

# Meditation and Psychedelics

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**B**oth meditation and psychedelics are close to my heart. I'm grateful to both of them for having shown me that true essence of the heart, which is the heart of everyone and everything, our ultimate belonging and source of meaning.

For starters, psychedelics began disrupting my, up until then, fairly smooth and protected life - enough to be able to ask, for the first time, a deep and urgent question. This kind of questioning goes far beyond words and concepts and leaves nothing untouched. We think we know about ourselves and the world. It is incredibly freeing and quite confusing. Next, meditation harmonized it all again, so that I could live with a measure of integrity and ease. Then, after many years of rigorous formal practice and complete abstinence, psychedelics have once again inspired

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my 'beginner's mind', getting me out of the habits and ruts that seem to be part of the package deal of life and which, though necessary and comforting, stand in the way of our fresh, direct experience. Now, I haven't traveled the psychedelic path much for about two years. It looks like everything has its time, life comes in cycles.

This is how it was for me, and it does not seem to be so unusual. The dramatic rise of interest in Yoga, meditation and eastern religion in the 60s and 70s was closely related to the psychedelic movement. A poll conducted by the Buddhist magazine "Tricycle" shows that 83% of the 1,454 respondents had some firsthand experience with psychedelics.

During the 80s and 90s many of the spiritual, once young ex-hippie communities had become middle-aged meditation centers with relatively few newcomers under the age of 30. The next generation seemed less interested in meditation, alternative lifestyles - and also in psychedelics.

On my recent trip through the States, during which I visited a number of meditation centers across the country, I noticed many young faces again. Being accompanied by my twenty-year-old daughter, I had easy and quick access to them and I was not surprised to learn that most of them have had some contact with mind-altering plants and chemicals.

So what is the relationship between psychedelics and meditation? One way to approach such a question is to first look at the meaning of the words independently. "Meditation" has roots in the Latin "meditari", which in turn has roots in the indo-Germanic "med", having something to do with "measuring, walking, staking out". We could define it as the act of exploring, walking in, measuring, staking out the sphere of our consciousness. "Psychedelic" is based on the Greek words "psyche" and "delos", the first meaning "breath, the seat of consciousness", the second "clear, visible". Psychedelics can help us to clear our mind and make visible the nature of consciousness.

So from the etymological point of view, through very different lineages, they are pointing in the same direction, the investigation of our inner being. This process is also known as 'practice' and the linguistic relationship of the two words mirrors the actual experience of many people: Very different means to investigate a very similar subject: Ourselves, the meaning of existence, the Ultimate.

Viewed from yet another angle, the difference might not be as big as it seems: neurologists have discovered that physical exhaustion, prolonged fasting and other austerities (such as the Buddha underwent before his Great Enlightenment) as well as wound fever (such as Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, as well as many other Christian Saints, suffered from at the time of their spiritual awakening) produce changes in the brain that are virtually indistin-

guishable from the changes produced by the intake of psychedelics.

At this point it might be useful to make a distinction between the virtue or goal of practice, the loving, beneficent and constant awareness of this never-ending process of exploration, and the methods that aim at getting us there. The former is universal, true and necessary for everyone. Dogen refers to this when he states that “Zazen has nothing to do with sitting or standing or laying down” - and St. Paul when he admonishes us to “pray at all times”. When it comes to the methods, we have a choice, and all of them work sometimes and sometimes they don’t. Some work better for some people than for others, and all of them have their relative strengths and weaknesses.

Traditional mainstream Buddhist training does not include the use of mind-altering substances. With very few possible exceptions, they are simply not mentioned in the sutras and other texts. Some think that they are dealt with in the precept that states “a disciple of the Buddha does not intoxicate mind or body of self or others”. Others think differently: the same poll mentioned above found that almost 60% of the responding Buddhist

practitioners felt that psychedelics and Buddhism do mix and that they would consider taking psychedelics in a sacred context (in the “under 20” category this percentage was 90%). The traditional understanding of intoxicants refers to all mental and physical phenomena that foster confusion through fanning our likes and dislikes. And as the Buddha never fails to point out, ultimately everybody has to decide for themselves what is what.

While it is true that the setting and the techniques used at traditional Buddhist retreats are not geared toward the use of psychedelics, it is quite obvious that skills in meditation, the practice of being at peace within one’s body and mind, even in uncomfortable places, can be of great help in the course of a psychedelic session. Not only from this point of view, one could say that the practice of meditation is available to more people than the practice of psychedelics.

Are there any dangers involved with the use of psychedelics? Yes, there are. They are very powerful sacraments, or medicine, and they have to be approached with the utmost respect, preferably under the guidance of an experienced friend. The fears most commonly voiced are damage to body and brain as well as dangerous

behavior and addiction. The classic psychedelics, unlike substances such as heroin, cocaine, and alcohol, have virtually no organic toxicity in the quantities in which they are ingested. Their addictive risk is too small to be measured when used in ceremonial settings. Psychedelic traditions from the Vedic dawn to Eleusis to the Native American Church have succeeded in creating ritual contexts in which hazardous acting-out is virtually unknown.

But what of the dramatic changes which psychedelics can have on our psyche and spirit, our heart/mind, our consciousness? Of course this effect is the very reason for taking them in the first place. Is it ultimately helpful or harmful? A moment after his great awakening, a Zen master exclaimed “...my life is completely ruined...”. As we get closer to the life force itself - not just our ideas about it - our categories and points of view are put into perspective, and their relative nature becomes obvious. And it is from this perspective that we must judge the value of any given experience.

Buddha recommends to view our life “as a dream, a flash in the darkness, a star in the morning dawn, a bubble in a stream, an illusion of the senses”. The aim of practice is to wake up from that dream. One ques-

tion often asked after a deep experience is: Was it a genuine awakening, or was it just another dream within a dream, another illusion within an illusion? Personally, I don’t worry too much about this. A primary religious experience is the seed for a spiritual life, no more and no less. No matter how genuine the encounter with the Ultimate might be, it does not guarantee a genuine spiritual life. The experience may be authentic, but what counts is our daily life - and how authentic it is depends on how we live, its quality, what we do with it. Will we be able to muster up the necessary determination and patience to let the light which we glimpsed for a moment, be it through meditation or psychedelics, gradually penetrate our whole being? Will we allow the experience of oneness and belonging - whether or not it wasn’t really real - to inspire and transform our lives? This is our challenge and our hope, individually and as a species.

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