

Are Psychedelics Useful in the Practice of Buddhism?

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In the fall of 1996 issue of the Buddhist magazine Tricycle, various teachers of Buddhist meditation practice commented on the value of psychedelic experiences, with opinions of them ranging from helpful to harmful. Here, the author hopes to explain these conflicting viewpoints by describing important aspects of employing psychedelics that must be taken into account for effective results. These embrace proper methodology, which includes set and setting, dose levels, appropriate substances, appropriate intervals, and proper integration of each experience. The author has found the informed use of psychedelics to be a valuable tool in accelerating proficiency and deepening meditative practice and offers recommendations for successful use. The adverse comments of several recognized teachers are evaluated to shed further light on fruitful application of psychedelic substances.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The author wishes to express his appreciation to the management and editors of Tricycle for their special issue on psychedelics and to all the contributors for their willingness to present their views on a controversial subject.

The Buddhist magazine Tricycle devoted its fall of 1996 issue to the topic of psychedelics and Buddhism. The viewpoints of the authors regarding the efficacy of psychedelics on Buddhist practice ranged from a high degree of support to outright opposition. Those who are interested in the possible application of psychedelics to meditative practice might well be puzzled by such a diversity of viewpoints. Yet, the answer is simple. Psychedelics can be used in a great variety of ways for an enormous array of purposes. The results depend greatly on the experience, knowledge, skill, and level of development of the practitioner. Thus, the person presenting his and/or her own particular point of view may or may not be aware of numerous other considerations involved. Widespread unfavorable public bias toward psychedelics has been created by very selective reporting by the media, as observed by Walsh (1982). As Walsh reports, this bias is so unfavorable that a reputable journal refused to accept an article that indicated some beneficial outcomes from the use of psychedelics unless the reference to positive effects was removed. I hope to shed some light on the diversity of viewpoints by first laying out what I consider to be important factors to take into account in effectively employing psychedelics. From this perspective, we can examine some of the more relevant comments that have been expressed.

Psychedelic agents, when properly understood, are probably one of the most valuable, useful, and powerful tools available to humanity. Yet, their use is extremely complex, which means that they are widely misunderstood and very often abused.

Let me be clear: It is not psychedelics that are complex. In their most useful application, they play a rather straightforward role. After 40 years of careful study, it is

my observation that one of the outstanding actions of psychedelics is permitting the dissolving of mind sets. One of the most powerful mind set humans employ is the hiding of undesirable material from consciousness. Thus, a very important function of psychedelic substances is to permit access to the unconscious mind. The unconscious mind is enormously complex and possesses an extremely wide range of attributes, from repressed, painful material to the sublime realization of universal love. We probably shall never cease to discover new aspects and dimensions of the mind, as it appears endless, and I am convinced that continual searching will reveal new discoveries.

Probably every hypothesis that any scientist, therapist, or mystic has conceived ultimately can be observed to fit some set of conditions, from psychological dynamics to the ultimate nature of the universe. One of the most remarkable things to the experienced psychedelic user is discovering how the boundaries of perception dissolve to permit viewing ever new images, perceptions, concepts, and realizations. The biggest problem lies in incorporating discoveries into meaningful, enhanced functioning in life.

Humans love structure, and at the same time, the ego loves certainty, so a great variety of claims often are made about what psychedelics can or cannot do. With integrity, commitment, and courage, vast aspects of the mind can be explored. It is important to realize that what one experiences depends a great deal on his/her value-belief system, motivation, conditioning, and accumulated unconscious content, which includes the rigidity with which the mind functions.

I am an early stage novice in my practice of Buddhism, so there is a great deal about the subject of which I am ignorant. However, I have had considerable experience with psychedelics, and my major concern is that there will be attempts to categorize these potent aids and contain them within the walls of narrow, judgmental decisions, thereby cutting off much potential usefulness.

I personally have found that appropriately understood and used, psychedelics can play a significant role in deepening and accelerating the progress of one's meditative practice. This is not true for everyone. Psychedelics are of little use for advanced practitioners who have learned to achieve results without the benefit of such aids or for those who can free themselves from worldly obligations for extensive daily practice. Also, encountering heavily defended areas in the psyche with psychedelics may produce intense, uncomfortable feelings that many may prefer to work through more gradually.

My concern is mostly for the large number of people who could benefit from fruitful meditation practice but must still be occupied in the world by earning a living and raising a family. Such persons lead busy lives and may not have the time to devote to perfecting a practice that will lead to significant freedom. For these, informed use of psychedelics can be quite helpful in more rapidly reaching the level of accomplishment at which practice becomes self-sustaining. The ultimate achievement of liberation must occur through interior development that does not depend on the use of a plant or a chemical, although these may help in discovering the way.

There are several key factors to consider in evaluating whether the use of psychedelics can be personally fruitful:

1. **Legal status.** In a sense, this discussion is hypothetical because now most psychedelics are illegal to possess in the United States. Westerners for several centuries have focused primarily on the outer world, with the resulting neglect of developing inner resources. This neglect, coupled with a heavy emphasis on mate-

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rialism and reductionism, has created a painful schism between adopted conscious values and the deep interests of the Self. For most people, it has become so painful to reveal this powerful conflict that those substances that might accomplish this have been made illegal to possess. This has not stopped many dedicated therapists and seekers who find that the value of such substances exceeds the risk of incarceration. The illegal status also creates the problem of finding pure substances in reliably known dose levels. I am not advocating that anyone break the law, but I am pointing out the importance of developing sound, rational policies that will permit appropriate scientific evaluation of these substances and, ultimately, the realization of their potential.

2. **Methodology.** It is important that those who wish to work with psychedelics be fully informed of appropriate procedures. Unfortunately, the illegal status of psychedelics has prevented the publication and sharing of results and effective practices. However, there is available a great deal of information to guide the serious seeker if one has the diligence to seek it out. Some excellent examples of appropriate procedures can be found in the following references.

Grof's (1980) book, *LSD Psychotherapy*, is a treasure house of good information. See in particular the sections *Psychedelic Therapy With LSD* (pp. 32-38), *Personality of the Subject* (pp. 52-64), *Personality of the Therapist or Guide* (pp. 89-107), and *Set and Setting of the Sessions* (pp. 108-116).

In Adamson and Metzner (1988), much attention is given to guidelines, preparation, set and setting.

The pamphlet, *Code of Ethics for Spiritual Guides*, was prepared by the Council on Spiritual Practices, which can be contacted at the following address: Box 460065, San Francisco, CA 94146-0065.

Finally, Stolaroff (1993) presents a brief summary of important factors to take into account.

3. **Low doses** Many who have experimented with psychedelics have used high doses of substance to assure penetration into the very rewarding transpersonal levels of experience. Such experiences can be awesome, compelling, and extremely rewarding. Yet, it is often the case that these experiences fade away in time unless there are diligent efforts to make the changes indicated. In profound experiences, the layers of conditioning that, in ordinary states, hold one away from liberation are transcended and from the lofty view of the transcendental state, personal conditioning seems unimportant and often unrecognized. Yet after the experience, old habits and patterns reestablish themselves and often there is no alteration in behavior. The use of low doses often can be much more effective in dealing with our "psychic garbage." Many do not care for low doses because they can stir up uncomfortable feelings, and they prefer to transcend them by pushing on into higher states, but it is precisely these uncomfortable feelings that must be resolved to achieve true freedom. With low doses, by focusing directly on the feelings and staying with them without aversion and without grasping, they will in time dissipate. Resolving one's repressed feelings in this manner clears the inner being, permitting the True Self to manifest more steadily. Such a result provides

greater energy, deeper peace, more perceptive awareness, greater clarity, keener intuition, and greater compassion. It permits the deepening of one's meditation practice. The surfacing of buried feelings that this procedure permits often can bring new understanding of one's personality dynamics.

4. **Different compounds** Some compounds may be more suitable for developing meditation practice than are others. I personally have had substantial experience with the phenethylamines, outstanding examples of which are 2C-T-2, 2C-T-7, and 2C-B (code names for 2,5-dimethoxy-4-(ethylthio) phenethylamine, 2,5-dimethoxy-4-(n-propylthio) phenethylamine, and 4-bromo-2,5-dimethoxyphenethylamine, respectively). The synthetic procedures and physical characteristics of all of these compounds are published in Shulgin and Shulgin (1991). These compounds have the characteristic of having some of the centering qualities of MDMA, yet being more LSD-like than is MDMA without the powerful push of LSD. This lowers the likelihood of the user being trapped in deep pools of repressed material. Not being as pushy as LSD, these compounds require developing volition to achieve similar levels of experience. This is the same kind of volition that develops good meditation practice. Consequently, it is easier to focus attention under their influence, which permits developing the attributes for good meditation practice. As one develops proficiency in entering the desired state, it is found that the advantage of one compound over another diminishes. The appropriate dose (found by experiment—generally equivalent to 25-50 micrograms of LSD) of most any long-acting psychedelic is helpful.
5. **Freeing deeply occluded areas** The practice of Buddhism in general, as I understand it, is not necessarily therapeutically oriented. There is much advice in older texts to resolve personal problems with focused attention and application of intention to change behavior. The result is that much unconscious material never gets resolved despite the ability of the mind to achieve high levels of awareness. For a discussion of the difference between meditative realization and the uncovering process achieved through psychotherapy, see Wilber (1993, pp. 196-198). Psychedelics facilitate reaching these deeper, often highly defended levels and clearing them out, thus permitting greater liberation and dropping of undesirable personality and behavior patterns. Some powerfully repressed areas, such as the very painful birth experience I underwent in my first LSD session (Stolaroff, 1994), might never be resolved without the help of psychedelics.
6. **Judicious spacing of psychedelic experiences** In my own practice, I intentionally have limited my early morning formal meditation session to an hour so as to leave ample time for worldly endeavors. Thus, whatever I discover will be more applicable for the large numbers of persons constrained by the need or desire to function in the world. Although I have advanced sufficiently in my practice to fend off some of the typical aging symptoms (I am 77 years old) such as loss of energy, stiff and sore muscles, and increased arthritic symptoms, I do find that after a while, I begin to acquire such symptoms. When this happens, an appropriate psychedelic experience is a very effective rejuvenator. Aging symptoms summarily are dissipated, I am in a much more enjoyable and effective state of

neously. Mogar (1965) provides an excellent review paper, pointing out the growing trends in psychiatry and psychology and the growing acceptance of a wider range of human capacities and functions as revealed through altered states of consciousness produced by a variety of means. An excellent summary of results obtained in psychedelic research is presented.

Harman (1963) presents probably the most informed review of the psychedelic drug controversy, recognizing the root of the controversy in basic metaphysical assumptions, carefully describing the character of psychedelic experiences and the factors that influence them, comparing the highest potential of such experiences with natural mystical experiences, presenting the data assuring safety in proper hands, analyzing the resistance to accepting psychedelic research despite the publishing of positive results, and recommending proceeding with important research. The most recent information at this writing comes from Shulgin and Shulgin (1997), which covers a wide variety of interesting topics. Pertinent to this discussion are presentations on the nature and variety of psychedelic experiences and the growing appropriation of power by government to prescribe medical practice and scientific research (see, particularly, Part 2: Psychedelics and Personal Transformation, and Part 5: Drugs and Politics).

Although the articles discussed above contribute much important information, they still fall short in recognizing one of the most crucial aspects of psychedelic use. Most observers still lean toward the allopathic medical perception of drugs, in which the results are attributed to the particular action of the drug in the body. In the case of psychedelics, what transpires depends far more on the characteristics of the participant ingesting the drug and the circumstances of its use. It does not seem to be recognized generally that an individual can, with time and repetition, learn increasingly how to make more effective use of the opportunities psychedelics afford. It is possible to develop the characteristics of the trained user as previously described, when the mind can be held perfectly still so as to reveal other aspects of reality. With continued practice, the aspiring seeker increasingly learns how to focus the experience, learn trust, and develop motivation and courage for deeper exploration. This practice will yield deeper and deeper penetration into unknown areas of existence, with the possibility of bringing back ever new treasures.

I therefore hope that Buddhists and others will approach these substances with an open mind and, as a minimum, not stand in the way of efforts to learn more about them and the most appropriate ways of employing them.

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I may be in no position to comment, as Aitken likewise may not be in a position to comment on the ecstatic experience some achieve through psychedelics. But I do know from firsthand experience that it is possible to experience ecstasy almost beyond what the human frame can stand, and if Zen practitioners reach this state, power to them.

Joan Halifax (1996) clearly understands a great deal about psychedelics and what they can do and, at the same time, has developed her practice to a point at which psychedelics are no longer necessary. In her description of outgrowing the need for psychedelics, she states that the qualities of stability, loving-kindness, clarity, and humbleness are the primary qualities of the mind cultivated in meditation. She further states that such qualities are not necessarily cultivated by psychedelics. This statement is certainly true for some users who have been deceived and even become burdensome know-it-ails through their psychedelic use. I personally have found that psychedelics have been powerful influences in developing all the qualities that Halifax mentions. I already have commented that the appropriate mixture of meditation and psychedelics can influence strongly the effectiveness of each practice.

I am very much encouraged by the positive results I have observed during several decades of investigation. I find psychedelics to have significant potential not only in aiding the development of meditation practice, but also in many other important areas. Unfortunately, this perspective is not generally shared, and the controversy over psychedelics continues to be one of the major scientific disputes of recent history.

A number of excellent articles have been published examining this controversy and/or providing additional information for better understanding psychedelics. Clark (1975) presents an insightful article based on 100 respondents to a questionnaire study to assess views on promising areas of psychedelic research, the extent of the promise, and the difficulties in conducting research. A strong recommendation is made for opening up and funding psychedelic research. Villoldo (1977) describes the work of Salvador Roquet, who developed very intense methods of conducting group psychedelic sessions with powerful impact, perhaps the most intensely focused procedure yet evolved. Many important aspects of successfully employing psychedelics in therapy are discussed. Klavetter and Mogar (1967) make a questionnaire analysis of participants completing the psychedelic program at the International Foundation for Advanced Study in Menlo Park and convert the data into peakers and nonpeakers following Maslow's (1962) definitions. Peakers consistently report significant therapeutic benefit following the LSD session, a result confirmed by Hoffer (1965) and Pahnke and Richards (1966). Stolaroff (1997) presents an in-depth interview with one of the most accomplished psychedelic therapists of our time, now deceased and unnamed because of our current drug laws. This book covers the successful development of both individual and group experiences, selecting the most effective of a variety of psychedelic substances, and the optimum progression of their application.

Baumeister and Placidi (1983) present a fairly complete review of the LSD controversy, citing interesting and insightful reasons for the positions taken. Kurtz (1963) presents a cogent comparison of religious mystical experience, nature mystical experiences, Maslow's (1962) peak experiences, and drug-induced experiences. His analysis provides conclusions that the drug experiences of unity, when they occur, are the most inclusive and comprehensive in including all aspects of reality and the totality of human consciousness, combining intellectual, sensory, and mystical aspects occurring simulta-

being, and I find it easier to remain in this state through my regular meditation practice. Also, if there are deep, underlying, unconscious dynamics that are a drag on life, as I have experienced much of my life, I find it especially helpful to resolve such deep patterns with psychedelics. The psychedelic experience provides extremely effective clearing and a quantum jump improvement in well-being and meditative proficiency. At the same time, it is important not simply to rely on another experience to overcome difficulties. Numerous times I have discovered that mustering a deeper degree of intent can resolve important restrictions through properly focused meditation practice, with the advantage of a more permanent and satisfying state of well-being. Such work also ensures that when an additional experience is found to be appropriate, it will be considerably more rewarding.

7. **Honoring the experience** A very important aspect of employing psychedelics is to acknowledge fully the graces that have been received. This is done through appreciation and gratitude, which are best expressed by determinedly putting into effect in one's life the changes that have been indicated. In fact, failure to do so can contribute to subsequent depression. Thoroughly honoring the experience and postponing further psychedelic exploration until a real need is determined that cannot be resolved in straightforward meditation practice ensures that the next experience will be fruitful. One of the fairly widespread abuses of psychedelics is to rely on repeated use of the drug to accomplish relief from discomfort instead of exerting the effort to make changes in one's behavior that have already been indicated. This is the most frequent objection to psychedelics raised by the contributors to *Tricycle* (1996).
8. **Historical precedence** Psychedelics have had extensive use in spiritual practices in numerous cultures around the world and encompassing some 2,000 years of history. Current legally sanctioned spiritual practices with psychedelics include the Native American Indian church in North America, based on the use of peyote, and the Santo Daime and União do Vegetal churches in Brazil employing ayahuasca. Robert Jesse (1996) briefly reviews the history of such usage and describes a number of the substances most widely employed—peyote, mushrooms, ayahuasca, soma, kykeon, iboga, cannabis, LSD, and MDMA.

Using Psychedelics In Meditation Practice

Since the passage of the Controlled Substance Analogue Enforcement Act of 1986, almost all psychedelic substances have been outlawed: As a consequence, it has not been possible to conduct legally any research since that time. The following suggestions are based on the limited amount of experience that has been garnered, most of which is personal, and indicate where future research can be gainfully directed.

1. **Ethical framework.** Committing oneself to a suitable ethical framework, such as the Buddhist eight-fold path, is essential. This is an important part of the mental set and also provides help in integrating psychedelic experiences.
2. **Preparation** The participant should have a thorough understanding of psychedelics including the types of experience that may be expected, factors affecting

experience, how to handle various kinds of experiences and how to follow them up, and the importance of set and setting as described above. It is important to have first undergone a high-dose experience with a qualified guide that has resulted in reaching transpersonal levels. This will put the entire process into perspective.

3. **Employing a correct substance at the proper dose level** Described above.
4. **Developing mental stability** This application is probably the most fruitful for employing psychedelic substances. A practice focusing on the breath is particularly appropriate. With proper substance and dose, one will note several possible developments. First, distractions may be more intense than in ordinary practice because the action of the chemical releases more material from the unconscious. At the same time, the enhanced awareness resulting from the action of the psychedelic allows one to notice in greater detail how various attitudes, thoughts, and actions affect the ability to hold one's focus steady. From this, one learns to hold the mind in the position of maximum effectiveness for becoming free of distractions and for holding mental focus stable. One then experiences the deepening of the practice, more readily avoiding distractions and moving into areas of peace, calm, and growing euphoria. With continuing practice, one finds it easier to enter the numinous levels that one ultimately is seeking. Furthermore, the volition gained in developing this practice under the influence of a psychedelic carries on into day-to-day practice during which the same level of achievement becomes accessible. The outcome that I personally have found most satisfying is the ability to hold the mind perfectly still, a state that makes access to previously unrevealed regions of the mind available, including the direct contact with one's essence or divinity.
5. **Deepening the meditation practice** One's daily practice may be strengthened by using the discoveries made under the influence of psychedelics. I recommend working to obtain maximum benefit from one psychedelic experience before proceeding with another. When experiences are spaced judiciously in this manner, one learns under the influence to go deeper into the contact with the numinous. As the ability to hold the mind steady grows, it becomes possible to focus more directly on the contact with the inner teacher—our deepest Self, our Buddha nature, or however one chooses to call the wise, guiding entity within us. Maintaining this focus leads to what seems to me to be the most valuable, fulfilling experiences possible. From such experiences, combined with daily practice, grows the ability to achieve similar results in ordinary practice, until eventually the use of the psychedelic substance is no longer required. At this point, the faculty for achieving optimum results has been developed within us. I like to call this “developing a God muscle.”

Many of the issues concerning the application of psychedelics in meditative practice may be clarified further by examining some of the comments reported in the Tricycle issue on Buddhism and Psychedelics (Tricycle, 1996). Jack Kornfield (1996) presents a knowledgeable and well-balanced view of the use of psychedelics as well as important factors required for a good meditative practice and spiritual development. He points out the value that psychedelics have in introducing

use psychedelics appropriately to enhance and deepen practice. It requires looking at a number of considerations. What is the substance, the dose level, the frequency, the intention, and the effort to make maximum use of the experience, regardless of whether it was pleasant or uncomfortable, or the effort to deal with indicated changes in values and actions? With agents as powerful as psychedelics and the vast regions of the human mind made available, it seems quite shortsighted to draw conclusions before thorough investigative efforts have been pursued. And of course, with the current legal status, one dare not publish or publicly share results, so that it is most likely that there exists a great deal of valuable experience that remains hidden from the public eye.

It is my experience that practice with an appropriate, moderate dose of a psychedelic permits deepening of the meditation practice and learning much more rapidly to avoid distractions and concentrate on the important aspects of the practice. Because of our unfortunate drug laws, it has not been possible to replicate my findings on a broad basis, although preliminary trials with others support my own experience and the validity of my hypothesis. I am sure that we must find ways to verify procedures that offer such promising accomplishments.

Aitken (1996) observes that those who returned to a retreat from psychedelic experiences demonstrated a deterioration in their ability to meditate. I personally deem it unwise to muddle the opportunity to learn what a retreat has to offer by interspersing drug experiences.

Aitken (1996) is certainly right to raise the question, what after the experience? There is now almost universal consensus that being shown the territory is not enough. It is extremely important to consummate the experience by bringing it to full fruition in day-to-day life. Commitment to an ethical way of life, supported by a good meditation practice that enhances stability and clarity, is one of the best ways to ensure this accomplishment.

Aitken (1996) again says that you do not have to take drugs to wake up to reality. This is certainly true, and a great many will choose the meditative path. But for many others, the appropriate use of psychedelics can rapidly hasten the discovery of reality and, furthermore, can help reveal the inner blocks that hold one from reality and even temporarily dissolve them, so that one develops a clear picture of how to stay in touch with reality. Without psychedelics, it can take many, many months of hard work to obtain the same vision, and after the vision is obtained, there may still be repressed inner psychic loads that can inhibit freedom, suppress the experience of one's feelings and senses to the fullest, and preclude living constantly out of one's essence or Buddha nature.

There no doubt are many who have turned away from psychedelics because of unsatisfactory experiences. Although psychedelics are not a path for everyone, it is possible to cultivate more favorable outcomes with a better understanding of the nature of the experience, the possible varieties of dynamics that can arise, and how to deal with them. Those who confront and resolve negative experiences can come out with a good deal more understanding and relief from psychic burdens, which can result in greater energy and well-being.

Aitken (1996) states “that there is a qualitative difference between the ecstasy that some people report from their drug experiences and the understanding, the realization, that comes with Zen practice” (p. 109). I am not familiar with Zen practice, and so

meaningful consequences in her life. Later, with the help of good meditation teachers, she reaches the peace and equanimity she has been searching for and is no longer attracted to the aid offered by psychedelics. She has reached the state of realization for which most of us long.

One hardly could hope for a better outcome than that which Nina Wise presents to us. Yet, her story does provide the opportunity to include some additional remarks about the use of psychedelics. Her first experience points out the need, as almost all the knowledgeable writers in the *Tricycle* (1996) issue have clearly stated, to have a framework and discipline within which to have the experience and, particularly, to help follow up the experience for optimum benefit. Her second experience with ayahuasca illustrated that at an appropriate time, a further experience can be quite helpful.

There were characteristics about her psychedelic journeys that she was quite happy to leave behind her and not engage again. Wise's (1996) words are, "My psychedelic experiences, which had brought me to this place, were now interfering with my vision" (p. 93). It is important to understand that psychedelics, when properly employed, can lead to the same state she had achieved of direct experience of reality. It is the state reached by what I call the trained user. It helps to know that the creepy visions, the hallucinations, and the constant flow of imagery are the results of pressures in the unconscious where repressed material is demanding release. By employing low psychedelic doses, it is possible to confront and deal with these images and, particularly, the feelings behind them, until they clear up. Then one reaches, while under the influence, the stage of immediate perception (Sherwood, Stolaroff, & Harman, 1962). "In this stage, the psychosomatic symptoms, the model psychoses, the multicolored hallucinatory images tend to disappear. The individual develops an awareness of other aspects of reality than those to which he is accustomed" (p. 71). The fact that a psychedelic produces streams of imagery indicates that the interior barriers to the center core of the self have not been completely eliminated. For those who wish to be completely liberated, psychedelic experiences, properly timed and integrated, can be very helpful in resolving repressed material and defensive blocks, thus giving freer access to the divine within.

Trudy Walter (1996) has given us a touching story of the difficulties of addiction and the hardship of breaking it. For years, she took respite and enjoyment in "getting stoned," and it was only through dedicated commitment to her meditation practice that she could free herself from her addiction. No matter how enjoyable or helpful an aid can be, eventually, as stated so clearly by Frances Vaughan (1995), these "golden chains" must be transcended to develop the capabilities of our true inner self.

Robert Aitken (1996) states: "I don't think drugs have particularly helped anybody arrive where they are" (p. 105). This is most definitely not true for me and many others whom I know. I very much agree with his observation that many desperately are trying to achieve realization through the drug experience when what is required is hard work in changing their attitudes, values, and behavior—a process facilitated much more effectively through deepened intention and improved behavior than through overuse of psychedelic chemicals.

Aitken (1996) offers evidence that being under the influence and then later trying to practice does not work. This has been commented on by other teachers, and I am sure that it is true for many. However, the situation is quite complex, and care is required to evaluate such generalizations. A great deal can be learned about how to

persons to new areas of the mind and even to glimpses of the goal of spiritual realization, experiences which encouraged many to develop a more disciplined practice. He also clearly points out a common failing among many psychedelic users: failure to understand the depth of change required to transform oneself and to understand that it takes more than repeated psychedelic experiences to accomplish this.

Next, I will present some responses to Michelle McDonald-Smith's (1996) firmly expressed views.

From my experience, no matter what kind of deep opening one might have on a drug, it isn't going to develop one's ability to have those experiences naturally. Other people might say that drugs are a doorway, but I don't see them developing anything. They don't develop equanimity, they don't develop concentration, they don't develop any factors of enlightenment. (McDonald-Smith p. 67)

In sharing my own perceptions on the same factors she has enumerated, I wish it to be clear that I am discussing the results of informed use, which has been delineated elsewhere in this article.

I agree that psychedelics alone will not necessarily develop the ability to have transpersonal experiences naturally, despite the fact that many people who have had such an outstanding initial experience are content to never have another, feeling that they have been blessed for life. I maintain that psychedelics are way showers, and we then must work with serious intent to attain the states that are shown to be possible. Nevertheless, it is of enormous benefit and inspiration if one can glimpse and experience firsthand the territory to which we aspire. Norbert Wiener, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology scientist who suggested the binary system on which the operation of computers is based, commented on the successful development of the atomic bomb by the Russians. He stated that their simply knowing that it is possible was at least 50

In contrast to McDonald-Smith's (1996) claim, "I don't see them as developing anything" (p.67), I see them as developing wisdom, heightened perception, self-understanding, energy, and freedom; releasing habitual blocks that interfere with the total response of our senses; facilitating the flow of ideas; releasing intuition and creativity as unconscious blocks are removed and as we become in touch with our inherent faculties; and deepening our meditation practice. My observations are based on some 40 years of research, including observing more than 100 individuals.

Regarding the comments about equanimity, concentration, and enlightenment, I find that appropriate use of psychedelics helps develop all of these qualities. I never realized what equanimity was until I began taking psychedelics. One of the great gifts of psychedelics is permitting one to learn real concentration. Of course, if there is much repressed material in the unconscious and one takes a significant dose of a psychedelic, it is neither possible nor desirable to try to concentrate. It is best to simply surrender to the experience and to let the flow of imagery and feelings proceed undisturbed. In this flow, unconscious material is released. The meditation equivalent is focusing on the breath or on an object and simply letting thoughts and feelings flow without getting involved. When the high-pressure feelings in the unconscious demanding release begin to abate, then it becomes possible to concentrate on the desired object. The practice

of holding one's attention steadily on an image, concept, or object under the influence of a good psychedelic permits many aspects of the object of attention to unfold, so that one may learn a great deal of new information about the object as well as discover unsuspected beauty and meaning and experience appreciation. Eventually, one develops concentration sufficient to hold the mind quite still, which permits other aspects of reality to manifest. I often feel that this is creating the empty space to permit God to enter, which I consider a major factor of enlightenment. In practicing holding the mind steady under a low dose of a psychedelic, one becomes much more aware of the subtle distractions and urges that affect concentration. Some distractions are more intense, so one can practice maintaining stability in spite of them. Such practice under the influence helps strengthen the faculty that maintains steady attention. A great deal can be accomplished in learning to effectively maintain stability, learning which is immediately applicable in subsequent practice.

McDonald-Smith (1996) stated:

Drugs take a considerable toll on the body and the mind. They bring all this energy into the system so that it catapults you into a different state of consciousness at the same time that it taxes your body, mind, and heart. You get a sort of beatific view, but actually you are further down the mountain. (McDonald-Smith p. 67)

My associates and I, in psychedelic research, find ourselves very much at odds with this statement. Yes, if a person is carrying heavy psychic burdens and takes a large psychedelic dose, he or she can be very tired at the end of the day and perhaps for a few days after. But often this is followed by a gratifying sense of rejuvenation and appreciation for the benefits realized. Important exceptions are the cases in which the participant does not work all the way through important problem areas, leaving them with a feeling of unfinished business and perhaps even greater discomfort because he or she is now experiencing uncomfortable feelings that formerly were locked safely away. Working through these feelings with the help of a good counselor and following up with subsequent psychedelic sessions can clear up this problem.

Rather than toll, there is healing and rejuvenation. One often feels that he or she has dropped a heavy load off the body, and his or her spirits are high. A heavier mind can come from the unresolved situation described above; otherwise, there is lightness of feeling and clarity of mind. Other than toll, there is renewal. I have friends who take many different kinds of vitamins and nutriments to achieve healthy states of mind and body and to have more energy. I try their various recommendations, but my experience is that none of them work as well as a good, appropriate psychedelic session. Rather than being brought further down, you are climbing the mountain with considerable help. It is very true, however, that to maintain the high states experienced, it takes committed effort to make the necessary changes in day-to-day life. This point is frequently neglected. My experience is that not expressing appropriate gratitude and appreciation for the marvelous graces that have been granted can lead to self-hatred and depression. A good meditation practice is an effective means of maintaining awareness of the needed changes and furnishing the energy and motivation to make them possible.

McDonald-Smith (1996) also stated:

I've had people come to retreats who've done a lot of drugs, and it seems like

they don't have the energy to access subtle stages of insight. They've blown it off with drugs. You pay a price for any drug experience. (McDonald-Smith p. 69)

It is true that many have abused psychedelics by frequent use, probably of high doses, with insufficient effort to integrate the meaning of the experience. Frequent repetition can dissolve ego strength, and such people can develop rambling minds and have little ability to focus. However, it is important to understand that this is the result of abuse, which is not the case with informed use. You do not "pay a price for any drug experience." Appropriately used, psychedelic experiences not only have little or no price, but also open the door to healing, rejuvenation, and many riches in life.

McDonald-Smith (1996) says: "On the deepest level of letting go, drugs get in the way. This is especially true for those who are heavily armored" (p. 69). I say that appropriate use of psychedelics teaches you to let go and discover the rewarding benefits of letting go. We are all afraid of the unknown; psychedelics can help one develop trust, face fear, and enter unknown and sublime arenas. Psychedelics are especially helpful for the heavily armored, if they truly wish to resolve their difficulties, as they can help dissolve the heavy walls of defensiveness and permit resolution and profound insight.

A major emphasis in the remainder of McDonald-Smith's (1996) article is that "drugs promote attachment to peak experience... what you actually get from drug experience is the desire to take the drugs again" (p. 70). Many have fallen into this trap, but it is an overstatement to generalize that this is always the case. With an honest approach, one realizes that there is work to do before seeking another session. My own experience is that for many of us, particularly with me for many years, our self-esteem is so low that we feel that we do not deserve the full benefits of grace. I have found that extensive help is waiting in many different forms and from many different levels and is generously offered. We can always benefit from taking advantage of help in whatever mode, be it teachers, nutriments, reading, exercise, prayer, or simply thinking good thoughts. And they can all work together and support each other. Appreciation and gratitude multiply the benefits. And one certainly cannot argue with McDonald-Smith's advice to be completely aware in each moment.

Allan Hunt Badiner (1996) has written in *Tricycle* an impressive description of an extremely powerful, remarkable, life-changing experience with yagé. His experience probably represents the far extremes of intensity, variety, complexity, and meaning that psychedelics have to offer. Badiner is to be highly congratulated for both his courage and his power of articulation in encountering and describing this compelling experience. There are probably not a great many persons prepared to make such an encounter, but the outcome of Allan's experience is testimony to the advice given by many sages that the encountering of pain and suffering, and even of near death itself, paves the way to becoming utterly alive.

Nina Wise (1996), in her article in *Tricycle*, tells a beautiful story of personal growth and development with the aid of psychedelics, excellent teachers, and dedicated practice. With her first psychedelic experience, she encounters a trauma often encountered by inexperienced explorers. She has a glorious, very opening experience, yet sinks into deep depression because she does not know how to integrate the experience to maintain such a state. She finds a meditation teacher and begins to grow in her practice. A subsequent experience with ayahuasca provides another important opening that has very