

In 1984, Terence's enthusiastic preference for plants over synthetic drugs led him to challenge the safety of MDMA at an Esalen conference on psychedelics. As a result of this, I was motivated to help initiate the first safety study with MDMA. Though we disagreed on the relative risks and benefits of plants and synthetic drugs, we shared a similar love and appreciation for the experiences these substances initiated. Terence's vision to co-organize the 1999 AllChemical Arts conference on psychedelics and creativity was a bold step toward promoting the importance of psychedelics. MAPS' next issue on psychedelics and creativity was inspired by Terence's leadership.

In his too-short life, he moved mountains.

—Rick Doblin, MAPS President

Terence McKenna Speaks...

**Interview by Jon Hanna and Sylvia Thyssen
at the 1999 AllChemical Arts Conference, Kona Coast, Hawaii**

Terence was a primary reason for our being in Hawaii. The AllChemical Arts conference, which focused on the influence of psychedelics on the art community, was conceived of—in part—by Terence, who along with Ken Symington and Manuel Torres produced the event. But more than a simple shared love of art, it was also our concern for Terence's health that brought us to the island, alongside the knowledge that this might-well be the last time that we had to spend with him.

We were a bit surprised to find, for all intents and purposes, the same old Terence. To look at him, and to listen to him, one would have had little idea that there was a tumor eating away at his brain. A long introductory rap and the traditional question and answer period kicked off the first official day of the gathering. It was clear

that Terence had held onto his wit, and his ability to mesmerize an audience with another one of his well-crafted, improvisational, meandering monologues—a McKenna hallmark. Throughout the week of the event, at other talks and over meals, it also became clear that Terence had not given up. He was still probing the depths, asking questions and seeking to understand what was happening.

Always generous with his time, even when it became obvious that it may be slipping away, Terence was happy to do an interview. On a sunny day we sat on the green hills looking over the ocean, and spoke of his condition, the potential state of non-existence known as "death," and of course, psychedelics and art. We are thankful for the time we had.

— Jon Hanna &
Sylvia Thyssen

Sylvia: Certainly we wanted to ask you first off about the experience you've been through lately with your brain tumor; how that's affected you, and how you feel about it.

Terence: Well, it's been an experience. It's not yet defined, so that makes it a little difficult to judge. I mean, is it the bad summer of '99, or is it the end of everything? And it won't be clear for a while. It was bad enough as "the bad summer of '99." The good news is that I discovered I don't really think that I'm afraid of death, which I assumed I would be. I am a little concerned about dying, and would like to get a little more clear just what's involved in that. It's a huge inconvenience, I have to say...

Jon: Do you feel as though your experiences with entheogens have prepared you, or paved the way for an attitude that lacks the fear when facing death?

Terence: I assume that must be it. I assume it must be spending so much time in those psychedelic places. The way I think of it, is that the analogy is to physics. I mean biological death is the black hole for organisms. All it means is, you know, when you go into that black hole, no information can be sent back. There is no way of judging what actually happens. Every culture on earth has assumed some kind of survival after death in some form. I don't particularly assume that. On the other hand, given that people exist in this world, embodied, anything could be possible. And these deeper psychedelic cultures—you know the Mayan, Tibetan, and so forth—seem to come up with the data that we should assume this kind of survival after death. But to imagine it in any way is pretty difficult. Maybe life is some kind of distillation through higher dimensions. But it certainly is... we are certainly three-



dimensional, and it's very hard to imagine us as two-dimensional beings, with a space/time that's three-dimensional...

But, I would assume that most psychedelic people, being told they had six to nine months to live, would behave pretty much as I have behaved. I mean, what else? What are you going to do? You can't rant and rail. There are different things to be done on this side. What should you do? Should you do everything that you always wanted to do and didn't do? So that means I should be flying to Florida to see a shuttle launch, on my way to see the great pyramids, on my way to Ireland, on my way to somewhere else? Or do you want to become a cure chaser, flying to the arms of John of God in São Paulo, who does psychic surgery on 14,000 people a day? Or do you just want to go home and do "why meism?" And one thing I have learned, or I'm learning—I think I'm learning it—is that your life is not a story. So when something like this happens to you, it's kind of futile to go back through your life and ask, "What did I do wrong? Was it playing with the asbestos dust in the construction yard? Was it the carbon tetrachloride used to kill the butterflies? Was it daily Cannabis for 28 years?" (laughs)

Jon: Your last point is something that one person on the 'net brought up to me, when discussing your situation. He asked, "Geeze, you don't think that it was the psychedelic drugs that Terence used, do you?" And it just doesn't really seem like it would be to me. There doesn't seem to be any indication that would point to that. Otherwise there would be a whole lot more of us with brain tumors.

Terence: When I got with these cancer doctors I said,

"Look, if you want to guilt-trip me, that's fine. What about the drugs?" And they all said, "No! Oh my God, what an idea! Inconceivable!" And I also asked, "Well, what about a lifelong history of severe migraine headaches?" Again, "Nothing whatsoever to do with it." I don't believe this about the migraines. I think anybody who had migraines as bad as I did for as long as I did... it had to have something to do with it. But then, you know, people who don't like drugs, or intellectuals, or troublemakers, can look at my situation and say, "Well, look at what happened to this guy? This is a perfect example of God's retribution striking somebody down." If you want to believe it, believe it.

It is ironic... I mean brain cancer of all things. Because I used to think about, what was my fear about how I related to my career? What was the worst thing that could happen? And I always thought that the worst thing that could happen would be to go nuts. And then people would say, "Whoa, you know this guy McKenna, the mushroom guy. You know what happened to him? He's been in a back ward for several years now." My situation now is worse; this is considerable orders of magnitude worse!

But then there's the possibility that I'll live. Which would then be viewed by a number of different people different ways. It has some political implication—very small political implication...

You know, you don't hear the word "cancer," but that you hear the word "miracle." It's like "wife beating" and "alcohol," it's like "circuses" and "lions." It just all goes together. And being told the moment of your own death, or the rough moment of three to six months, is pretty interesting. I mean very few people have that opportunity here, whatever it is. To mentally pack your bags, and say, "Well, hmm..." And also to contemplate non-entity. I always assumed that my death would come in some horrible ten minutes on a freeway somewhere, and it would be complete chaos, and horrible agony, and then the final darkness, and it would be brief. Quick. No time to call lawyers, no time to reread Heidegger, or anything like that. Apparently, maybe not. Anyway, if I go through this and then I don't die, it is like a permanent high. It is like, "Wow, does this shit turn on the lights." It just turns on the lights. And these cancer doctors are unrelenting. They just look you straight in the eye, and they say, "No one escapes." That's what the guy said to me, he said, "No one escapes."

Jon: It makes me think of something that Christian Rätsch said about the diagnosis of HIV/AIDS being a sort of voodoo death curse. When someone is said to have AIDS, that's it. And it's almost like the performance of a psychological magic that kills any chance for the person to postpone their death, or to get well. I think that a sick person has to accept the possibility that it is going to

happen, but they don't have to accept the inevitability that it is going to happen. So the way that you describe the message given by the doctors is...

Terence: Well, I suppose that they tell them in medical school, "Don't raise false hope. Cover your ass. And if a disease is incurable, tell them that it's incurable." And it's such an imprecise thing, disease. All spun around diet and attitude. But it has been very, very interesting. And what you become for other people. You become an object of fascination. There's some kind of power in dying, or walking around with a death sentence. And I'm sure going to get to find what kind of power it is.

Jon: Do you feel as though there are written works that you need to complete? I know that you had been working on a book with another author...

Terence: Yeah. Well, I have books ready to go. But, you know I'm very realistic. And I suppose these things will get published in time. But, there's a lot of younger people coming up, and I'm glad for it. I mean people like yourself. And, the Lycaeus people. And all you guys at MAPS. I think, if no more of Terence McKenna were published or recorded, there's plenty of Terence McKenna out there. It would be good for my children to get a little more of this into the market. But do I feel cut off in mid spiel? No, I don't feel cut off in mid spiel. It's good to rotate the spokesman, or spokespeople, every once in a while. And I think that this whole thing is changing. I'm not sure that it is an entirely happy story. But Europe will shame the United States into better drug laws. And, there are just too many loopholes. *Salvia divinorum* is a certain kind of loophole. Ayahuasca is a different sort of loophole. GHB is a kind of loophole. There are just so many.

Jon: And it's a constantly shifting landscape, because as soon as something is scheduled, the people interested in these drugs move one step ahead by responding to the new laws. Unless they make everything illegal, a point that we may be coming to...

Terence: Yeah, right.

Sylvia: They haven't made art illegal. Which makes me want to shift this conversation a little bit. Tell us one delightful thing for yourself that has resulted from the AllChemical Arts Conference.

Terence: Well, I'm very keen for these Active Worlds, these virtual walk-around pieces of art. [see www.activeworlds.com for more information on this technology, and surf the links at www.digitalspace.com for more about the virtual AllChemical Arts Conference gallery.] I always said that virtual reality could be a

technology for sharing the inside of our heads, and that's what we have not had. If we could show hallucinatory states as they actually are, the argument would be over. And so in a way it's interesting. It's a challenge to us, to use the animation tools and the scripting tools, to be as good as we say we can be. And so its no more of a hassle with the establishment. It actually lays the obligation back on the artist. And if artists would rise to that challenge, I think incredible art would begin. Transcendent art worthy of the name could be created.

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Jon: With my own visions, the only kind of medium that they could be completely conveyed with would be the computer. The only parallel that there is, is computer animation, which sometimes is already so much like these visions, and could be even more so. So it really is an amazing tool.

Terence: That Active World, "Pollen," that we were looking at. There should be an effort out of our community to get together a core group of designers, animators, texture-mapping people, and just build. And build a psychedelic world where that's the charter, "This world is psychedelic. This world is for psychedelic people." And it's probably just a matter of suggesting it in the conference room here today to get it going, at this point.

The thing about drugs that will, I think, finally bring them to the surface and defeat the establishment, is that they're such a splendid way to make money. The corporations will never let that slip. The pharmaceutical industry is so huge, and so powerful, and eyeing the psychoactive market with such interest, because the stuff that's been done with the

serotonergic re-uptake inhibitors is edging into that area. You know, suddenly shyness is a treatable psychiatric disorder.

Jon: Sure. An additional area of note is nootropics; there's a growing interest in improving cognitive functioning through chemistry. And then the other one that seems to be a very promising sign for those sharing our area of interest is Viagra®, what with Bob Dole on television promoting what keeps him up. Here's something that is entirely related to pleasure. A drug that is allowing people to have pleasure. Although it is treating a specific dysfunction, a "legitimate" pleasure drug is something that's almost unheard of in our society, other than alcohol.

Terence: You're right. That's changed the dialog. That's really a watershed product. In fact, other companies are furiously trying to produce their own "Viagra."

Jon: And faster-acting forms.

Terence: Right. And there will be orgasm enhancers. And there will be memory enhancers. All of this will come, but incrementally. And governments will probably just have to stand back before big capitalism, and let it happen.

Jon: Getting back to the topic of death, and also psychedelic states of mind. One of the things that a lot of people report in psychedelic states are "past life regression" experiences. And one thing that I was thinking related to these states of mind—and something that you've commented on—is that they seem like they are specific spaces. And not something that one would think of creating in one's mind by their own volition. Especially the states that one enters with DMT. When I'm in that state, it is hard to accept that my mind is fabricating what I am seeing. It is almost like I am really visiting some other place. Like the DMT has opened a portal to this other place, an other dimension. Being embodied in the physical realm here—where we feel so connected to material, concrete reality—it is hard for us to comprehend that these mental spaces may have their own reality, divorced from the viewer. But perhaps these other realms that we are visiting are also physical in some manner for those beings "living" in that "dimension."

Terence: Well, they're informational. I think information theory has a future. In other words, what's real is what can pass a certain set of criteria for real. And if it can pass those criteria, it is real. And the rest is just philosophical quibbling. You know in that poem by Yeats, speaking of death, he says:

*Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enameling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium*

Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

In other words, a machine—a little bird. A thing of gold and gold enameling. And before I got sick, I assumed that sometime in the next 30 years I would download myself into some kind of form of immortality. I mean I think that's what the whole hullabaloo is about—some kind of immortality. It may be that tasteful people won't want it. But how many tasteful people do you know? Everybody else will be trampling the furniture to get to it. And the human experience is infinitely redefinable through human interaction with technology. And this has been going on slowly, glacially slowly for millennia. But now it's just in your face. It's explicate.

This illness is such a weird thing to take on board. I never was a morbid person, and I always had a kind of a... well, I haven't spent much time being sick in my life. And then this has such a paradoxical aspect to it, because... well, I have dizzy spells, but I don't feel like I'm dying for Christ's sake. That's crazy. I feel largely pretty healthy, and because I'm paying more attention to my health than ever before, I probably am healthier.

Jon: Have you cut back dramatically on any type of drug use?

Terence: At first I cut back on Cannabis, because it seemed to trigger the seizures. But then I easily got that corrected. Now I'm smoking as much dope as I ever did. I haven't been taking ayahuasca, because the vomiting reflex is too scary in terms of the brain seizure reflex. They're really closely related. So I've been taking psilocybin. We happen to have some actual pure psilocybin, not mushrooms. And it's great. So I guess the answer is no. I want to probe into it, I want to understand it. I mean obviously, death is a very big deal.

Jon: My father recently died suddenly related to complications from blood thinner given to him for a heart attack. It caused his brain to bleed-out, and he was diagnosed as brain dead. This occurred over a two-day period. He was still there, but his brain was gone. So as a comparison, in one way the situation that you're in is wonderful, in that it allows a grace period for you to accomplish some of the things that you want to get done. Do you feel as though it has had a strong effect on your personal interactions with others?

Terence: Oh yeah, that is mostly what it's about. Is seeing... if you can forgive, you can forget. And there's a lot of forgiving and forgetting to do. Yeah, that's the grace of it, is that you can actually arrange, not the whole structure of it, but just how you want it to be. Crazy... Well, it's been a pleasure talking with you both. •