the drug might permanently alter one's brain chemistry, so my idea was that the protagonist of the story wouldn't care about such permanent brain damage if he planned on dying. In retrospect, I think the vivid synesthesia and overall aesthetics of the hallucinations were completely incongruous with the emotional content of someone who was supposed to be suffering from suicidal despair.
5. Gunapala Dharmasiri, *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God*, 2nd rev. ed. (Antioch, CA: Golden Leaves Publishing Company, 1988).
6. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1974 [1959]).
7. Marion L. Matics, trans., *Entering the Path of Enlightenment: The Bodhicaryāvātāra of the Buddhist Poet Śāntideva* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971).
8. For more on Godwin, see "Godwin Homepage," accessed April 5, 2015, <http://www.godwin-home-page.net/>.
9. See Bruce Kapferer, "Outside All Reason: Magic, Sorcery, and Epistemology in Anthropology," in *Beyond Rationalism: Rethinking Magic, Witchcraft and Sorcery*, ed. Bruce Kapferer (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), 1–30. For the possible use of psychoactive substances in European witchcraft, see Michael J. Harner, "The Role of Hallucinogenic Plants in Medieval Witchcraft," in *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, ed. Michael J. Harner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 125–50. See also H. Sidky, *Witchcraft, Lycanthropy, Drugs, and Disease: An Anthropological Study of the European Witch* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010).
10. "Entheogen" was the favored term used by our group. However, I have always found the expression a little pretentious, and prefer "psychedelic" in most cases. Moreover, as a Mahāyāna Buddhist, I do not view any particular substance as possessing the "divine within." Given emptiness, all phenomena lack an essence, and therefore none can be inherently divine. "Psychedelic," in its literal sense of "mind-manifesting," captures the possible utility of

these substances for a Buddhist. In this regard, I view certain psychoactive substances as spiritual and psychological tools or medicines that may be employed skillfully by a Buddhist on the bodhisattva's path.

11. His name has been changed to protect his identity.
12. "The Harvard Agape" is an unofficial and etic term applied to the event, which was in no way formally affiliated with or endorsed by Harvard University. Moreover, it took place off-campus in a private rental property in Cambridge. The participants simply called it "The Agape." The Harvard name was attached by others because the majority of people participating in the event were Harvard Divinity School students at the time.
13. See for examples, "The Harvard Agape," Council on Spiritual Practices, accessed December 29, 2014, <http://csp.org/nicholas/A54.html>; Aline M. Lucas, "Entheology," *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 27, no. 3 (1995): 293–95; Aline M. Lucas, "What Is Entheology?" in *Psychoactive Sacramentals: Essays on Entheogens and Religion*, ed. Thomas B. Roberts (San Francisco: Council on Spiritual Practices, 2001), reprinted in Thomas B. Roberts, ed., *Spiritual Growth with Entheogens: Psychoactive Sacramentals and Human Transformation* (South Paris, ME: Park Street Press, 2012), 169–77; Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 94–95; and more recently, Charles Foster, *Wired for God? The Biology of Spiritual Experience*, reprint ed. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012). See also Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 204, wherein he refers to one of our group singing the song "Amazing Grace."
14. "Kitten" was my pet name for my girlfriend at the time. She called me "Bear."
15. I worked on the S.A.U. from the autumn of 1994 to the autumn of 1995. My other part-time job while a student at Harvard was as a café worker at the Gato Rojo Café, in the basement of the graduate student building in Harvard Yard. Incidentally, it was from the basement storeroom of this café, on March 1, 1995, that I witnessed the robbery of an armored car in Harvard Square and the armed security guard's shooting of the escaping thieves. Such acts of violence as this can also induce altered states of consciousness.
16. Paul Stamets, *Psilocybin Mushrooms of the World: An Identification Guide* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1996).
17. *Ibid.*, 6–8.
18. Notice yet again the use of a spatial metaphor—in this case, the commonly used slang "trip" for the psychedelically induced altered state. Metaphor is one of the primary tropes employed to construct narratives at all levels (personal, historical, philosophical, theological, etc.), so endemic to our conceptualizations of self and world that often its metaphorical nature is forgotten. A prime example of this is the metaphor of visual perception ("seeing") for intellectual comprehension ("knowing"), i.e., "I see what you mean." However, any metaphor will break down under analytical scrutiny.



19. During this short period of my life, due possibly to meditating several hours a day and suffering intense grief from the breakup of my first marriage, I developed an almost preternatural level of empathy, which at times bordered on the telepathic, for certain people I randomly encountered in pubs, bars, or nightclubs. To this day, I have no adequate explanation for how this was possible. Psychic phenomena induced through meditation and psychedelics are an intriguing subject worthy of much more scholarly investigation.
20. This analogical association between Finsbury Park and Buddhist cosmological realms was further reinforced in my mind by the heroin and cocaine addicts congregated in the southwest region of the park, who reminded me of Buddhist “hungry ghosts,” and the more well-to-do Londoners with their children enjoying recreational activities in the center of the park, who seemed like gods and demigods when compared to the homeless and addicted.
21. This was a secretive and close-knit group of perhaps 20–30 convert Vajrayāna Buddhists led by a charismatic Western self-styled guru. The group met on full-moon days for empowerments by the guru, who gave students new Sanskrit names and bestowed secret oral and written teachings. Emphasis was placed on the special connection (*samaya*) with the teacher, mantra recitation, and emptiness. Wrathful Buddhist deities such as Heruka and Mahākāla were commonly invoked. After I broke *samaya* and left the group, I was appropriately threatened with a tantric curse if I publicly revealed the identity of the teacher or his students.
22. Although this unfortunate circumstance alienated me from the movement, I have maintained a friendly relationship with Gen Kelsang Demo, my personal teacher and head of the local branch of the NKT, who was in no way involved in any impropriety. To this day, I possess the utmost respect for Demo, whom I view as a true spiritual guide (*kalyāṇamitra*).
23. Douglas Osto, *Power, Wealth and Women in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).
24. For more details, see “Mindfulness Meditation,” Douglas Osto, accessed April 5, 2015, <http://www.douglasosto.com/mindfulness-meditation-2/>.
25. “The Peyote Way Church of God,” Peyote Way Church of God, accessed March 23, 2015, <http://www.peyoteway.org/>.
26. Dale Pendell, *Pharmako Gnosis: Plant Teachers and the Poison Path* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010).
27. See Charles T. Tart, *Waking Up: Overcoming the Obstacles to Human Potential* (Lincoln, NE: iUNiverse.com, 2001), 85ff.

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