



Allan Badiner

Zig Zag Zen: An Interview with Author Allan Badiner

JENNIFER BLEYER

Buddhism and psychedelic use have been linked since at least the 1950s, when influential thinkers and writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Alan Watts experimented with both as avenues toward understanding the mind. The tacitly acknowledged connection took a leap forward in 2002 with the publication of Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics, a collection of essays, interviews, articles edited by Allan Badiner, which examines the two realms and their similarities and differences. A new edition of Zig Zag Zen was published in 2015. Badiner, a contributing editor of Tricycle, is a longtime supporter of MAPS.—Jennifer Bleyer

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How did you become involved in Buddhism?

I'd never had any interest or belief in any religion, but when I was in my early 30s, I spent a year traveling in India, and right before returning home I took some advice to enroll in a Buddhist meditation retreat in Sri Lanka. I hated it. My bones ached, the only food was stewed greens, the venue was overrun with bugs, and the bed was a blanket over wood boards. Suddenly, when the ten-day retreat was almost over, I felt free of any pain and almost ecstatic—and not just because I was leaving. The bugs were my relatives. I slept like a baby. I was overtaken by a subtle but persistent wave of ecstasy, and felt a diminished sense of separation from others.

And how were you exposed to psychedelics?

After that I trip I returned to California, and the meditative glow eventually faded. But I had been “bitten” by the Buddhist bug. I took classes with a senior Buddhist monk, studied Pali, the original language of the Buddha, and earned a Masters degree at the College of Buddhist Studies, a small Theravada university in Los Angeles—all because I was trying to understand how to return to the blissful state I had experienced on the retreat. I was writing a column called “Mind and Spirit” for the *LA Weekly* while working on my Buddhist studies, and had a plan to interview Terence McKenna. He accused me of being

an “armchair Buddhist” and challenged me to try sacred plants, such as psilocybin mushrooms. We became friends, and I visited him at his home in Hawaii where he treated me to *yagé*, or ayahuasca, the so-called vine of the soul. Sometime later, I experienced MDMA and got to know Alexander Shulgin. I regularly enjoyed Friday night dinners at the Shulgin home, where the Bay Area psychedelic community gathered. So, indeed, I became formally and viscerally connected to both Buddhism and psychedelics.

How do you describe the relationship between Buddhism and psychedelics?

Both share an interest in the primacy of mind and present moment awareness, and while they are very different in character, the 1950s Beat Generation and the 1960s cultural revolution were both heavily influenced by Eastern wisdom traditions, including Buddhism, as well as LSD, psilocybin, and peyote. I think their relationship manifests in the human pursuit of evolution. Many people seek the compassionate wisdom of the Buddhist philosophy, also known as the Dharma, as well as the psychic reset and transformational power that certain plant substances offer. A kind of practical magic results when the “Zig” zags into Zen—when a time-tested philosophy and ethical system meets plant-assisted changes in consciousness.

Your book identified the complementary natures of Buddhism and psychedelics as facilitators of the “liberation of the mind.” How has it been received in the Buddhist community?

It was fascinating to me that, with only one exception, every American Buddhist teacher I interviewed had personally experienced psychedelics prior to getting into Buddhism. One of the most revered and respected teachers, Jack Kornfield, went so far as to say that were it not for LSD, he would never have been able to grasp the Dharma. It should be noted that *Zig Zag Zen* also presents the thinking of teachers who are clearly not fans of psychedelics. I was secretly hoping for *Zig Zag Zen* to

ruffle a lot of Buddhist feathers, envisioning that the controversy would drive sales. When the book was released, the Buddhist community in general was like, “Buddhism, psychedelics, ok... so?” The anti-*Zig Zag Zen* rallies and Buddhist book boycotts I was imagining never materialized. (laughs)

You said in a recent interview with *Tricycle* that “psychedelic use is an issue for many contemporary Buddhists.” Why is that?

Anyone who becomes seriously focused on spiritual development has to at least consider the issue of psychedelic use. Everyone knows someone who, after taking acid or magic mushrooms, or attending a peyote sweat lodge, experienced themselves as changed forever for the better. In the mid-20th century, famous Buddhist writers like Alan Watts and Ram Dass popularized psychedelics, even as Buddhist centers were filled with young people who had experienced psychedelics and were eager to find more practical and gentle routes to the same “destination.” Added to the question of psychedelic use is the realization that we live in a critical time ecologically. The sixth great extinction is underway. Who would have thought that we would live to see the extinction of elephants, or tigers, or orangutans? Coastal cities are experiencing unremitting flooding, and the end of ice caps is a planetary inevitability. Recognizing the interbeing of people and planet is the fundamental awakening of our time. Buddhists are enlightened by the extent of their compassion—for themselves, for other people, for all living beings, and for the planet itself.

Isn't there a Buddhist rule about not using intoxicants?

Buddhist precepts are not hard rules or commandments but guiding principles meant to facilitate progress on the path. Buddhists refrain from killing, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, and incorrect speech. According to Robert Thurman, the chair of Buddhist studies at Columbia University, the Buddhist fifth precept, which is interpreted by some as prohibiting all substance use, specifically refers to grain alcohol, which was a problem even in the Buddha's day as it's likely to lead to carelessness, and to the user violating the other four precepts. Obviously, one can misuse many substances to the point of intoxication, but it is not correct to say generally that psychedelics are intoxicants.

How did you get involved with MAPS?

I met Rick Doblin through mutual friends when he was a college student, and he had just attended a psychedelic conference at Esalen Institute, my neighbor in Big Sur. He was very excited about the emergence of a psychedelic culture consisting of scientists, physicians, caregivers, and psychiatrists. He had

personally experienced the healing power of psychedelics and told me that he was dedicating his life to making these materials legal and respected for their helpful effects. I promptly told him he was hallucinating, so to speak, and that he should get a job, maybe in academia. These were the Reagan years. Attitudes about cannabis and psychedelics in the '80s were harshly negative. It is a profound testament to the power of psychedelics and of Rick's formidable persistence that now the government is approving clinical testing of psychedelic drugs for medical use. Rick's dream is coming true. The physical, mental, and emotional healing possible with psychedelics makes this pursuit a moral imperative. Rick does not consider himself a Buddhist, but he is definitely in the business of relieving suffering—and that is the primary goal of Buddhism.

Why are you so passionate about MAPS' work?

Well, having entered on the ground floor, I've watched MAPS grow from the moment Rick spoke about his vision in my driveway, to its emergence as an amazing organization making epic and sorely needed change. It is poised to open the first non-profit pharmaceutical company, turning psychedelics and cannabis into prescription medicines; educating therapists in to practice psychedelic-assisted therapy; building a network of clinics, and educating the public about the risks and benefits of these substances. As the psychologist, Ralph Metzner, a contributor to *Zig Zag Zen*, points out: “Two of the most beneficent potential areas for application of psychedelic technologies are in the treatment of addictions and in the psycho-spiritual preparation for the final transition.” I feel totally aligned with this vision.

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Ultimately, what do you hope to achieve through your support of MAPS?

I hope to play a role in helping MAPS raise the funds required for the Phase 3 trials of MDMA as a treatment for PTSD—the critical step to becoming a prescription medicine. Like everyone, I see so many people suffering around me. I have confidence that psychedelics can be a serious medicine, as well as a powerful tool for personal self-development. The Anthropocene—the age of human-driven change to the Earth's natural systems—has ushered in a new urgency for shamanic and psychedelic tools. The clock is ticking. We need all the help available to foment an evolution in our relationships with our neighbors, neighboring nations, and the planet. 🌍

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