

# The New Wave of Psychedelics in Buddhist Practice

BY MATTEO PISTONO | AUGUST 19, 2018

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On the first evening of her Lotus Vine Journeys meditation retreats, Spring Washam explains the five ethical precepts: to refrain from the taking of life, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxicants. Over the next two weeks, Washam, a member of the Spirit Rock Teachers Council, offers guided meditation sessions, compassion and loving-kindness practices, and other foundational Buddhist teachings. And on eight of the fourteen evenings, under her care and the direction of a Peruvian healer (*curandero*), a group of twenty retreatants drinks ayahuasca, the psychoactive brew made from a vine that grows in the heart of the Amazon rain forest. The group then meditates under the influence of ayahuasca for the next five to eight hours.

From Colorado to California, North Carolina to New York, and beyond, Buddhist practitioners are gathering to experiment with, and discuss the merits of, consciousness-altering substances in the context of their dharma practice. In May, InsightLA and Buddhist Geeks co-hosted “Waking up with Psychedelics” for a sold-out crowd at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery. Trudy Goodman, founder of InsightLA, Buddhist Geek’s Vincent Horn, Washam, and Dr. Charles Grob, Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics at the UCLA Medical School, discussed the current confluence of psychedelics and Buddhist practice on American soil. Ram Dass joined them via livestream.

“We know that [psychedelics](#) are a valid doorway to dharma practice. It was in the 1960s and still is today. And now, there is a renaissance of use,” says Mark Koberg, Executive Director of InsightLA.

This emergent interest in psychedelics coincides with growing recognition in the wider public sphere of their potential benefits, due in part to a wave of medical research beginning in 2002. In Michael Pollan’s recent book, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence*, he highlights a number of researchers, doctors, and therapists who believe psychedelic therapy will soon be “routine and widely available in the form of a novel hybrid of pharmacology and psychotherapy.”

*Today’s practitioners insist their forays into psychedelics are not a replay of the merry prankster, tripping counterculture scene of the 1960s.*

Indeed, the medical community has long recognized the therapeutic potential in psychedelics, but only recently has it been legally allowed to resume clinical trials after they were banned in 1971. Today, multi-discipline teams at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, New York University, the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, the University of New Mexico, Imperial College in London, and the University of Zurich have all demonstrated that psilocybin (found in magic mushrooms), MDMA (ecstasy), and LSD can have positive results in treating alcohol and nicotine addiction, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, cancer distress, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, including among military veterans. In 2016, the US Federal Drug Administration approved Phase 3 trials of MDMA and psilocybin. Both substances could be taken off the Schedule 1 list of illegal drugs in the near future according to

Pollan, and if that happens, doctors will be able to prescribe them. Dozens of medical schools across the US have asked to participate in future trials.

## **Youthquake**

Those pushing the boundaries of dharma and psychedelics are, for the most part, Generation X teachers and millennials. Erik Davis, who writes frequently on the intersection of Buddhism, psychedelics, and Americana, said, “We are witnessing a youthquake within Buddhism, a changing of the guard of teachers following the decline of the hippie baby boomers. This new generation of teachers is comfortable with being both Buddhists and consciousness hackers using non-Buddhist means.”

One of those teachers, Vincent Horn, a mindfulness teacher in Asheville, North Carolina, and founder of the Buddhist Geeks website and podcast, recently wrote a short guidebook, *Meditating on Psychedelics—A Simple Ceremony*, for students and friends who had been asking for guidance in combining their meditation practice with the use of psychedelic substances such as ayahuasca, psilocybin, peyote/mescaline, and large dosing of cannabis. For the last two years, Horn’s popular podcast series, “Meditating on Psychedelics,” has explored the merits and dangers of weaving Buddhist contemplative practice with ritualized psychedelic use, with guests such as Roshi Joan Halifax, Dr. Roland Griffiths of Johns Hopkins, Washam, and Goodman, among others.

Horn isn’t alone among his generation in creating new modalities and manuals for navigating the consciousness-altering journeys from a Buddhist perspective. Lama Karma (Justin Wall), who completed two traditional three-year Tibetan Buddhist meditation retreats, has written an account of his experiences with ayahuasca in the Amazon and how it might be understood from the perspective of a Vajrayana initiation. And last year, a prominent Vajrayana teacher convened a gathering in Portland called “Dzogchen and Psychedelics” to explore whether psychotropics could play a role in sadhana practice, with particular value as either an “initiator” (*abhiseka*), expanding one’s consciousness to see beyond conventional reality, or as an “obstacle destroyer” along the path.

Even the old guard is taking note of this development, recognizing the new generation’s skill in working with psychedelics and the advances in their therapeutic use. Insight Meditation teacher Jack Kornfield, speaking last year at a Sprit Rock conference titled “At the Intersection: Psychedelics and the Buddhist Path,” opined that the new generation of Western Buddhist teachers is “on the cusp of something revolutionary.”

“But,” Kornfield cautioned, “it has to be done carefully and with the boundaries that the Buddha offered regarding ethics—not to harm yourself and not to harm others.”

## **“Set” and Setting**

Today’s practitioners insist their forays into psychedelics are not a replay of the merry prankster, tripping counterculture scene of the 1960s. Nor is it a continuation of the psychedelic use in the 1980s and 1990s, which Davis described in *Zig Zag Zen* as “American tantric adepts in their solitariness working with these substances by themselves.” Rather, Buddhist teachers and practitioners are reviewing, reassessing, and experimenting with psychedelics in small sanghas across the country.

*‘Ayahuasca is a powerful medicine — it heals — it should be honored and respected.’ —Spring Washam*

Intention and caution are two hallmarks of the contemporary flowering of psychedelic use among Buddhists. Recreationally tripping on mushrooms or LSD at a Phish show is not to be confused with dharma practice. Instead, as one Zen teacher from Washington said, “We take these substances, which we consider medicine, as a kind of sacrament, with aspirations of healing ourselves so that we can more effectively be of service throughout the world.”

Washam continually emphasizes to those who ask her about ayahuasca, “It is not a recreational drug. Ayahuasca is a powerful medicine—it heals—it should be honored and respected.”

Intention has long been stressed as a principal driving force behind how one experiences one’s mind on psychedelics, beginning with Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (later known as Ram Dass) and their research group at Harvard in the 1960s. They referred to intention as the “mind-set,” or simply “set,” one creates going into a psychedelic experience. Equally important to the set is the setting, or the social and physical surroundings in which the experience takes place.

“Of course, the drug dose does not produce the transcendent experience. It merely acts as a chemical key—it opens the mind, frees the nervous system of its ordinary patterns and structures. The nature of the experience depends almost entirely on set and setting,” Leary wrote in his 1964 guide, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

The setting for Washam’s Buddhist ayahuasca retreat is a traditional shamanic ceremony in the Peruvian jungle. This is not only because ayahuasca is legal in Peru and understood as a medicine to heal the body and mind, including trauma, but also because she sees this as the safest and most supportive environment.

“When we take these plant medicines in the proper setting,” says Washam, “time and again, I myself and others experience a sense of interconnectedness that is beyond words. I’m not talking intellectual understandings but rather a kind of body-based wisdom and love that arises from within. You are connected to others and to nature so deeply you will never forget. It is such a powerful shift in the way we view ourselves in the world. Is it going to enlighten us? No, that is not the job of ayahuasca. Its job is to help us wake up. We still have to do the work of being ethical, working with our heart and mind, and serving others.” Washam’s preliminary talks on set, or intention, encourage retreatants to adopt the bodhisattva ideal of serving all beings, even while on their powerful, and often frightening, ayahuasca journey.

### **Inside the Temple Walls**

Increasingly, practitioners are inserting the “set and setting” into traditional Buddhist ceremonies and rituals. Vanja Palmers lived and trained for over a decade at Tassajara and Green Gulch and was authorized as a teacher by Kobun Chino Otogawa before returning to his home in Switzerland. He regularly conducts five-day Zen sesshins at Felsentor, his zendo near Lake Lucerne, which include long periods of sitting meditation, mindful walking, and work practice in the mountainside temple. During five recent retreats, he and a group of up to forty meditators also ingested the psychotropic substance psilocybin. Milos Savic’s forthcoming documentary about Palmers includes footage of students approaching their teacher at the shrine, receiving a bag of mushrooms to eat, and then bowing before the Buddha before returning to their zafus.

In Vajrayana sanghas in Oregon, Colorado, and Washington, D.C., practitioners are using psychedelic substances during tantric feast offerings, including mixing psilocybin into the tormas, the sacrificial cake that is ritually offered to the deities and later eaten by the practitioners. Some practitioners ingest mushrooms or LSD before the liturgy begins so the full effects of the substances can be felt throughout the entirety of the practice. One Vajrayana practitioner in Boulder described placing one drop of LSD from a tincture into the *kapala* (ritual skull container) on the shrine as an offering and another in her mouth. She said the substance helps remove her habitual deluded way of seeing herself and the world. Another practitioner in Virginia said mushrooms help him in the generation stage of visualizing deities in the form of light, as well as in the dissolution stage of resting in the spacious clarity of mind.

### **Are Psychedelics Dangerous?**

In spite of the increased use of psychedelics in association with dharma practice over the past decade, taking psychedelics is not without risks. Most psychedelic substances are illegal in the United States and have been since the Nixon administration categorized LSD, mushrooms, and other psychedelic substances as Schedule 1 drugs, more restricted than cocaine, opium, and methamphetamine. But apart from running afoul of the law, might taking psychedelics cause harm to one's body or mind?

The more common risks include the often-reported "bad trip" in which one experiences panic attacks or intense terror, albeit temporary. However, several fatalities have also occurred during ayahuasca retreats in South America, including the unexplained death of an eighteen-year-old American in Peru and a nineteen-year-old British student in Colombia who reportedly had a toxic allergic reaction.

Using psychedelics may also pose particular dangers for those recovering from substance addictions, according to Valerie (Vimalasara) Mason-John, president of the Buddhist Recovery Network and coauthor of *Eight Step Recovery: Using the Buddha's Teachings to Overcome Addictions*. "There is a part of me that is curious about ayahuasca. But then I have to remember, 'I'm an addict.' It is a risk. I don't know what will happen. It may be brilliant—I may get to glimpse enlightenment for a few minutes. But I'm not prepared to take that risk because I have that addictive mind."

Mason-John stresses that if a dharma practitioner wants to work with psychedelics, it should be done in a therapeutic setting. "Things can be revealed [on psychedelics] from your subconscious," she says. "You are thrown all over the place in that journey and people don't know what to do with all that."

"Psychedelics are definitely not for everyone," warns one California Zen teacher. "People with latent psychosis or schizophrenia, or those who have ever had suicidal thoughts, should not take these substances outside of a clinical setting. Psychedelics seem to open the valve on our storehouse consciousness, and all of our deepest habits and patterns of thinking and behaving come rushing out. The vastness and clarity of pure awareness is there, but it's sometimes hard to recognize in the chaos, and even terror, of the psychedelic experience."

In Douglas Osto's *Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America*, he argues seeking altered states of consciousness has always been at the core of Buddhist meditation practice—but there are dangers. He reveals his own and others' experimentation with psychedelics that led to bouts of psychosis and paranoia. "It took several months of hard work and professional help to completely regain my physical and psychological equilibrium," Osto writes, describing what happened after he ingested hallucination-inducing amounts of cannabis.

Washam screens out nearly 20 percent of applicants for her retreats, either because they are taking contraindicated medications or because she believes the ayahuasca experience will be too intense for them. Horn and Katherine MacLean, a psychologist who worked as one of the lead psychedelic researchers at Johns Hopkins Medicine, are planning to host a “Mushrooms for Meditators” retreat next winter in Jamaica. They too are cautious about accepting people to their retreat, preferring to work with those who already have retreat experience.

“It is hard enough to just do a meditation retreat, and quite another to combine it with psychedelics,” Horn noted. “We want to make sure people are safe and able to navigate their psychedelic experience with some mental agility that comes with previous meditation training.”

Even those who express enthusiasm for psychedelics in Buddhist practice regularly raise cautionary flags. The Dzogchen teacher Keith Dowman recently wrote in *Everything is Light* that psychedelics can “provide an opportunity for synchronicous moments of full recognition of the nature of mind,” but he went on to note that even though the clarity and unbound spaciousness of the nature of mind may unfold while on psychedelics, the challenge is that it is almost always accompanied by an onslaught of visionary, hallucinogenic, and otherwise psychedelic phenomena.

There are other reasons to approach psychedelics with caution. Lama Karma, while expressing deep gratitude for what his work with ayahuasca has allowed him to access and heal, warns that psychedelics can greatly enhance the ego. “Experiences on these plant medicines can definitely supercharge your personal samsara in ways that you can believe are deeply liberating,” he explains. “Some people go from one so-called liberating experience to another, effectively running in circles while constantly telling all their friends how profoundly life-changing it all is.”

Lama Urgyen, an American teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, has a more existential concern. “Don’t get involved in psychedelics unless you are willing to have your most deeply held beliefs—about you and your world—not only questioned but also shown to have no basis,” he cautions. “Your belief systems are constructed by thoughts. Psychedelics are like a solvent poured on your beliefs. You may watch all of that dissolve. And although dissolving belief structures is the ultimate point of the dharma, doing so with psychedelics is not for every practitioner.”

*Those who champion the use of psychedelics do not view them as intoxicants.*

Some Buddhist teachers express skepticism that psychedelics can bring about any true awakening. Ajahn Sucitto, former abbot of Cittaviveka Monastery, experimented with psychedelics in his early twenties and concluded that they don’t offer a path to liberation. “Psychedelics don’t get the mind to bring forth its strengths, virtues, warmth, or discernment,” says Sucitto. “Instead the mind is rendered passive. They do indicate that the reality constructed by the senses is just that, a kind of spell that we’re born under, but they don’t reveal how that spell is cast, nor how to come out of it. In fact, they cast another spell, the spell of a shift of perception.”

Moreover, many Buddhists believe the use of psychedelics contravenes the fifth Buddhist precept of abstaining from intoxicants. The Buddhist texts (in Pali and Sanskrit) enjoin the practitioner “to abstain from liquor, wine, and [other] intoxicants, which are a basis for heedlessness.”

Those who champion the use of psychedelics, however, do not view them as intoxicants. As the Zen teacher in Washington expressed, “It’s not that the mind [on psychedelics] is intoxicated and experience

is distorted. Rather, what happens on psychedelics is everyday conceptual intoxication is stripped away.”

But not everyone is swayed by this kind of argument. Some Buddhist teachers, including those with firsthand experience of psychedelics, have concluded that what one experiences on psychedelics is indeed a form of intoxication and that their use, therefore, violates both the letter and spirit of the fifth precept.

“I reckon psychedelics to be less harmful than alcohol, but essentially they made my mind lazy,” Ajahn Sucitto continues. “It took about five years of training in attention, patience, and emotional resilience to clear the major effects of a comparable period of drug use. And it took longer still to come out of the notion that what counts is what the mind ‘sees’—its content—rather than what it ‘does,’ its hanging on to or relinquishment of perception and consciousness. For that relinquishment one needs a basis in the reality that consciousness and perception (and the rest of the aggregates) naturally arise from, because this is where the mind’s innate strengths and virtues lie. So rather than changing the balls, we learn how to juggle them, in the school of our kamma.”

### **Burning Down the House**

With so much caution and concern regarding their use, why are some Buddhist teachers offering suggestions on how to use psychedelics in formal dharma practice and in some cases hosting retreats in which psychedelics are used? The short answer is that they are convinced of the benefit of these substances for practitioners’ mental health and of their power to accelerate profound insights into Buddhist teachings.

“We read about Big Mind, as the Zen teachers say, or resting in the spacious clarity of the nature of mind, as the Tibetan teachers call it—those were all just concepts to me, even after twenty years of meditation practice,” said one Bay Area Zen teacher, who also studies with Tibetan lamas. “When I took psychedelics, I actually experienced what before was only a philosophical concept. My psychedelics experiences have given me so much devotion toward the dharma.”

Another Zen teacher on the West Coast reported that while on a psychedelics journey, she saw how she had mentally constructed the self through the different roles she inhabited—daughter, partner, student, teacher, and administrator at the dharma center—and then “all of them were stripped away, totally and completely, and all that remained was a kind of innocence, a fresh knowing, a childlike knowing free from the residue of role conditioning.”

But, she said, the most meaningful part of the experience came when the effects of the psychedelics wore off. Though she ultimately returned from that place of innocence to her roles as a dharma student and teacher, she said those roles never reassembled as concretely as they had existed before. The experience gave her a visceral understanding of what she had read years before in the *Dhammapada*:

Through the round of many births I roamed  
without reward,  
without rest,  
seeking the house-builder.  
Painful is birth again  
& again.

House-builder, you're seen!  
You will not build a house again.  
All your rafters broken,  
the ridge pole dismantled,  
immersed in dismantling, the mind  
has attained to the end of craving.

—*Dhammapada* 152, translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

After thousands of hours of meditation, contemplation, and intense retreat over the last twenty years, she had concluded, “The traditional Buddhist practices are not getting at the relational role identities all of us get stuck in.”

The recognition that psychedelics can accelerate insight is a common acknowledgement among the newer generation of Buddhist teachers who use them. Despite the profundity of methods and reverence for their respective practices in Theravada, Insight, Zen, or Vajrayana, their psychedelic journeys are precipitating insights and understanding that had been previously unknown to them.

Shugen Arnold, abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery and the Zen Center of New York City, is wary. “I wonder about the influence of our culture in terms of seeking very powerful experiences, hoping that those experiences are going to save us,” Arnold explains. “People are looking for shortcuts, even in Buddhism—they want to ‘expedite the path’ and some are hoping psychedelics will do that. But those influences are so pervasive in our culture that it merits being cautious.”

Washam, for one, is not deterred. “We see longtime students not growing anymore after their initial opening to the dharma many years ago. When they fill out their retreat history, it’s like a who’s who of babas and lamas and teachers who they have meditated with. But they have plateaued, and often there is a kind of stuckness in the heart. These substances offer a jolt to shift them.”

The California Zen teacher agrees. “Our dharma practice must continually point us to the deeper levels of the mind so we can inquire, ‘What is this life, really?’ and ‘Who am I?’” He contends that psychedelics help the mind understand that “This life is not what we think it is. This world is not what we think it is. This mind is not what we think. Psychedelics don’t necessarily say, ‘*This is what it is*’ either, but at least they point out that it is not what we think it is. Psychedelics open the gates of curiosity for those who have become complacent in a nice, neatly packaged practice.”

Lama Ugyen echoes the thoughts of other dharma teachers in suggesting there are no answers in psychedelics, but rather they offer a possibility of opening to the mysterious. “The path of the Buddha leads us to an unnamable place. Psychedelics have the capacity to do that as well,” he says, “albeit in a more forceful way. In both cases, we may arrive at an indescribable place where we realize we cannot say anything definite about anything. That in itself is a type of freedom.”

Shugen Arnold recalls a recent conversation with a dharma student who had decided to use psychedelics. “My response was, that’s your decision,” says Arnold. “I said my hope is that if anything good comes out of this, you will be able to turn that into your practice so that you move toward not needing to do this anymore. In other words, if it serves some purpose, then so be it, but its purpose is finite. The goal is to let go of that and be able to rely entirely on your own resources.”

# The Mind-Bending History Of Buddhism And Psychedelics

## Do substances like LSD and psilocybin have a place in a dharma practice?

By [Carolyn Gregoire](#) Oct 8, 2015 [Huffpost.com](#)

The history of Buddhism and of psychedelics in American culture follow a surprisingly similar trajectory from the 1950s through the present-day.

But perhaps this shouldn't come as a surprise, given that they share a common aim: the liberation of the mind.

Many of the thinkers who turned to Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies in the 1960s -- including Alan Watts, Jack Kerouac, Aldous Huxley, Allen Ginsberg and Ram Dass -- were influenced in some way by their experiences with LSD and other psychedelic drugs.

American Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield said that LSD, "prepares the mind for Buddhism," while Allan Watts described both practices as being part of a comprehensive philosophical quest.

Now, more than 60 years later, we're seeing a resurgence of popular interest in Buddhism -- with mindfulness meditation now firmly entrenched in the [cultural mainstream](#) -- and also in psychedelics, which are being investigated as [therapeutic agents](#) for mental health issues including depression, anxiety and addiction.

The intersection of these practices raises a number of questions: Are psychedelics an obstruction to a Dharma practice, or a helpful accompaniment? Are mind-altering substances a legitimate means of personal transformation?

"In spiritual communities, we need an honest exploration of this delicate and sometimes taboo topic," [Kornfield wrote in a blog post last year](#). "Let us approach the use of these drugs consciously."

In the essay collection [Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics](#) (released in a new edition in May), a number of prominent thinkers in both disciplines come together to address these questions, and more. I caught up with Allan Badiner, author, activist and editor of *Zig Zag Zen*, to learn more about the intersection of Buddhism and psychedelics, and to find out why both philosophies are more relevant today than ever. Here's what he had to say.

**In a [talk at the Rubin Museum](#), earlier this year, you said that Buddhism itself is psychedelic in its effect. What did you mean by that?**

Buddhism has a quality that it shares with psychedelics, in the sense that it places great importance on the primacy of mind and on being in the present moment. The definition of psychedelic is mind-changing or mind-manifesting, and both buddhism and psychedelic substances share that in common. How is Buddhism psychedelic? It's really against the grain, in the sense that from a Buddhist perspective, things are often the opposite of what they seem.

Something may look very different in apparent reality than it does in ultimate reality. That dichotomy, to a point, is recognized in Buddhism... We look at our lives in terms of relative truth and ultimate truth. It isn't easy to grasp Buddhist ideas and to understand how the mind creates things, rather than just responds to them.

Jack Kornfield, a respected Buddhist teacher who talks openly about his psychedelic experiences, said that LSD prepared his mind for grasping the most difficult things in Buddhism.

**For a lot of people, psychedelics are sort of a "gateway drug" that leads them to Buddhism. How do people describe these initial experiences that lead them to a Dharma practice?**

What a lot of people will say is that they took a psychedelic journey, and they reached a place that was extremely beautiful and special and had a non-dual character; that the whole world made sense to them and was integrated; that they were integrated with the world; that everything was alive. People describe these almost oceanic feelings of joy and connection. They don't want to have a practice that involves a chemical dependency so they look for ways to kindle that feeling again in a more sustainable way.



There's kind of a migration to Buddhism to reach the highs that they had some experience with in their psychedelic journey.

**Not everyone thinks this is a good idea. What are some of the arguments *against* psychedelic use in a dharma practice?**

The arguments are all over the map. There's some people who insist that psychedelics have no place in a Dharma practice at all, and some people who insist that psychedelics are a legitimate gateway or opener to Buddhism, and others who think that Buddhism and psychedelics make a great pair of practices. People take positions along that spectrum.

I think where a lot of people are currently is they've had some experience with psychedelics and with a mystical wing of a religion or spiritual practice -- it might even be yoga -- and then have taken up psychedelics occasionally since then. So there's an ongoing relationship with psychedelics while they explore a more everyday sustainable path of integration with a lot of the things that came up in their psychedelic journeys. I think there's a middle path there.

**Why do you think 2015 is such an important moment for both Buddhism and psychedelics?**

I think there's a new challenge that asks us to look again at how we can employ psychedelics, or not, because we're facing unprecedented challenges as a species. We're in deep doodoo, ecologically speaking.

One of the most burning reasons we need to wake up is in order to survive. Unless we wake up in both an individual and a cultural sense, we're not going to be able to make the kind of changes we need to in order to survive.

The real problem, I think most people agree, is a problem of consciousness. We need to change consciousness. When you look around, there aren't that many strategies that can bring about a rapid change in consciousness, but psychedelics is one of them. So we need to have that conversation. Psychedelics are in the toolkit and we have to find the best way to use those tools in a way that is safe and respectful.

***"There aren't that many strategies that can bring about a rapid change in consciousness, but psychedelics is one of them."***

**Is there a risk here for spiritual materialism -- becoming attached to peak experiences and using them to strengthen the ego, rather than tame it?**

I think there is a risk. The ego is so profound and so able to gain things and twist them around and co-opt them. So the standard cautions of set, setting and intention are important for your own fulfillment and for being a warrior for change.

Putting all those factors in the mix, and not just your own pleasure, is helpful.

**There's anthropological evidence that the drive to alter consciousness is an innate and universal aspect of the human experience. And yet, there's a great deal of shame and guilt in our culture around doing this, even if it's in a spiritual or therapeutic context. When do you think we transitioned from viewing altered states as sacred to viewing them as shameful?**

In every religious tradition, there's been an esoteric, sort of secret initiation usually where usually plant psychedelics or something like that have been involved. It's just about ubiquitous around the planet in every culture, and really going back as far as human culture goes.

But there was a concerted effort in certain periods of history to stamp that out for political reasons. For example, the Nixon administration declared a very special kind of war on substances. I think Nixon realized that when people smoked weed, they didn't like him [laughs].

That created an atmosphere of repression and fear, and that served their political purposes. But there are many factors that contributed to how we got to a real extreme on the end of being repressive and seeing no value in altered states, even when used with high intentions.

**What are some of the most exciting directions for [psychedelic research](#)?**

Hopefully we will have in place opportunities for people who need these medicines to get what they need, and to be in the hands of qualified professionals in safe settings. So not only because the earth is going to hell ecologically and we need to change consciousness quickly, but also to relieve suffering and to make it possible for people to get really profound and powerful help.

There are some interesting studies even on Buddhism and psychedelics, including a Johns Hopkins study looking at long-term meditators that is in its early stages. There are the [PTSD studies](#), the [end-of-life anxiety studies](#) -- there are just so many really interesting areas to look at how psychedelics can be a medicine and help people as opposed to being something harmful.

## Renaissance or Dead End? The New Debate on Psychedelic Drug Use by North American Buddhists

By Justin Whitaker

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Buddhistdoor.net

The use of psychedelic drugs was common in the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s in North America and Western Europe. This time also saw a flourishing of Buddhism in the West, and for many the use of drugs was seen as a doorway into Buddhist practice and perhaps even a tool for seeing through illusions of society and the ego. And while this trend has continued, it was this year that the discussion of drugs and spiritual pursuit became an open and at times confrontational debate in the Buddhist world.

While the topic of drug use continues to elicit very strong opinions and reactions, the range of responses to this issue have been anything but black and white. One initial area of developing nuance has been in the specific drugs being discussed. Allan Badiner, one of the editors of *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics* (Synergetic Press, 2010 and 2015), writes:

*The notion that all "drugs" are fundamentally alike is at the root of the confusion in our drug laws and the social debate about them. Drugs differ. Uses and occasions differ. Policies and practices also ought to differ appropriately.*

Along those lines Stephen Batchelor, in his forward to the book, writes:

*Before Buddhists can even begin to have a serious discussion about the use and abuse of drugs in contemporary society, there needs to be an acceptance of at least the possibility that certain currently illegal drugs can produce life- and performance-enhancing effects. Such a shift in attitude may require considerably greater openness, understanding, and tolerance from those in the Buddhist community entrusted with offering moral and spiritual guidance.*

While a shift in broader cultural openness to certain drugs is by no means complete, a step was taken with the publication of Michael Pollan's book *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (Penguin Press 2018). This was followed by articles in two major North American Buddhist magazines, *Lion's Roar* and *Tricycle*, exploring specifically Buddhist applications of psychedelic drugs for spiritual purposes.

Both articles draw from the experience and teaching of Spring Washam, a member of the Spirit Rock Teachers Council, who has begun offering guided ayahuasca meditations in the Peruvian jungle. In an interview last year, Washam spoke of the arising of traumatic feelings during a three-month retreat that she could not handle within the context of Buddhist thought and practice alone. Afterward she spoke with a psychologist friend who had begun using ayahuasca with a small group and healing childhood trauma in the process.

Washam decided to join in one of her friend's ayahuasca ceremonies. Speaking of her own experience, Washam recounts, "I felt like in that one night I had learned more about myself than I had on that three-

month retreat.” From there, she went on to study and practice directly with traditional ayahuasca healers in Peru, leading eventually to the creation of her own 14-day retreats mixing Buddhist practice and ayahuasca. (Chitheads)

The articles in the major Buddhist magazines were followed, most notably, by a series of responses by Zen teacher Brad Warner. In his first he suggests that, “Rather than running off to find new experiences to relieve the boredom of meditation, maybe it would be better to dive deeply into that boredom and find out where it comes from and whether it really needs relieving.”

In a second article he goes further, saying of Washam and others teaching about psychedelics and Buddhist practice, “These charlatans are making a buttload of money selling this worthless trash to the millennial crowd. I can almost forgive younger people for being ignorant of where this crap took our culture the last time we tried it.” (Hardcore Zen)

Other teachers joined in. Daniel Scharpenburg wrote, “The troubling thing isn’t that there are people saying Buddhists can use psychedelics. I have my own complicated relationship with the fifth precept, but these people are saying that psychedelics can make Buddhism better.” (Tattooed Buddha)

Sensei Alex Kakuyo wrote about being invited to try psychedelic mushrooms with a coworker:

*But as I studied the sutras, I couldn’t find a single passage where the Buddha instructed his students to use psychedelics. And I couldn’t justify abstaining from alcohol in order to keep the fifth precept if I was going to break it through the use of magic mushrooms.*

*IN THE END, I DECIDED THAT I WAS EITHER GOING TO DRINK ALCOHOL AND DO MUSHROOMS, OR I WAS GOING TO ABSTAIN FROM BOTH.*

*I chose the latter. (The Same Old Zen)*

The Rev. James Ford wrote a similarly cautious dissenting piece after the discussion of Pollan’s book came to him in May:

*Relying on personal insights, even profound experiences, without a larger context of practice and life creates people who are at best narcissists and at worse monsters. And, I’ve seen no such path of integration among those who rely upon psychedelics.*

*So, my bottom line point. The real deal of our spiritual lives is much more complicated, much more difficult than any experience we might have. It requires actual commitment to a life beyond any kind of indulgence, including and maybe particularly indulging those special experiences. (Monkey Mind)*

A final response, by Gesshin Greenwood, traces much of the spectrum of responses in her own experience, from initial agreement with Warner and Ford, to anger and judgment, and finally a sense of joy for the benefit that might come with psychedelic use for some.

*The judgement and righteousness about medicine among Buddhists is harmful. Yet people so rarely can articulate this with nuance. Psychedelics and anti-depressants are not Buddhism. Of course not. And yet they can be a part of a larger path of healing. They are not for everyone. Anti-depressants quite literally do not work for 50% of the people who take them. But they work for some people. Psychedelics can be extremely dangerous for some people, and for others, they have healing capacities. I wish there was more research about this, to be frank.*

*Buddhism is not a magic bullet that solves all of our problems. As other teachers have said, meditation practice opens the door to a larger path of healing. On that path of healing we will each need to find our own medicine. (That’s So Zen)*

# Psychedelics' Buddhist Revival

For some Buddhists, experiences of selflessness induced by hallucinogens are tools for practice. But others see distraction and even danger.

By [Gabriel Lefferts](#)

JUL 27, 2018

<https://tricycle.org/>

Nearly ten years ago, in the middle of a monthlong meditation retreat, Spring Washam had a sobering experience. Far from entering one of the blissful states of concentration that often mark the [jhanas](#), the progressive stages of meditative absorption outlined in Theravada Buddhism, she entered a state of [trauma](#).

An experienced Buddhist practitioner and teacher at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Washam insists that the Buddhist teachings were not at fault. It was the form of the practice—being silent, being still, being *alone*—that unraveled unconscious levels of pain to an unbearable degree.

“What I realized there,” she recalled, “was that the form of sitting in silence wasn’t alleviating the symptoms; it was making it worse.”

Washam later explored pairing her Buddhist practice with a different spiritual calling: the ceremonial drinking of ayahuasca, a plant-based hallucinogen brewed by Amazonian indigenous communities. Her story became a precursor to what has, over the last few years, become a widespread surge of interest in the psychological and spiritual effects of psychedelics, namely LSD (“acid”), psilocybin (think “magic mushrooms”), and DMT, the psychoactive chemical in ayahuasca.

Buddhist interest in psychedelics has been around for a long time. To emphasize their spiritual value, many seekers have referred to them since 1979 as “entheogens,” a word derived from the Greek adjective *entheos*, which translates roughly as “God-inspired” and is the root of the English word “enthusiasm.” Almost a quarter-century ago, *Tricycle* published a special section titled “[Psychedelics: Help or Hindrance?](#)” to address Western Buddhists’ somewhat behind-the-scenes fascination with these substances. But today, backed by widespread interest among accredited researchers, the willingness to explore them has gone more public.

In 2015, Synergetic Press published a new edition of [Zig Zag Zen](#), a collection of essays and conversations on the combination of Buddhism and psychedelics first edited in 2002

by *Tricycle* contributing editor Allan Badiner. One year later, Columbia University Press released Douglas Osto’s [Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America](#).

Mainstream interest in psychedelics got a boost in 2017 when Ayelet Waldman, a novelist and the author of a best-selling collection of essays on motherhood, offered a personal account of her experiences taking microdoses of LSD in [A Really Good Day: How Microdosing Made a Mega Difference in My Mood, My Marriage, and My Life](#). Microdosing—the consumption of minute amounts of psychedelics to enhance creativity and focus—has gained traction to such a degree, particularly among [professionals in Silicon Valley](#), that *New York Magazine* published its own “[Microdosing Guide and Explainer](#)” this spring.

Following this wave was food journalist Michael Pollan’s May bestseller [How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence](#). This “new science” refers to [a series of studies](#) conducted over the last decade at major institutes, particularly the medical schools at Johns Hopkins University and New York University, that show startling success rates for treating major psychological maladies with LSD and psilocybin.

“The psychedelic experience of ‘non-duality’ suggests that consciousness survives the disappearance of the self, that it is not so indispensable as we—and it—like to think.”

For people like Chris Kelley, a New School religious studies professor who is also a Buddhist practitioner and self-identified “[consciousness hacker](#),” the release of Pollan’s book represents a major leap forward for those able to benefit from psychedelics—Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. The book, despite its

once-taboo topic, is making its rounds: since its release, it has spent nine weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and Pollan has appeared on *Real Time with Bill Maher* and other media outlets.

The respect accorded to Pollan's name, Kelley told *Tricycle*, "legitimizes the topic and makes it safe for people who would otherwise be a little bit spooked to buy that book."

A section of Pollan's book about the brain's "default mode network" may draw particular attention from Buddhist practitioners. Citing the work of Robin Carhart-Harris, a neuroscientist at the Imperial College in London, Pollan describes the network in the brain that forms a critical locus of neural activity. Because it filters the rest of the brain's vast sensory and emotional overload into a cohesive lifestory, the default mode network is often referred to as the CEO of the brain. Many also attribute to it the functioning of the ego and the creation of a self-versus-other duality.

After treating subjects separately with psilocybin and LSD, Carhart-Harris found that the default mode network became "quieter," meaning that its levels of oxygen consumption and blood flow were reduced. The more those levels went down, the more likely the volunteer was to express a loss of sense of self. "The psychedelic experience of 'non-duality' suggests that consciousness," Pollan writes, "survives the disappearance of the self, that it is not so indispensable as we—and it—like to think."

This proposal will likely sound familiar to Buddhists. According to Chris Kelley, the default mode network "makes perfect sense . . . and resetting it seems to be a good idea. What you do after that is a different project."

That's why Kelley, Washam, and other Buddhists argue that chemically induced states should be coupled with Buddhist methods for training the mind to witness its own selflessness. But some dharma teachers and practitioners, unswayed by this position, remain committed to Buddhism's [fifth precept](#): to abstain from intoxicants.

Jesse Maceo Vega-Frey, the resident teacher at Vipassana Hawai'i, suggests that Buddhist practitioners become attached to "marvelous states of being" when they use psychedelics "under the guise of spiritual exploration."

"It is the wanting of things to be other than they are that is the heart of our imprisonment," Vega-Frey told *Tricycle*. "Changing the colors, textures, and flavors of the prison doesn't lead us to freedom."

A significant portion of early American Buddhist converts were first drawn to Buddhism through eye-opening experiences with entheogens. Roshi Joan Halifax, the founder and abbot of Upaya Institute and Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, was one of them. Many of her peers, she said, graduated from psychedelics because they were dedicated to cultivating a mental stability and insight through meditation alone.

Halifax agreed that there are dangers to using psychedelics. "But," she said, "there are dangers to gardening. There are dangers to meditation." Halifax will steer students away from experimenting with entheogens if she knows that the individual is unstable or won't take the substance in an appropriate setting. "Frankly, I wouldn't prescribe what I experienced for anybody. I was able to integrate my experience by having a strong Buddhist practice, by having a lot of grit and determination."

Washam, too, admits that psychedelics are controversial in Buddhist circles. But she has found that entheogens like ayahuasca function as spiritual accelerants and can actually *reduce* addiction to intoxicants. Since her own traumatic episode in retreat, Washam has started facilitating two-week retreats in Peru (where ayahuasca's preparation and consumption are legal) at which Buddhist mindfulness techniques are combined with indigenous shamanic ayahuasca ceremonies. She reports that the program, led by Lotus Vine Journeys, an organization that she founded, has attracted many people with backgrounds in all Buddhist traditions, and a recent effort to target her advocacy for plant-based medicine to a larger Buddhist audience through interviews and podcasts has met with increased interest.

"I'm still a Buddhist," Washam said, describing ayahuasca ceremonies as a type of "ultimate meditation" that can enhance Buddhist practice and provide personal insights into global interconnectedness.

“Through the lens of the dharma,” she added, people who try ayahuasca can “accelerate a type of spiritual growth that we need on the planet right now.”

Washam reported seeing a recurring pattern at American dharma centers: students expressing dissatisfaction with their practice. “Many people complain that they’ve plateaued,” Washam said. “They go to retreat after retreat after retreat, get more blessings by more rinpoches, and they’re like, ‘I’m not fundamentally feeling like I’m changing anymore.’” This problem is one of the reasons why Washam thinks more Buddhists may be willing to explore entheogens.

In the American culture at large, psychedelics seem to be transcending the stigma created by the “war on drugs” campaign, and Washam and Kelley both have high hopes for the future.

“I look over at my 11-year-old daughter,” Kelley said, “who’s reading the children’s version of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* [a previous Michael Pollan bestseller], and I’m like, ‘Oh my God, my kid is being assigned homework in Michael Pollan’s book.’ It’s such a huge leap forward from where I was when I was growing up and what we were reading. I couldn’t help but think that the next generation is going to be reading *How to Change Your Mind*.”

Among Buddhists, for whom the ingestion of intoxicants, including psychedelics, carries the risk of violating deep personal commitments, the consensus on entheogens has yet to be written. In the meantime, Roshi Halifax offers a view of moderation.

“The point of Buddhism is not to get high,” she said. “The point of Buddhism is to see clearly into the nature of mind. The nature of mind, in its fundament, is not separate from this very moment as it is. If we get a peek into that through the use of entheogens, then wonderful.”

Sangha Panel 12-6-2022  
Presentation notes – Bo Fried

The intersection of Buddhism and psychedelics raises a number of questions: Are psychedelics (e.g. ayahuasca, LSD and psilocybin) an obstruction to a Dharma practice, or a helpful accompaniment? Are mind-altering substances a legitimate means of personal transformation?

## INTRO

Many of the thinkers who turned to Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies in the 1960s -- including Alan Watts, Jack Kerouac, Aldous Huxley, Allen Ginsberg and Ram Dass -- were influenced in some way by their experiences with LSD and other psychedelic drugs.

American Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield said that LSD, "prepares the mind for Buddhism," while Allan Watts described both practices as being part of a comprehensive philosophical quest.

"In spiritual communities, we need an honest exploration of this delicate and sometimes taboo topic," Kornfield wrote in 2014. "Let us approach the use of these drugs consciously."

Allan Badiner, editor of the essay collection [Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics](#) (2010, 2015)

2016, Columbia University Press released Douglas Osto's [Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America](#).

May 2018 saw release of Michael Pollan's bestseller [How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence](#). This "new science" refers to a series of studies conducted over the last decade at major institutes, particularly the medical schools at Johns Hopkins University and New York University, that show startling success rates for treating major psychological maladies with LSD and psilocybin.

Pollan states in his book, "The psychedelic experience of 'non-duality' suggests that consciousness survives the disappearance of the self, that it is not so indispensable as we—and it—like to think."

For people like Chris Kelley, a New School religious studies professor who is also a Buddhist practitioner and self-identified "consciousness hacker," the release of Pollan's book represents a major leap forward for those able to benefit from psychedelics—Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike.

## Background:

Psychedelics or entheogens have been studied in the 50's-60's for therapeutic effects, and are capable of altering consciousness, enabling users to experience dissolution of ego, feel the non-dual nature of existence, get a glimpse into what may be ultimate reality.

There is a resurgent interest in studying these substances for medical therapeutic benefits, and also in use for spiritual purposes.

There is controversy among Buddhist thinkers and teachers regarding the place psychedelics have, if any, in Buddhist practice.

References include 2015 HuffPost article after publication of Zig Zag Zen, 2018 articles in Lions Roar and TriCycle after publication of Pollan’s book, and some exploration into two websites of two young Buddhist teachers, Brad Warner (HardCore Zen) and Vincent Horn (Buddhist Geeks) who sit at opposite poles of the debate.

Those pushing the boundaries of dharma and psychedelics are, for the most part, Generation X teachers and millennials. Erik Davis, who writes frequently on the intersection of Buddhism, psychedelics, and Americana, said, “We are witnessing a youthquake within Buddhism, a changing of the guard of teachers following the decline of the hippie baby boomers. This new generation of teachers is comfortable with being both Buddhists and consciousness hackers using non-Buddhist means.”

One of those teachers, Vincent Horn, is a mindfulness teacher in Asheville, North Carolina, and founder of the Buddhist Geeks website and podcast, recently wrote a short guidebook, *Meditating on Psychedelics—A Simple Ceremony*, for students and friends who had been asking for guidance in combining their meditation practice with the use of psychedelic substances such as ayahuasca, psilocybin, peyote/mescaline, and large dosing of cannabis. For the last two years, Horn’s popular podcast series, “Meditating on Psychedelics,” has explored the merits and dangers of weaving Buddhist contemplative practice with ritualized psychedelic use, with guests such as Roshi Joan Halifax, Dr. Roland Griffiths of Johns Hopkins, Washam, and Goodman, among others.

The Camp	Their Response
<b>Anti-Psychedelic Puritans</b>	"Absolutely Not"
<b>Tolerant Buddhists</b>	"Maybe, But"
<b>Psychedelic Buddhists</b>	"Yes, And"
<b>Psychedelic Evangelists</b>	"Absolutely Yes"
<b>Psychedelic Agnostics</b>	"Don't Know"

Jack Kornfield, speaking in 2017 at a Sprit Rock conference titled “At the Intersection: Psychedelics and the Buddhist Path,” opined that the new generation of Western Buddhist teachers is “on the cusp of something revolutionary.”

“But,” he cautioned, “it has to be done carefully and with the boundaries that the Buddha offered regarding ethics—not to harm yourself and not to harm others.”

Spring Washam quote:

“When we take these plant medicines in the proper setting,” says Washam, “time and again, I myself and others experience a sense of interconnectedness that is beyond words. I’m not talking intellectual understandings but rather a kind of body-based wisdom and love that arises from within. You are connected to others and to nature so deeply you will never forget. It is such a powerful shift in the way



we view ourselves in the world. Is it going to enlighten us? No, that is not the job of ayahuasca. Its job is to help us wake up. We still have to do the work of being ethical, working with our heart and mind, and serving others.” Washam’s preliminary talks on set, or intention, encourage retreatants to adopt the bodhisattva ideal of serving all beings, even while on their powerful, and often frightening, ayahuasca journey.

## **Risks**

### **Legality**

#### **“Bad trip”**

#### **Rare lethal toxic/allergic reactions**

#### **Potential dangers for those recovering from substance addictions**

Valerie (Vimalasara) Mason-John, president of the Buddhist Recovery Network and coauthor of *Eight Step Recovery: Using the Buddha’s Teachings to Overcome Addictions*. Mason-John stresses that if a dharma practitioner wants to work with psychedelics, it should be done in a therapeutic setting. “Things can be revealed [on psychedelics] from your subconscious,” she says. “You are thrown all over the place in that journey and people don’t know what to do with all that.”

#### **Latent mental illness can manifest**

“Psychedelics are definitely not for everyone,” warns one California Zen teacher. “People with latent psychosis or schizophrenia, or those who have ever had suicidal thoughts, should not take these substances outside of a clinical setting. Psychedelics seem to open the valve on our storehouse consciousness, and all of our deepest habits and patterns of thinking and behaving come rushing out. The vastness and clarity of pure awareness is there, but it’s sometimes hard to recognize in the chaos, and even terror, of the psychedelic experience.”

#### **Onslaught of sensory and hallucinogenic phenomena**

Even those who express enthusiasm for psychedelics in Buddhist practice regularly raise cautionary flags. The Dzogchen teacher Keith Dowman recently wrote in *Everything is Light* that psychedelics can “provide an opportunity for synchronicous moments of full recognition of the nature of mind,” but he went on to note that even though the clarity and unbound spaciousness of the nature of mind may unfold while on psychedelics, the challenge is that it is almost always accompanied by an onslaught of visionary, hallucinogenic, and otherwise psychedelic phenomena.

#### **Enhancement of Ego**

There are other reasons to approach psychedelics with caution. Lama Karma, while expressing deep gratitude for what his work with ayahuasca has allowed him to access and heal, warns that psychedelics can greatly enhance the ego. “Experiences on these plant medicines can definitely supercharge your personal samsara in ways that you can believe are deeply liberating,” he explains. “Some people go from one so-called liberating experience to another, effectively running in circles while constantly telling all their friends how profoundly life-changing it all is.”

Lama Urgyen, an American teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, has a more **existential concern**. “Don’t get involved in psychedelics unless you are willing to have your most deeply held beliefs—about you and your world—not only questioned but also shown to have no basis,” he cautions. “Your belief systems are constructed by thoughts. Psychedelics are like a solvent poured on your beliefs. You may watch all of that dissolve. And although dissolving belief structures is the ultimate point of the dharma, doing so with psychedelics is not for every practitioner.”

Some Buddhist teachers express **skepticism that psychedelics can bring about any true awakening**. Ajahn Sucitto, former abbot of Cittaviveka Monastery, experimented with psychedelics in his early twenties and concluded that they don’t offer a path to liberation. “Psychedelics don’t get the mind to bring forth its strengths, virtues, warmth, or discernment,” says Sucitto. “Instead the mind is rendered passive. They do indicate that the reality constructed by the senses is just that, a kind of spell that we’re born under, but they don’t reveal how that spell is cast, nor how to come out of it. In fact, they cast another spell, the spell of a shift of perception.”

Moreover, many Buddhists believe the use of psychedelics contravenes the **fifth Buddhist precept of abstaining from intoxicants**. The Buddhist texts (in Pali and Sanskrit) enjoin the practitioner “to abstain from liquor, wine, and [other] intoxicants, which are a basis for heedlessness.”

Those who champion the use of psychedelics, however, do not view them as intoxicants. As the Zen teacher in Washington expressed, “It’s not that the mind [on psychedelics] is intoxicated and experience is distorted. Rather, what happens on psychedelics is everyday conceptual intoxication is stripped away.”

But not everyone is swayed by this kind of argument. Some Buddhist teachers, including those with firsthand experience of psychedelics, have concluded that what one experiences on psychedelics is indeed a form of intoxication and that their use, therefore, violates both the letter and spirit of the fifth precept.

“I reckon psychedelics to be less harmful than alcohol, but essentially they made my mind lazy,” Ajahn Sucitto continues. “It took about five years of training in attention, patience, and emotional resilience to clear the major effects of a comparable period of drug use. And it took longer still to come out of the notion that what counts is what the mind ‘sees’—its content—rather than what it ‘does,’ its hanging on to or relinquishment of perception and consciousness. For that relinquishment one needs a basis in the reality that consciousness and perception (and the rest of the aggregates) naturally arise from, because this is where the mind’s innate strengths and virtues lie. So rather than changing the balls, we learn how to juggle them, in the school of our kamma.”

## Benefits

With so much caution and concern regarding their use, why are some Buddhist teachers offering suggestions on how to use psychedelics in formal dharma practice and in some cases hosting retreats in which psychedelics are used? The short answer is that they are convinced of the benefit of these substances for practitioners’ mental health and of their power to accelerate profound insights into Buddhist teachings.

Another Zen teacher on the West Coast reported that while on a psychedelics journey, she saw how she had mentally constructed the self through the different roles she inhabited—daughter, partner, student,

teacher, and administrator at the dharma center—and then “all of them were stripped away, totally and completely, and all that remained was a kind of innocence, a fresh knowing, a childlike knowing free from the residue of role conditioning.”

But, she said, the most meaningful part of the experience came when the effects of the psychedelics wore off. Though she ultimately returned from that place of innocence to her roles as a dharma student and teacher, she said those roles never reassembled as concretely as they had existed before. The experience gave her a visceral understanding of what she had read years before in the Dhammapada:

Through the round of many births I roamed

without reward,

without rest,

seeking the house-builder.

Painful is birth again & again.

House-builder, you're seen!

You will not build a house again.

All your rafters broken,

the ridge pole dismantled,

immersed in dismantling, the mind

has attained to the end of craving.

—Dhammapada 152, translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

After thousands of hours of meditation, contemplation, and intense retreat over the last twenty years, she had concluded, “The traditional Buddhist practices are not getting at the relational role identities all of us get stuck in.”

The recognition that psychedelics can accelerate insight is a common acknowledgement among the newer generation of Buddhist teachers who use them. Despite the profundity of methods and reverence for their respective practices in Theravada, Insight, Zen, or Vajrayana, their psychedelic journeys are precipitating insights and understanding that had been previously unknown to them.

Shugen Arnold, abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery and the Zen Center of New York City, is wary. “I wonder about the influence of our culture in terms of seeking very powerful experiences, hoping that those experiences are going to save us,” Arnold explains. “People are looking for shortcuts, even in Buddhism—they want to ‘expedite the path’ and some are hoping psychedelics will do that. But those influences are so pervasive in our culture that it merits being cautious.”

Washam, for one, is not deterred. “We see longtime students not growing anymore after their initial opening to the dharma many years ago. When they fill out their retreat history, it’s like a who’s who of babas and lamas and teachers who they have meditated with. But they have plateaued, and often there is a kind of stuckness in the heart. These substances offer a jolt to shift them.”

The California Zen teacher agrees. “Our dharma practice must continually point us to the deeper levels of the mind so we can inquire, ‘What is this life, really?’ and ‘Who am I?’” He contends that psychedelics help the mind understand that “This life is not what we think it is. This world is not what we think it is. This mind is not what we think. Psychedelics don’t necessarily say, ‘This is what it is’ either, but at least they point out that it is not what we think it is. Psychedelics open the gates of curiosity for those who have become complacent in a nice, neatly packaged practice.”

Brad Warner HardCore Zen

2022 Youtube Review of Leary's album The Psychedelic Experience

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8vzDTi-POI&ab\\_channel=HardcoreZen](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8vzDTi-POI&ab_channel=HardcoreZen)

Comment by listener

The biggest insight I gained from my own psychedelic experience was just that, that this normal waking state is the point. Like Dogen said this is the miracle. For some reason we seek extraordinary experiences without realizing that this normal mundane waking state is the extraordinary experience

Vincent Horn- BuddhistGeeks network <https://linktr.ee/buddhistgeeks>