

SKAPASTORA-

Leaves of the Shepherdess

Conference at Breitenbush Hot Springs, Dec. 7-10, 2000

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I was invited by MAPS to attend the 3rd World Conference on *Salvia divinorum* at Breitenbush Hot Springs in Oregon, Dec. 7-10, 2000. I was delighted to go and report on the conference, especially since Breitenbush is one of my favorite holiday spots for healing and relaxation. The hot spring resort specializes in organically grown vegetarian meals, yoga, and healing mineral pools. Breitenbush has been the center of environmental activism to preserve the Opal Creek watershed from logging. It is remotely located and there is no communication with the outside world beyond the radio channels available through the office for emergency use. Their usual "no drugs" policy at Breitenbush was waived in light of the fact that participants at the conference were to be given fresh *Salvia divinorum* leaves to chew if they felt so inclined.



From L to R: Ralph Metzner; Jonathan Ott, Rob Montgomery, Daniel Siebert, Kat Harrison, Dale Pendell, Breitenbush Staff, Bret Blosser

Salvia Divinorum (SD) is a member of the Sage family whose name means "Sage of the Diviner". The herb contains a very powerful visionary component called salvinorin-A. This diterpine substance attracted a lot of attention in the field of pharmacology in the mid-nineties because it was not an alkaloid. Alkaloids are a chemical family which has been regarded for a century or so as the only one likely to possess psychoactive members.

During the past two years I have been carrying out research (funded by MAPS) to see whether or not *Salvia divinorum* could enhance meditation when used in very low doses. (Editor's Note: See the MAPS Psychedelic Project List for details: <http://www.maps.org/research/salvia/sdmeditation.html> . See also Ian's article in the MAPS Bulletin, Vol. IX, #1, Spring 1999, page 36: <http://www.maps.org/news-letters/v09n1/09136sou.html>.)

We have found that one gram of dried leaves can be washed with hot water to remove the bitter components, pressed to remove most of the water and held under the tongue for twenty minutes or so, after which the remaining plant is spit out. The herb was found to greatly enhance people's ability to meditate. Our study is just starting up again after a period of inactivity. We are hoping to prove this meditation-enhancing effect in a scientific experiment. We are using a questionnaire designed by Dr. Rick Strassman, modified from a set of questions he used to evaluate DMT in another study.

Professionally, I am an electronic product inventor, specializing in the creation of medical, industrial and acoustical tools as well as toys. My newest work involves a rescue device for the Canadian Coast Guard to listen for people calling for help at sea. This interesting project can be seen at <http://www.rescueears.com>. As a psychedelic researcher I am an amateur...motivated by the love of the herb and the desire to find a valuable use for *Salvia divinorum*. Amateur scientists are extremely important in astronomy as well as many other fields. Perhaps their importance in psychedelic research will grow if restrictive drug laws continue to hamper professional investigators.

Conference Presenters

The presenters at the conference included Ralph Metzner, Kathleen (Kat) Harrison, Bret Blosser, Rob Montgomery, Jonathan Ott, Daniel Siebert and Dale Pendell. The conference lectures kept us busy from 9:30 AM until 9 or 10 PM each evening. I kept extensive notes on a palm pilot with keyboard and took a few pictures of each speaker. Every lecture was very interesting and I observed that most people in attendance were also keenly interested in each speaker. At the end of each day most attendees could be found relaxing in the hot pools, looking at the stars or snow falling, and discussing the conference and other related issues.

The organizers of the conference, Bret Blosser and Rob Montgomery said that the purposes of the conference were many:

- 1) To describe the use of the herb *Salvia divinorum* tradition.
- 2) To describe the modern techniques of SD usage, including the use of the very powerful active ingredient salvinorin-A. This extracted drug is one of the most powerful visionary agents ever discovered and can be quite hazardous emotionally for the user if it is taken without the respect that it deserves. Safety issues include the importance of a "sitter" to watch over the SD user who may become ambulatory and temporarily unaware of his or her surroundings. Simple emotional support is sometimes required if the person becomes agitated or fearful. *Salvia divinorum* is not a drug one tries for entertainment.
- 3) To describe the cultivation techniques of growing this rather

delicate herb, easily destroyed by insects. Organic techniques were recommended for its cultivation and tobacco tea to keep away the insects.

- 4) To describe the process of divination both theoretically and experientially and to give the attendees the chance to try chewing a small number of leaves of *Salvia divinorum* in a peaceful setting. Attendees could choose to explore divination both with and without the use of the herb.

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Ralph Metzner

The first speaker was Ralph Metzner who has been exploring states of consciousness and transformational practices for over thirty years.

He is a psychotherapist and professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, where he teaches courses on altered states of consciousness, ecopsychology and ecological worldviews. In his presentation he stated that answers to modern ecological and spiritual crises may be found by looking deep into the past—to the ancient indigenous religions and shamanic practices of Pagan Europe. This little-understood tradition is the ancestral heritage of so many of European descent. It includes the god Odin and his relentless quest for knowledge; Freya, the goddess of sexuality, abundance, and seership; the shamans, warriors, and priestesses; and magical plants and incantations. The riches of this spiritual path are still abundantly available to all through the practices of divination.

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tween ordinary reality and non-ordinary reality ... or between the Spirit World and "consensus" reality. So-called witches were known in Europe as those who could walk between both worlds.

Crossing the boundaries between ordinary reality and non-ordinary reality and back, and carrying new information,

is the process of divination. Drumming is one means to experience these alternate worlds, as is drugs, breathing, dancing, praying, chanting and other techniques. Divination can be used for both acquiring information and for healing. Low doses of drugs are best for divination because we need to be conscious ... we need to be aware and have some memory of the experience. For divination purposes we use a mild sensory-enhancing effect. Entheogens amplify perceptions ... divination can be done with and without them, for the process of divination is independent of the drugs.

For divination the crucial thing is intention or question. The degree of dissociation from your surroundings is another important variable. Some drugs, including *Salvia divinorum*, *Datura*, as well as ketamines, are more dissociative than others, such as the classical tryptamines. The degree of dissociation in *Salvia divinorum* is dose dependent. Low doses are not so dissociative, hence better for divination. It takes some mental discipline and intentional ritual to use the herb effectively. Being in a questioning or receptive state is very significant. You ask a question and listen for the answer. Traditionally, in divination, as in healing, there is always a cost or sacrifice to be made, such as fasting or praying.

After his talk, Ralph promised that on that first evening he would conduct a class in divination and invited us to either use favorite herbs to amplify the experience or not. In any case he stressed the use of very low doses of herbs so that we had a full memory of the experience.

That evening we were led in one divination to go into the past - back to our birth, and back even further to the time of conception. It was a powerful experience with drumming, incense and chanting. We were led to the roots of the tree of life. Later we were led in a divination into the future by becoming a bird of our choice. The bird flew high and could see the future stretched out before us. This was a powerful experience for everyone. Later, when I talked to people, many had not done any drugs or herbs. The ritual was a powerful effect on its own.

After the divination I did a little exercise on my own. My wife had just recovered from major brain surgery. The good news is that she will be fine and have a normal life span. However, I was still traumatized at the conference from the remembrance of seeing her in intensive care on the edge of life and death. So I did a divination ritual of healing. I used a very small amount of SD about an hour before, by placing the dried reconstituted leaves under my tongue. After an hour there is little effect from this herb except an increased ability to visualize. The healing ritual was simple ... I held the memory of my wife in intensive care as clearly in my mind as possible and also held my attention as clearly as possible on the present (benign) outcome of good health for her. I shook with terror at the memory but soon felt the trauma melt away as it was neutralized by the present. It was a deep healing that released me from that experience. This technique shows a positive use for *Salvia divinorum* or some other psychedelic that might form the basis for a research project. The visionary plant could help people overcome traumatic experiences by allowing

them to re-live the experience with greater clarity and in the light of their present situation in the world.

Kat Harrison

On the afternoon of the first day Kat Harrison gave a presentation including slides showing her work with the Mazatec peoples who use SD ritually in Mexico. She is an ethnobotanist, photographer, and artist who has traveled to Mexico for many years studying and practicing SD rituals with a family willing to share their experiences. In her talk she spoke of the following:

Salvia divinorum is a spirit to which (the Mazatec people) pray and ask for guidance, which they associate with a guiding spirit who is thought of as a shepherdess. The name of the conference ... "Ska Pastora, Leaves of the Shepherdess" is based on this concept. The native people are careful to honor ritual guardian spirits who are present in their SD rituals. These spirits serve to guide and protect them during the experience.

Vision-inducing mushrooms and SD are sometimes used by the same families, although mushrooms are available at a different time of the year. The leaves or mushrooms are always measured out in pairs. The SD rituals are often used for healing and are led by women or men, either alone or together. Kat finds it especially interesting to work with native midwives. Altars for SD and mushroom rituals often contain images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and other saints.

The families are quite secretive of these rituals, possibly because of persecution by the Spaniards as early as 1600. The Spanish regarded the visionary plants as the work of the devil.

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One example of such a healer, an 80-year-old curandero, looks at patients in the dark. Cloudy areas or dark areas mean that there is a problem in this area of the body. The therapist then tries to lighten up the dark areas with herbs rubbed on the body and other ritual practices including the use of SD by the healer, in order to gain insight into the cure. This traditional practice of using SD goes back hundreds of years. It has avoided attention until the early 70's and is now established around the world by cultivation. It cannot reproduce by seed, but rather by cuttings passed down through the generations.

Kat is very fond of the plant and sees all such plants as working spirits. She has acquired the native perceptions and uses SD in the traditional way in her own life. Surprising information that comes to mind from nowhere can be remembered and be useful. She described that recently she needed healing and could feel that day-to-day responsibilities and stress were the cause of her illness. She did some SD leaves, incense and meditated while watching her cats. Ritual prayers for healing were carried out with candles. She asked for her

load to be lightened. And she asked for the Shepherdes to be present. She is 20 feet tall and infinitely benevolent. Kat saw the Shepherdes take away the burdens one by one. She thanked her in many ways and suddenly found herself singing. La Pastora ... La Pastora ... the song goes around and around and was sung again and again. Other phrases came and the song became an invocation. Her stress was healed and she felt well again after the experience. Kat recommended growing tobacco near your *Salvia divinorum* and to use it in rituals. Ritual tobacco varieties are never sold because they are considered sacred. In a later lecture we learned that tobacco serves a very useful function in repelling the insects that tend to attack *Salvia divinorum* plants. A final recommendation for a healing ritual was to use SD to relive a past painful experience in a more positive way ... in effect, to change your history.

Bret Blosser

Bret is an anthropologist who has also studied the Mazatec peoples and their *Salvia divinorum* rituals. Recently he has become interested in tracing back the historical records of the Spanish to find references to SD that might enlighten us about its' past usage. It was a most intriguing lecture outlining the records found at the Archivo Nacional de la Nacion in Mexico City about a year and a half ago. The Mexican scholar Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran had published extracts from documents that mentioned pipiltzintli as a psychoactive plant used in healing in his groundbreaking study, *Medicine and Magic: the process of acculturation within the colonial structure* (1963). Bret located a few more documents from the library relating to pipiltzintli on his own. The lecture consisted mainly of quotes from Spanish authorities about native drug use in religious and healing rituals dating from the 1600's. The puzzle unfolds in such a way as to suggest that pipiltzintli is in fact *Salvia divinorum*. The evidence is based largely on Spanish Inquisition records of seizures of sacred herbs, and fines given to native people caught either growing such herbs or engaged in rituals felt to be demonic. These records state that pipiltzintli was pulled up by the roots (ruling out psilocybin mushrooms) and that they grew in areas of great rainfall and cool climates (typical for SD). The most interesting record mentioning pipiltzintli was from 1769 and was an edict condemning the use of rituals and specifically the use of this herb. Several arrests were made around this time, and the details suggested that *Salvia divinorum* was seized by the sheriff. Several records of investigations in the late 1600's also showed that herbs similar to *Salvia divinorum* could be associated with the name pipiltzintli.

The connection between demonic practices and visionary herbs that were established by the Spanish Christians may explain the peculiar dread that western cultures, particularly in the USA, have held for these herbs. Perhaps deep in our cultural memories in North America there is an association between visionary herbs and evil practices dating from early Christian prejudices of the 1600's. It is interesting to note that the modern Mexican families who have taught both Bret and Kat about the use of *Salvia divinorum* were deeply convinced that the herb was illegal. This demonstrates clearly that fear of

a law can come down through the generations long after the law has ceased to exist. So also perhaps the fear of hallucinogens has come down to us in North America through the 400-year-old Spanish Inquisition beliefs and persecutions. The Inquisition would of course have been active in those parts of the US that were once part of Mexico. This is only a theory of course, but it helped me to understand the irrationality of modern drug laws.

Jonathan Ott

Jonathan is a well-known writer on the chemistry of a number of psychoactive herbs. His lecture was on *Salvia divinorum* Pharmacognosy. He began by describing a Mexican method of SD ingestion in which the leaves were rubbed between the hands until it became a juice. The history of our awareness of SD was traced back to research in 1938 but the exact identity of the plant was not known at this time. Wasson and Hoffman discovered the actual plant in 1958 and it was named *Salvia divinorum* in 1962. Hoffman took several gallons of the juice to Switzerland but was unable to find an active ingredient. He assumed that the ingredient was very unstable and had been lost. Various people tried to establish the active ingredient and to standardize the dose. However there was much confusion and the estimate ranged from 6 leaves to 150 leaves. This was due to the fact that SD is inactive when eaten and the transfer of the active ingredient only occurs as the herb is held in the mouth. Experiments by amateur scientists established this in a simple way ... the herb was made into a juice with a blender and the volunteers drank it quickly without holding it in the mouth. They then washed out their mouths with water. No matter how much they consumed in this way there was no effect. On the other hand, if the same volunteers held 2 to 6 chewed leaves in the mouth, the effects were very noticeable. It appears that the digestive process destroys the active ingredient.

The active ingredient named salvinorin-A was discovered in 1982 and is known to be so potent that 500 micrograms produces a profound effect. Daniel Siebert was the first person

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to consume the pure active ingredient in 1993.

Amateur Research

The importance of amateur science in the study of pharmacologically active plants was discussed at length. While professional scientists evaluating possible psychoactive plants must work for years on animals, amateurs can simply try them out for themselves. Instantly they can determine if a plant looks promising. Double-blind testing can follow immediately with human volunteers. Jonathan pointed out that in the field of psychoactive herbs, animal tests mean nothing. A good example is catnip which appears to be a powerful plant to cats. In human testing catnip is only mildly active or inactive. Conversely many powerful drugs such as LSD can have little effect on some animals.

The issue of amateur research came up and Jonathan suggested the following as a guideline for researchers to follow ...

- 1) Consult the professional literature.
- 2) Consult the ethnographic studies that show the native usage. If the native people use a tea, do not grind the herb up and eat it. Thousands of years of experimentation may have led up to that tea technique in order to avoid an insoluble poison. He has observed many an amateur poisoning himself by not following a traditional method for herbal consumption.
- 3) Be careful and be conservative about dosage.
- 4) If we are looking for visionary effects, amateur self-experimentation can lead to the most significant results. Data on rats will not be of any use.
- 5) The psychonautic approach is the most efficient way to find an active ingredient. For example you find that there are five alkaloids in some plants. You can tell from their structure approximate dosage and through experimentation it is easy to find what is active.
- 6) You should make only one trial a day on yourself at the most. Otherwise the chemical may build up in your body if it is not quickly eliminated. The result will be an incorrect assessment of the correct dosage.

Daniel Siebert

Daniel is an ethnobotanist, educator, and artist. He has been researching *Salvia divinorum* for over ten years and was the first person to work on the human pharmacology of salvinin-A and to clearly identify this compound as the psychoactive principal of the plant. He has studied *Salvia divinorum* in its native habitat and has worked with it under the guidance of Mazatec shamans. His work appears in scientific journals and other publications. Mr. Siebert is the creator of the popular *Salvia Divinorum* Research and Information Center web site at <http://salvia.lycaeum.org/>. He is also the founder and moderator of Sagewise, a closed membership email-based discussion forum for *Salvia divinorum* researchers and professionals. He currently resides in Malibu, California, and is completing work on his book *Divine Sage*.

Daniel stated that his first experiment with salvinin-A was too strong and that he would not repeat such a high dose. But, he has used the pure compound many, many times since then, and sees nothing wrong in using it (provided that the dosage is carefully measured). He owns an analytical balance that can measure sub-milligram doses. People who do not have access to this type of balance, should not experiment with the pure compound, because they would not be able to judge the dose accurately. One of my own friends consumed a large dose of a concentrate and said it was the most frightening experience of his life. Everyone at the conference was in agreement that it was extremely undesirable to work with pure salvinin-A without the proper equipment. It is simply too powerful and difficult to administer.

Daniel demonstrated a new way to consume *Salvia*

divinorum by inhalation of the vapors given off by a 1/4 gram of dried leaves. The leaves were heated with a digitally-controlled heat gun at 520 degrees F. He uses a glass pipe with a screen on top and bottom. He recommends the technique for health reasons. In a demonstration he showed that after fully vaporizing the active ingredient there was a barely detectable smoke. Then he raised the temperature and a huge quantity of bad smelling smoke was released. He recommended 1/4 gram of dried leaves for this method and also warned that it can produce a very powerful result. Daniel has

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developed an extract that is designed for convenient sub-lingual use. This technique gives the user a great deal of control over dosage, and the effects come on over a 20 minute period. This very safe technique deserves the attention of researchers doing double-blind studies because it is very easy to concoct similar tasting extracts.

Daniel mentioned briefly the double-blind experiment with which I am involved - using fresh leaves held under the tongue. Daniel went on to describe medical and psychological effects he has observed in his years of experimentation with *Salvia divinorum*. It is a diuretic when consumed orally. Feeling nurtured and cared for is a commonly experienced phenomenon that is most often associated with oral ingestion. It was believed to relieve upset stomach, nausea and anemia, but Daniel's studies do not support these effects. Headaches can sometimes be relieved in low doses. Anthropological evidence suggests that swollen abdomens can be reduced. A small percentage (15%) experience sweating and some people feel hot or cold. Few other effects of a physical nature are observed. Many people find that very low doses are conducive to erotic contact. But he emphasized that this is only true for very low doses. Psychological effects include illusory movement or a compulsion to physically move. Space distortions are common. Sounds can become colors or shapes. Language distortions happen and you can completely misunderstand words. A feeling of being loved and cared for are common. *Salvia divinorum* in a safe, natural, outdoor environment can be particularly rewarding. Some of the more unusual effects include people feeling they have become other people, other animals, or have moved in time to other eras. Seeing through the eyes of an animal is a typical effect that is useful for divination. A lot of people experience an underlying unity of consciousness.

Dale Pendel

Dale has done a lot of experimental blending of traditional *Salvia divinorum* techniques with world religious traditions. We have lost our tradition of using sacred plants and Dale has been trying to regain this connection. There are published reports indicating that young Mexicans were obtaining dried *Salvia divinorum* leaves in Huatla de Jiménez and smoking them in 'joints' like marijuana for a mild high (Díaz, 1975; Ott,

1975). These reports predate Dale's work with smoked *Salvia divinorum*. At the time, *Salvia divinorum* was generally regarded as a very mild psychoactive herb, at best. It was also commonly believed that the leaves were inactive when dried, so many people were doubtful about the reports of Mexican *Salvia divinorum* smokers. Dale confirmed in his original experiments that the dried leaves were in fact active when smoked, and he was the first to report that smoked *Salvia divinorum* can produce very powerful visionary effects. He thus helped overturn the old notion that *Salvia divinorum* was merely a mild psychoactive herb. Even so he recommends the technique of chewing the leaves for religious or divinatory use.

Dale and friends gave a concert that night called "Oracular Madness", which was a blend of poetry, chanting, music and slides shown by Kat Harrison. It was a very entertaining multimedia presentation that had a peculiar impact on myself. I found myself whistling the haunting musical theme that was chanted and it carried on into my dreams that night.

On the last day of the conference, Rob Montgomery led a discussion of cultivation techniques for those interested in growing SD. The plant grew well in neutral or slightly acidic or basic soil. It benefited from fertilization and lots of watering. Rooting of the plant was so easy that rooting hormone was not recommended. The flowers are apparently quite spectacular and have a beautiful aroma.

The plants are particularly susceptible to attack from aphids and white flies. Tobacco tea was discussed as the ideal organic insecticide. A handful of organic tobacco was used to make a gallon of tea which was either sprayed on the plants or small cuttings might be immersed in the liquid. Newspapers soaked in the tea could be spread out over the soil to kill the larva stage of these pests. The plant was so easily infested with insects that one organic vegetable grower at the conference uses *Salvia divinorum* as a decoy to keep the insects away from his vegetables.

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The most dramatic thing about growing *Salvia divinorum* is the need for shade. You must choose a spot that is out of direct sunlight. Under a tree and beside a fence might be an ideal spot. A place so dark that few plants could even survive there was often found to be ideal for this plant. Some attendees at the conference said that hydroponic gardening methods were ideal for *Salvia divinorum*. This would be an interesting field for investigation, considering that the very low need for light would make hydroponic gardening very easy. The plant also requires a high level of relative humidity. Attendees from dry areas such as Arizona said that it was almost impossible to grow it outdoors in the dry heat. Hydroponic techniques would suit such areas of the world.

When I left the conference on Sunday I was impressed by how much I had learned and was humbled by my ignorance of the subject. The anthropological discussions and divination demonstrations showed me that when we bring "sacred herbs" into our culture we must also import the rituals and healing techniques that have evolved with their use. The herbs are simply tools for healing or divination, possessing little magic of their own. The dosage of this herb need only produce a marginal effect if combined with an appropriate setting and ritual. Through these techniques comes the feeling of protection and guidance that are necessary for benevolent results. I realized I was mistaken in my belief that the "magic was in the drug". The magic is in the intention one holds in the mind while using a visionary herb. After years of experimentation with psychedelics I am just beginning to get an understanding of their best uses through the study of traditional practices.

This visionary herb can easily become an integral part of modern life but there is a need to study the many centuries of traditional use in other cultures. Based on our current research and prevailing philosophies we will have to develop our own rituals to assist in the use of this herb. As our own careful and intentional ways to use *Salvia divinorum* evolve we will be able to tap its deep potential for healing and learning.