

On the Borderlands of Religion and Science: Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Contemplative Traditions and Psychedelic Medicine

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Abstract: The current ‘Second Wave Psychedelic Movement’ or ‘Psychedelic Renaissance’ promises to transform contemporary medicine, particularly psychological and psychiatric therapies, in profound ways. As psychedelic therapies have become increasingly mainstream, issues have emerged regarding the salience of religious and philosophical issues to these interventions. Roland Griffiths, a leading researcher on psychedelics, argued that the therapeutic potential of psilocybin-based therapy can be correlated with participants’ reporting profound spiritual or even ‘mystical’ experiences. Religious communities have increasingly been compelled to address the spiritual implications of psychedelic therapy, with responses that range from explicit prohibition to the establishment of practices of ‘psychedelic chaplaincy’ and certification programs in psychedelic-assisted therapy. In this paper, I examine the response of contemporary Indo-Tibetan Buddhist traditions to psychedelic medicine among both ‘ethnic’ and ‘convert’ Buddhist communities in light of Pāli and Sanskrit canonical discussions of prohibitions against alcohol (P. *majja*/Skt. *madya*) and discussions regarding the use of herbs (*osadhī*/*oṣadhi*) as a means to achieve extraordinary accomplishments (*ṛddhi*). On this basis, I argue three things: (1) that many ‘traditionalists’ connect the notion of ‘heedlessness’ (*pamāda*/*pramāda*) to all intoxicants, widening the scope of the fifth precept to a range of substances that induce cognitive and behavioral distortions and thus include psychedelics within the prohibited sphere; (2) if psy-

chedelics are argued to be medicine (*bhesajja/bhaiṣajya*) as opposed to being akin to alcohol or an ‘intoxicant’ (*majja/madya*), they fall into a ‘therapeutic’ as opposed to an ‘enhancement’ sphere and are defensible as a medical intervention via Buddhist ethics; and (3) Indic sources convey an understanding that herbs (*osadhī/oṣadhi*) are a known, if not legitimate, source of extraordinary experiences and capacities (*rddhi*) and thus provide conceptual grounds supporting the contemporary linkage among Buddhist communities between psychedelic and meditative experiences.

Keywords: Buddhism, medicine, therapy, enhancement, ethics, precepts, psychoactive, psychedelics, intoxicants, meditation

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I. Introduction

In 2009, during the Q&A session after a talk at the University of California, Santa Barbara, the Dalai Lama was asked by an audience member how he felt about the use of psychedelic drugs to enhance spiritual life. In response, in part through his translator, he stated:

Of course, firstly, I have no such experience. [Laughter] Then, according to the people who have some experience, then it seems from what I have heard from the people who have had the actual first-hand experience it seems that the experience of using these kinds of psychedelic drugs tend to bring a greater profusion of illusion—and, since we already have a lot of illusory experiences to begin with, so why do we need additional illusory experiences?¹

After the uproar of laughter from the audience settled down, he added:

¹ Gyatso, ‘The Nature of the Mind’.

I think that you see...and [as far as] serious practice is concerned, I think should not rely on external methods [or] substances—just simply try to cultivate the nature, quality of mind, that’s much better.²

It is perhaps a bit surprising to hear the Dalai Lama, a profound advocate of research on the interface between Buddhism and neuroscience, prominently embodied through the work of the Mind & Life Institute, speaking so clearly against the use of psychedelics as a part of spiritual practice. Though the Dalai Lama has, in other contexts, embraced emerging technologies that might transform the mind productively, he clearly views psychedelics as worthy of scrutiny, if not outright criticism. The first part of his response frames psychedelics as prone to the generation of illusion rather than wisdom or insight and the second frames ideal spiritual practice as drawing on *endogenous*, or internal, resources, rather than *exogenous*, or external, ones.

These comments came at the temporal cusp of the burgeoning ‘Psychedelic Renaissance’ or ‘Second-Wave Psychedelic Movement’ that is currently sweeping the globe. Drawing deeply on earlier ‘First Wave’ models of the use of psychedelics as a therapeutic catalyst, contemporary neuropsychological research forwarded by scholars such as Roland Griffiths and Robin Carhart-Harris has re-ignited and, in many respects, revolutionized the use of such substances in research and therapy. At the same time, psychedelics are increasingly re-entering the cultural mainstream across the globe, creating waves that echo the earlier countercultural movement, which was deeply connected to both psychedelic research and Buddhist and Buddhist-inspired movements in the latter part of the twentieth century. The question of, or questioning of, the relationship between Buddhism and psychedelics has again mounted, particularly in Europe and the United States, where cosmopolitan Buddhist cultures that embrace psychedelics have proliferated and show no sign of abating.

In this paper, I argue three things: (1) that many ‘traditionalists’ connect the notions of ‘intoxicant’ (P. *majja*/Skt. *madya*) and

² Gyatso, ‘The Nature of the Mind’.

‘heedlessness’ (*paṃāda/pramāda*) to all psychoactive substances, widening the scope of the fifth precept to a range of agents that induce cognitive, sensory, and behavioral alterations and thus include psychedelics within the prohibited sphere; (2) if psychedelics are argued to be medicine (*bhesajja/bhaiṣajya*) as opposed to being akin to alcohol or an ‘intoxicant’ (*majja/madya*), they potentially fall into a ‘therapeutic’ as opposed to an ‘enhancement’ sphere and are defensible as a medical intervention via Buddhist ethics; and (3) that Indic sources convey an understanding that herbs (*osadhī/oṣadhi*) are a known, if not legitimate, source of extraordinary experiences and capacities (*iddhi/ṛddhi*) and thus provide conceptual grounds supporting the contemporary linkage among Buddhist communities between psychedelic and meditative experiences and of psychedelic use as ‘enhancement’. These understandings serve to bring nuance to often polarized contemporary debates regarding the position of psychedelics in relationship to Buddhist ethics and practice.

II. Interpreting the Fifth Precept: Are Psychedelics ‘Intoxicants?’

One of the most important and pervasive philosophical debates around psychedelics in the contemporary context is the question of whether the use of psychedelics is a violation of the Fifth Precept, which prohibits the use of intoxicants, specifically alcoholic beverages, as leading to heedless behavior. As discussed in Osto, this is an issue of paramount importance in cosmopolitan, and often convert, Buddhist communities, in which psychedelic use is a common precursor, if not accessory to, Buddhist practice.³ This question ultimately boils down to whether (1) whether the Fifth Precept applies broadly to drugs or simply to alcohol; and (2) if it applies broadly, whether psychedelics are, in fact, intoxicants. With respect to the first question of whether the Fifth Precept applies broadly to drugs, it depends on how one translates the authoritative texts and whether one interprets it through the ‘letter’ or ‘spirit’ of the law. According

³ Osto, *Altered States*.

to Bhikkhu Bodhi, the Pāli precept reads *suramerayamajjapamadat-thana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*, ‘I undertake the training rule to abstain from fermented and distilled intoxicants which are the basis for heedlessness’.⁴ This first reading would potentially allow a narrow interpretation of the precept such that psychedelics and other mind- or mood-altering substances would not fall within the scope of the precept. Similarly, an alternate reading in which *sura*, *meraya*, and *majja* are all viewed as different *types* or *categories* of alcoholic beverage would narrow the scope of the precept such as to exclude psychedelic substances. So, in these respects, one can make narrow text-based arguments that psychedelics don’t fall under the purview of the Fifth Precept, which appears to single out the use of alcohol. This is not entirely counterintuitive, as one would imagine that alcohol was likely the most prevalent mind and mood-altering drug of that historical era in India, with an ancient pedigree of antagonism to Buddhist morality, likely due to the same problematic social fingerprint alcohol has in the contemporary context.

Yet, the reality on the ground is that most contemporary, and traditional, Buddhists such as Bodhi interpret the Fifth Precept much more broadly than this—viewing it as encompassing not only alcohol of various types, but also tobacco, betel, narcotics, psychedelics, and other drugs—a view heightened and intensified by the influence of pervasive drug cultures in Asia on Buddhist Saṅghas. In other words, the conservative view is that the ‘spirit of the law’ is what matters—it is not alcohol per se, but intoxication itself that is the issue at stake. In this respect, we might see the Dalai Lama’s initial statement above as being consistent with a Fifth Precept application to psychedelics: viewing them as intoxicating the mind and causing a proliferation of illusion, and, by implication, clouding the mind in such a way as to lead to heedlessness. Implicit in this understanding, and consistent with a larger Buddhist epistemology and morality, is the notion that the awakened mind is one that is unclouded by mistaken views (*diṭṭhi/dṛṣṭi*) and that mental clarity is the foundation for moral life and moral agency. But psychedelic enthusiasts might make the

⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi, ‘Going for Refuge & Taking the Precepts’.

counterargument that in the contemporary context, the association between psychedelics and social ills does not stand in comparison to alcohol and other drugs, a point that has become almost boilerplate in scientific presentations on psychedelic research. According to Nutt, the ‘harm’ profile regarding self and other of psychedelics is overall quite low—but it is, notably, not zero—and contemporary psychedelic cultures have been increasingly aware of the risks of so-called ‘psychedelic exceptionalism’ as a social and ethical pitfall.⁵ It is worth noting that, ultimately, the Dalai Lama’s view on the subject of the Fifth Precept might be framed as one of ‘harm reduction’—as evidenced by his so-called ‘single malt vow’, in which he argues that it is better to take a vow to mitigate alcohol consumption that is feasible than take a vow of abstinence that is unfeasible.⁶ This is, arguably, consistent with the complex role of alcohol (Tib. *chang*) in Tibetan society and in religious thought and practice.⁷ This would also, presumably, apply to so-called ‘Four Precept Buddhists’—an anecdotal designation that is used, tongue-in-cheek, to refer to North American Buddhists for whom drinking alcohol is an important and valued lifestyle choice.

III. Psychedelics as Medicine (*bhesajja/bhaiṣajya*): Therapy Versus Enhancement

It should be noted that the question that was asked of the Dalai Lama above was focused principally on the question of the benefit of taking psychedelic drugs in order to have profound ‘spiritual’ experiences. In this regard, we might view the use of psychedelics as what Ron Cole-Turner would call ‘spiritual enhancement’.⁸ Within

⁵ Nutt, King, and Phillips, ‘Drug Harms in the UK 2010’; Noorani, ‘Making Psychedelics into Medicines’; Pilecki, Luoma, Bathje et al., ‘Ethical and Legal Issues in Psychedelic Harm Reduction and Integration Therapy’.

⁶ Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics*, 161–62.

⁷ Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, 78.

⁸ Cole-Turner, ‘Spiritual Enhancement’.

the context of technological ethics and specifically medical ethics, an important, if not pervasive, conventional distinction is made between the use of technologies, such as drugs, as *therapy* versus *enhancement*. A common-sense way that this distinction operates is with respect to the idea—familiar to Buddhism in many ways—between removing an illness or malady (therapy) and increasing an existing good (enhancement).⁹ The ‘therapeutic’ category is often connected to ‘restoration’ of capacity and ‘enhancement’ to the extension of capacity—categories that may rest as much on socially constructed conceptions of ‘normalcy’ as on objective reality. This distinction has an array of implications within the spiritual, ethical, legal, and economic domains of society, often as setting ‘benchmarks’ for approval and/or prohibition and the various qualifications and gradations thereof. Current moral and legal views on cannabis in the United States have been a case in point—the ground shifting over time from broad moral and legal opprobrium to a narrow tolerance as a ‘therapeutic’ intervention, and ultimately to broad social and legal acceptance of both therapeutic and recreational usage.

This brings us to an important element of the ‘Psychedelic Renaissance’—the prevalence of neuroscientific and neuropsychological models and the emphasis on the therapeutic potential of psychedelic substances. This emphasis on the ‘sober’ scientific study of psychedelics has been a critical part of the success of the ‘Second Wave’—exemplified by the work of Roland Griffiths, who drew upon years of research on addiction to psychoactive substances, such as nicotine, caffeine, and alcohol, in formulating a federally-funded program of research brought to the attention of a large public audience through works such as Michael Pollan’s *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence*. Framing psychedelics as *therapeutic*, and distancing them from countercultural associations has been a critical part of the mainstream success, if not popularity, of such research.

Coming back to the relationship between Buddhism and psyche-

⁹ Gert and Culver, ‘Therapy and Enhancement’.

delics, if we distance ourselves from the enhancement or ‘spiritual’ dimension of psychedelic use and focus on the therapeutic, we perhaps find a more fruitful ground for building a philosophical and moral alliance. Divino has argued that the foundation for conversations about medicine in Buddhism are the concepts of *roga* and *dukkha* (Skt. *duḥkha*), paralleled by the concepts of their relief in their opposites, *aroga* and *sukha* (*suḥkha*), roughly dividing up the dimensions of mundane and supra- or ultramundane health and wellness.¹⁰ The Buddha himself is credited with establishing a framework for the role of medicine (*bhesajja/bhaiṣajya*) in the life of the Saṅgha, including the use of various herbs (*osadhī/oṣadhi*) or roots (*mūla*), to be used for healing purposes.¹¹ As such, the Buddha is represented as being pragmatic in addressing sickness or illness (*roga* or *vyādhi*), such that Buddhist precepts are modified, within reason, to the degree necessary to support the healing process. On these grounds, one might argue for the use of psychedelic interventions as a means of addressing mental (*cetasika*) and bodily (*kāyika*) forms of *roga*, though recognizing their limited ability to address issues of ‘existential suffering’, as with other forms of conventional medicine.¹² Just as the precepts allow the use of mood-altering medications, such as opioids, for the treatment of pain and injury in contemporary hospital settings, the intoxicating effects of psychedelics can be seen as an undesirable, but insignificant, side-effect in their therapeutic application.¹³ This argument is particularly compelling if one views the healing action of psychedelics to be a function of their ability to stimulate neuronal growth or other demonstrable physical effects on the brain that correlate with the removal of disease (*roga*), and perhaps anticipates future drugs that will have physical but not psychological effects.¹⁴

Complicating this picture, however, is the question of whether it is in fact the *phenomenological* experience of psychedelics that is the

¹⁰ Divino, ‘Elements of the Buddhist Medical System’.

¹¹ Zysk, *Asceticism and Healing*.

¹² Divino, ‘Elements of the Buddhist Medical System’, 28–33.

¹³ Canton-Alvarez, ‘A Gift from the Buddhist Monastery’.

¹⁴ Peterson and Sisti, ‘Skip the Trip?’.

driving factor in the healing process, and whether that process aligns with Buddhist principles and practice. Despite the ‘sober’ framing of his work within neuroscience, Griffiths ultimately came to argue that among the subjects in his psilocybin-based therapy trials, it was those who claimed to have had profound spiritual or ‘mystical’ experiences who benefitted the most with respect to individual and social benchmarks.¹⁵ He argued that meditation ‘is the tried and true method’ and psychedelics ‘the crash course’ in understanding the mind. As such, one might query whether the psychedelic mode of healing is ultimately as much about existential suffering (*dukkha/duḥkha*) as it is about sickness (*roga*), mental or otherwise. Psychedelic experiences bear many commonalities to Buddhist descriptions of insight into the mind and body (*nāma-rūpa*) complex, including perceptions of self-disassembly and the constructed nature of the human organism, the operations of the mind and senses in constructing experience, and the perception of different ‘orders’ of being or cosmological levels. Might the benefits from psychedelics, in some cases, be that they provide dharma-like insights into the nature of oneself and world, offering a form of healing similar to contemplative accomplishments? Yet might they also thrust the subject into realms of fear, fantasy, and delusion, blurring what is real in lasting ways, inducing a noetic sentiment to distorted perceptions in counterproductive ways? Or, for that matter, lead—as has been documented in a small number of cases—to episodic or permanent psychosis or long-term conditions such as Hallucinogen Persisting Perceptual Disorder?¹⁶ These are questions that call for further reflection and examination as Buddhists continue to engage with the ongoing and unfolding application of psychedelics in therapeutic, recreational, and spiritual contexts.

¹⁵ Griffiths, Johnston, Richards et al., ‘Psilocybin-Occasioned Mystical-Type Experience’.

¹⁶ Though it might be noted that adverse events—in some cases quite similar in nature—are associated with meditative practice as well. Schlag, Aday, Salam et al., ‘Adverse Effects of Psychedelics’; Britton, Lindahl, Cooper et al., ‘Defining and Measuring Meditation-Related Adverse Effects in Mindfulness-Based Programs’.

IV. Psychedelics as Enhancement: *Oṣadhi*, *Ṛddhi*, and the *Nirmāṇacitta*

The role of herbs (*osadhī/oṣadhi*) as having an enhancement aspect beyond the therapeutic sphere is expressed amply in Indic sources, most notably in Buddhist Abhidharma, Classical Yoga, and Āyurvedic contexts. In particular, herbs, either independently or in multi-plant formulas, are described as having the ability to yield extraordinary modes of perception and action, the ‘perfections’ referred to through the terminology of Skt. *siddhi* and *ṛddhi* (P. *iddhi*). Perhaps the clearest expression of this conception is found in Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (specifically his commentary on *Abhidharmakośakārikā* 7.53), in which *ṛddhi* are described as being respectively the fruit of meditation (*bhāvanāphala*), obtained through birth (*upapattilābha*), born of mantra (*mantraja*), born of herbs (*auṣadbaja*), and born of *karman* (*karmaja*).¹⁷ This formulation parallels *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* 4.1, in which five sources of *siddhi* are articulated, namely birth (*janma*), herbs (*oṣadhi*), incantation (*mantra*), austerity (*tapas*), and contemplation (*samādhi*). In both cases, meditation, *dhyāna*, appears to be framed as the superior method among them, in part due to the fact that meditative methods arise a constructed mind (*nirmāṇacitta*) that is free of the karmic colour, residue, or implications compared to those arisen from other methods.¹⁸ There are several points to be gleaned from this: 1) multiple modes of cultivating *siddhi*/*ṛddhi* were recognized, if not embraced, in classical Buddhist and Hindu literature; 2) their mode of action was understood to be through the arising of a constructed mind (*nirmāṇacitta*); and 3) the endogenous method of utilizing meditation was seen as the superior method for cultivating them. The last point here dovetails with the Dalai Lama’s assertion that it ‘is best’ to use cultivation (*bhāvanā*) as a means of accessing extraordinary modes of perception and action, and that there are ultimately pitfalls to other means.

¹⁷ Sarbacker, ‘Patanjala Yoga and Buddhist Abhidharma’, 230.

¹⁸ Ibid., 231.

However, I would like to emphasize this deep link between the practice of meditation (*dhyāna*) or meditative cultivation (*bhāvanā*) and the use of herbs (*oṣadhi*), in that they are both a basis for achieving extraordinary powers of perception and action. The modern fixation upon analytical types of meditation and philosophical constructions of the dharma, exemplified by the so called ‘dry insight’ traditions of *vipassanā* and in much of the popular scholarly discourse on Buddhism, has obscured deep and persistent connections between often ecstatic yogic and tantric disciplines and the achievement of such extraordinary powers in Buddhism. These are evident in a wide range of yogic-meditative movements and practices in the Indo-Tibetan context, from the Yogāvacara traditions to those of the Indian Mahāsiddhas and the Tibetan tantric lineages and practices descended from them. This linkage provides insight into the fluidity of the boundary between contemporary cosmopolitan psychedelic cultures and Buddhism, in recognizing that the extraordinary perceptions generated through psychedelics can be understood, or even integrated, coherently within the framework of Buddhist philosophy and practice. And, with respect to practice, there are resources within Buddhism for systematically cultivating such extraordinary states, without recourse to the use of substances. I have heard several anecdotes in recent years about how psychedelic experiences ‘prepared’ people in constructive ways for experiencing the rarefied states of *jhāna* (*dhyāna*) in serenity (*samatha*/*śamatha*) retreats and other forms of Buddhist meditative training. Likewise, I have been told by prominent voices in the contemporary Buddhist psychedelic community that they see the broad appeal of psychedelics as a way of approximating the more ecstatic aspects of Buddhist practice that are either not available in their community or require a seemingly impractical amount of training to achieve. Practitioners turn to organizations such as Lotus Vine Journeys with the understanding that psychedelics may help them overcome insurmountable obstacles to their practice, enhancing their yogic and meditative discipline, and in hopes of more direct access to the healing/therapeutic power of the dharma. Lastly, in parallel with, if not in concert with, contemporary Transhumanists, some Buddhist practitioners feel an urgency in their practice—in some cases, coming out of the Mahāyāna spirit—that

leads them to privilege visionary experience and to embrace extraordinary means for rapid progress in the face of the sheer scope of human suffering and the looming existential threats on our planet. They turn, much like the *tāntrikas*, to an admittedly more fraught and dangerous path that offers the potential for accelerated spiritual development. Instead of ‘either/or’, the equation becomes ‘both/and’, whether that be in the form of micro-, meso-, or macro-dosing in concert with dharma, and especially meditation, practice.

V. Conclusion

The relationship between the practice of Buddhism and the use of psychedelic substances from the Psychedelic Revolution to the Psychedelic Renaissance has been an extremely important one. Both the therapeutic and spiritual uses of psychedelics met in the expressions of the formative frameworks of psychedelic exploration in the twentieth century—embodied in works such as Leary, Alpert, and Metzner’s *The Psychedelic Experience*, which drew its inspiration from the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the *Bardo Thödol*, and in turn inspired The Beatles’ ‘Tomorrow Never Knows’.¹⁹ The countercultural movement and the psychedelic experimentation of the 1960s and early 1970s fueled interest in and commitment to Buddhist communities, where practitioners sought to understand, integrate, and, in some cases, replicate the extraordinary experiences and understandings arisen from their journeys. The Psychedelic Renaissance has seen both a resurfacing of this countercultural legacy and a ‘mainstreaming’ of psychedelics as a therapeutic intervention, bringing once again questions about the relationship between Buddhist practice and psychedelic use to the fore.

As we have seen, the current Dalai Lama has articulated a largely conservative position on psychedelics, questioning their value as a means to obtain liberating spiritual insight on the grounds that they lend to the proliferation of illusion and are inferior to ‘natural’,

¹⁹ Leary, Metzner, and Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience*.

or endogenous means of obtaining such realizations and thereby transformation. These criticisms intersect in important ways with ongoing debates over the scope and meaning of the Fifth Precept with respect to the use of alcohol and drugs, especially within the global cosmopolitan Buddhist context. I have argued here that if we shift the focus from psychedelic use as spiritual ‘enhancement’ to psychedelics as ‘therapy’, we perhaps find more solid ground to build an argument for the use of psychedelics that is in line with Buddhist ethics. In some respects, that interpretation is at parity with the larger ideological shift that has made the Psychedelic Renaissance possible—bringing psychedelics into the locus of healthcare and of the hospital and unmooring them from their countercultural associations. But I have also emphasized the point that the use of psychoactive substances as ‘enhancement’, namely as a way to achieve extraordinary powers of perception and action, *siddhi* and *ṛddhi*, has been long recognized within the Buddhist context, even if ultimately viewed as inferior to meditative means. We see the confluence of such therapeutic and enhancement perspectives in contemporary Buddhist psychedelic retreat culture—such as the ‘Lotus Vine Journeys’ of Buddhist teacher and psychedelic guide Spring Washam. Their website states:

At Lotus Vine Journeys, our mission is to offer transformative plant medicine retreats in a safe, supportive, and ethically curated environment. By combining the ancient healing wisdom of plant medicine with Buddhist meditation practices, we guide individuals on a journey of deep spiritual, emotional, and physical healing. Our retreats cultivate a strong sense of community and compassion, providing a sacred space for personal growth, connection, and awakening. We are dedicated to curating each group with care, ensuring that every individual feels supported, respected, and empowered on their path to transformation.²⁰

As the biological effects and phenomenological dynamics of psy-

²⁰ ‘Our Vision and Mission’.

chedelic experiences become clearer, we may well have more clarity on the connections and disconnections between psychedelic use and Buddhist medicine. Undoubtedly, given the potential of psychedelics to transform the contemporary therapeutic and religious landscapes, Buddhist philosophy provides unique and ample resources for thinking about the ethics of psychedelic therapy and for making sense of psychedelic-inspired experiences in bodily, cognitive, and cosmological terms.

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