

## Yoga and Psychedelics

**Soma, Nectar of the Gods**

By Ganga White



To follow is an excerpt from Ganga White's book *Yoga Beyond Belief: Insights to Awaken and Deepen Your Practice* (North Atlantic Books, 2007), followed by a commentary that he wrote especially for this *Bulletin*. —DJB

**NO exploration** into yoga and meditation would be complete without a look at the ancient lineage of sacred plants and herbs that many assert are at the origins of religious experience and spirituality. We live in a time of drug hysteria that calls for a more intelligent understanding that doesn't lump every psychoactive substance, plant, or herb into the same category called dark and dangerous. The Soma was an ancient brew or drink prepared by sages and yogis that was said to bestow health, strength, insight, spiritual visionary experience, and communion with divinity. This sacred drink, also called "Amrita" or "nectar of the gods," opened the mind, heart, and inner landscape while purifying and healing the body. The word "Amrita" means nectar. It comes from the word "Mrita," which means death and "A-mrita" means non-death or immortality. Soma use dates back to the ancient time of the Vedas and origins of yoga.

Researchers have suggested that the Soma was made from psychoactive mushrooms or possibly from a combination of plants, like the middle eastern Haoma or Syrian Rue, and various herbs. The formula and exact nature of this "nectar of immortality" has been lost, possibly forever, in the mists of antiquity. The Amazon region holds what is probably a similar sacred brew, called Ayahuasca, which means vine of the soul or vine of the dead. For centuries, and probably thousands of years, this plant admixture has played a primary role in indigenous people's spirituality, healing, and discovery of a vast pharmacy of medicines and healing herbs. We owe much of our pharmacopeia to the legacy from indigenous peoples and the sacramental practices.



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I touch on the topic of plant sacraments because it is a timely subject and something I am repeatedly asked about. I was very fortunate early in my studies of yoga and mysticism to have had the opportunity to meet and practice with researchers and explorers of the Soma and other entheogens. It is important to realize that there is a right place and proper use for everything. Plant intelligence has informed human consciousness since the beginning of time. We are dependent on plants and live in symbiotic relationship with them. To make certain plants illegal is ignorance. Rather, we need to learn their language, receive their gifts, and learn the right and intelligent use of all things. As Paracelsus, an alchemist and a founder of modern medicine, stated, "The difference between a poison and a medicine is dosage."

There are neural pathways in the brain that are more ancient than our beliefs, philosophies, and religious proscriptions. There are keys to the doorways of the rich interior landscape that open dimensions of beauty, order, intelligence, immense complexity, and sacredness beyond measure. These realities can be so powerful, brilliant, and intense that, while visiting them, our world seems like a distant hallucination in the way that these dimensions can seem hallucinatory from this one. Seeing and being touched by these mystical experiences can change one and help one in positive ways with insights into self-healing, enlightened living, and the wholeness of life. Our bodies and brains operate on chemical messengers and information exchange systems within nature. Evidence shows that medicinal plants were probably at the origin of religious

and mystical experience. To say they are unnatural, and that practices, rituals and belief systems created by man are natural, is an absurdity. It is a shame that fear and conditioning can preclude the greatest journey...within.

*Soma, Soma, devanritam, parama jyoti, namo, namah.* "To Soma, nectar of the gods, who reveals the divine light, salutations, again salutations." I quietly offered the ancient chant as we floated down the jungle river hanging in hammocks. The

Amazon reflected the night as lightning bugs lit the sky opening up mysteries of the cosmos, revealing beatific sights in holographic worlds of light, intricacy, and geometric, oscillating wonder. We were drifting in and beholding the matrix of life. We floated into a void of darkness that took shape and form, turning into corridors of color, opening into the field of dreams. All my relations, the sweat lodge prayer of Native Americans, takes on new meaning as each relationship in

your life parades before you, viewed with the lens of insight from the sacred vine.

There are keys to the doorways of mind and consciousness that are guarded by phantom demons of fear and uncertainty. They bring dread to the brittle minded and self-righteous, preventing their entry. These demons may guard the entrance but the reward inside, ironically, is the gift of responsibility that is the wisdom of uncertainty. •

**THIS addendum** to the piece from my book, *Yoga Beyond Belief*, is not written to advocate nor to proscribe the use of psychedelics, which is a deeply personal choice, but rather to stress the importance of considering the validity of experiences received by these means. Even seasoned psychonauts and neuronauts have sometimes opined that while it may be possible to have a spiritual experience, philosophical insight, or religious experience with entheogens, it's important to be able to get to the same place "naturally." The implication is that such experiences are analogs of genuine religious experience. We need to ask what, or who, is the arbiter of true religious experience? Furthermore is spiritual experience measurable at all? The arguments leveled against the validity of entheogens can be aimed equally in the other direction. We could also ask whether the experiences obtained by prayer, rosary, mantra recitation, or years of trying to quiet the mind, are more valid and "natural" or if they are merely mechanical repetition and hypnotic self projection?

Who or what can dictate the authenticity of religious experience and is it measurable? If there is an acceptable measure, it is usually centered around how that experience later expresses itself in daily life with compassion, love, kindness and care. With that metric so many who have been touched by psychedelic awakening report, or have friends and family reporting, obvious and significant transformation and flowering of these essential, evolved human attributes.

Psychotropic substances are powerful tools, and like all tools, they can cut both ways—helping or harming. Paracelsus offered a great guiding principle when he pointed out that the difference between a medicine and a poison is dosage, or usage. There are many examples of great emotional opening, creativity, insight and positive transformation from entheogenic experiences. Unfortunately, we've also seen the opposite. We must acknowledge that the same is true in the arena of traditional religion. In these epochal times of religious fervor and extremism, East and West, sometimes it seems riskier to experiment with religion than with drugs. Religion can trap a person for a lifetime in the confines of a myth, or worse, and people live their whole lives for a promise of reward in what lies beyond the ultimate mystery, death, while seeking an afterlife and neglecting or devaluing what may be the only life there is—the here and now.

I mainly want to suggest that many of the arguments against psychedelics have as much validity, or lack thereof, when aimed back toward organized religion. I heard a Zen master once lecture that if psychedelics provided authentic awakening or spiritual experience, one would not ever have to approach them again. This is a common point of view. I would ask why the same isn't said of the Zen cushion or approaching the Zen master or guru? Is wisdom and realization a destination we arrive at, or a constant journey in ever unfolding possibility? If it is an ongoing process, a journey of constant vigi-

lance, awakening and reawakening, then tune-ups, from life, from teachers, or plant friends are welcome along the way.

Due to the current level of drug hysteria that tries to demonize and marginalize those who work with psychedelics, many yogis and yoga teachers are hesitant to speak publicly of their experiences. However, I've had the opportunity to talk in depth with many scholars, teachers, and leaders about the benefits they've received through their use of entheogens and sacred plants. Some point out there are two different ways to use these allies—using psychonautical tools for the experience they offer in and of themselves and also the use of these tools to open, enhance and deepen the dimensions of traditional practices. In other words when potentiating the practice of meditation, pranayama, asana, dance, massage, tai chi, or other modalities with psychotropics, whole new worlds, depths, and perspectives can become possible.

Once, on a pilgrimage deep in the Amazon, I was invited to a Tea ceremony with a few elder maestros. At the peak of the session, with galaxies swirling around me, I was asked why, after years of meditation, self study, and yoga would I be interested in, or bother with, this strange brew. I replied that if a hundred people spent many years in yoga, prayer, chanting, and meditation there may only be a few who have a profound mystical experience of oneness, the connection of all things, the immensity of life, the immeasurable. However, if the same people, with good guidance and attitude, participated in some Ayahuasca sessions there may only be a few who don't have such a visionary experience. I added that after observing hundreds of people partaking of this sacrament, I witnessed only positive effects. Ayahuasca seems to contain a beneficent, guiding and forgiving, wise presence.

Many modern yoga teachers look to the sutras of Patanjali as their most important foundational text for the practice of yoga. Patanjali's first sutra of the fourth and last chapter (4:1), though not often quoted, asserts: "These spiritual attainments may be congenital in some, or they may be gained by the use of certain medicinal plants, by incantations, by fervor, or by meditation." The sage Patanjali advocated plant medicine as an aid to awakening.

Anyone intent and serious about exploring life, consciousness, and his or her own mind would want to be open to all the avenues available. The disciplines of yoga and meditation offer powerful pathways. Entheogens contribute some of the most potent means we have and offer the possibility to open the deepest levels of human consciousness. Visionary realms, internal microcosms, external macrospheres, and other realities or dimensions can be accessible. Whether the plant potions are a medicine or poison depends on personal discernment, intelligent and careful use, set and setting, and wise counsel.