

# INFLUENCES OF PREVIOUS PSYCHEDELIC DRUG EXPERIENCES ON STUDENTS OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM: A PRELIMINARY EXPLORATION

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper presents some new information on how transpersonal experiences induced by psychedelic drugs have influenced a group of people practicing a particular discipline, Tibetan Buddhism. It is primarily an empirical paper, presenting new data which suggest further avenues of exploration. It does not aspire to answer such problematical questions as to whether psychedelic-induced transpersonal experiences are *really* "spiritual."

The so-called "psychedelic revolution" in the 1960s and early 1970s was quite important to the development of transpersonal psychology. It also left a lasting impact on Western culture (see, e.g., Tart, 1987), primarily by way of opening many bright minds to the realizations that our everyday, so-called "normal" state of consciousness is (a) quite arbitrary in many ways, rather than "natural" and unalterable, (b) is pathological in many ways, and (c) that there are many other ways in which self and reality can be experienced and organized. Many intellectuals were familiar with William James' oft-quoted statement:

*a  
lasting  
impact  
on  
Western  
culture*

Our normal waking consciousness ... is but one special type of consciousness, whilst **an** about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence: but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are all there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of

consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question- for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality (James, 1929; pp. 378-79).

Through psychedelic experiences, this statement became experiential reality for many people. not abstract intellectual theory.

### *The Spiritual/Transpersonal Quest in the West*

I shall give a somewhat personally oriented view of the effects of psychedelics on the transpersonal quest in our culture, since we are still somewhat too close to it in time for objective, historical accounts to have been written. Some more scholarly accounts worth perusing, however, are Clark, 1969; 1981; Krippner & Davidson, 1976; Needleman, 1970; and Needleman & Baker, 1975.

a  
focus  
on  
spiritual  
use

I knew many of the key people first involved in the psychedelic revolution and so can state with some confidence that a primary motivation of many for using psychedelic drugs was a transpersonal or spiritual one. There were other reasons, of course, varying with the individual, such as sensual pleasure, curiosity, a desire to escape suffering or boredom. etc. This was especially true once the issue of psychedelic drug use became politicized and a primary reason of many for using psychedelics became its rebellious nature. I will focus on the spiritual use in this paper, however.

We hoped and intuited that there was more to life than what everyday materialistic philosophy postulated, with its cheerless, mechanical view of human beings, with its bleak "religion" of "scientism" (Tart, 1989; chapter 22). Western religion offered little hope to many of us for finding a way to genuine transpersonal experience. Conventional Western religions are profound spiritual paths for some, but many of us had tried it and found it sadly lacking. It was too much empty words and negative emotions, too much "Believe!" (contrary to reason) and "You will go to hell if you don't believe!"

Some simplified versions of Eastern spiritual teachings had reached this country and caused excitement because they claimed to have practical methods for producing *experiences* of higher consciousness and transpersonal truths, not just doctrine about them. Some people were and are able to get impressive results from the practice of various kinds of meditation and related psychotechnologies in a short time. For many of us, unfortunately, the

meditation techniques produced mainly aching backs and discouraging experiences of seeing our uncontrolled mind go on and on in its usual patterns without reaching any higher levels.

### *The Promise of Psychedelics*

When information about psychedelic drugs appeared, it immediately aroused much interest. While many aspects of the drug experience were sensory and psychological—and there were definite dangers of "bad trips" and psychological harm in unprepared and unsuitable people—psychedelics also seemed to lead some people to deep transpersonal insights. Many of us tried psychedelics as part of our transpersonal search and did feel rewarded with at least glimpses of vital transpersonal truths and sometimes with life-changing insights.

General reviews of our knowledge of psychedelic drugs can be found elsewhere (see, e.g., Aaronson & Osmond, 1970; Bakalar, 1979-80; Barber, 1970; Blewett, 1961; Clark, 1969; 1981; Cohen, 1967; DiLeo, 1975-76; Dobkin de Rios, 1972; 1984; Drury, 1984; Ebin, 1965; Furst, 1976; Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1979; 1983; Grof, 1972-73; Harman, 1963; Huxley, 1957; Huxley, Horowitz, & Palmer, 1977; Krippner, 1985; La Barre, 1964; Leavitt, 1974; Lukoff, Zanger & Lu, 1990; Masters & Houston, 1966; 1968; Pahnke, 1966; 1967; 1968; 1969; 1970; Proffoff, 1961; Ring, 1988; Rogo, 1984; Siegel & Hirschman, 1984; Siegel & West, 1978; Siegel, 1989; Silverman, 1975-76; Snyder, 1971; Solomon, 1964; Tart, 1990; Wasson, 1962; Weil, 1975-76).

*general  
reviews  
of  
our  
knowledge  
of  
psychedelic  
drugs*

### *Are Psychedelic Experiences "Genuine" Mystical Experiences?*

Scholars, psychologists and theologians have argued about whether such drug-induced experiences were "genuine" mystical experiences (see, for example, Clark, 1969; 1981; Drury, 1984; Huxley, 1957; Krippner & Davidson, 1976; Lilly, 1975; Masters & Houston, 1966; Pahnke, 1968; Ring, 1988; Rogo, 1984; Siegel & Hirschman, 1984;). To get beyond intellectual speculation, Pahnke (Pahnke, 1963; 1966; Pahnke & Richards, 1966; 1969) carried out a controlled, double-blind experimental study of the genuineness of mystical experiences induced in a religious atmosphere coupled with psilocybin. Pahnke's study is, unfortunately, the only one of its kind.

After studying Western scholarly literature on mystical experiences, particularly Stace's classical work (Stace, 1960), Pahnke first devised a check list of nine characteristics usually used to describe mystical experiences. There were: (1) unity between

experiencer and the universe, the hallmark of mystical experience; (2) objectivity and reality, *the* certainty of the knowledge obtained; (3) transcendence of space and time; (4) sense of sacredness; (5) deeply felt positive mood; (6) paradoxicality in tenus of ordinary thinking; (7) alleged ineffability; (8) transiency; and (9) lasting positive changes in attitude and/or behavior. Twenty graduate students of theology were then given either psilocybin or an active placebo in a religious setting on Good Friday.

Pahnke concluded that, insofar as one can rely on people's descriptions (which is all most scholars had to go on), mystical experiences produced by ingesting psilocybin in a religious setting seemed as genuine as those described by the (predominantly) Western mystics of the past.

Doblin (1991) resurveyed almost all of Pahnke's subjects more than twenty years later and found that the experiences they had with psilocybin in the study showed the long-term effects characteristic of mystical experiences.

This kind of argument about genuineness is usually quite sterile to those who have actually experienced drug-induced mystical glimpses, of course: in this case, intellectual argument cannot compare with direct knowledge.

*the  
distinction  
between  
"spiritual"  
and  
"transpersonal"*

Now it is useful to note the distinction between my use of the words "spiritual" and "transpersonal" in this paper, although the two terms are frequently used synonymously in other settings. I usually use "spiritual" in conjunction with some particular, historic religion and practice (Buddhism, Christianity or Islam, for example), but I use "transpersonal" in the more general sense of experiences which transcend the boundaries and limitations of the individual ego in a vital way, regardless of the particular historical and religious terminology and conceptual system they may be cast in. The question of whether psychedelically aided experiences are "spiritual" or "genuinely" mystical always implies some historic tradition, with accompanying theology and vested interests, to judge them by. So we may argue endlessly about how spiritual some psychedelic experiences are, but there is no doubt that they can be genuine transpersonal experiences. The examples presented later as part of the findings of the present study will illustrate this.

#### *Long-term Change*

Observing many people in the psychedelic movement over the years, I can, in an oversimplified way, divide them into two categories. Those in the first had marvelous experiences with psychedelics and immediately sought more such experiences with

psychedelics. Some of these people were permanently changed in the long run, but many remained the same, basic, neurotic people they had always been; they just spoke of bad "vibrations" and "karma" instead of arguments at work and car accidents. It was as if, having seen a very inspiring movie on how their lives could be changed for the better, they kept going to see movies of this genre instead of applying the lessons of the films to change themselves.

People in the second category usually used psychedelic drugs much less than those in the first category, but their usage was more serious. They usually prepared for a psychedelic experience in advance, sorting out their motivation and goals, and then spent a long time (months to years) after an experience trying to see what they could apply of it to altering their lives and personalities, to making the insights they had received a part of their being. Many of the people I know in this category became more mature, open, loving, "spiritual" people over the years. Walsh (1982) found similar patterns in a study of five exceptionally mature individuals.

I believe that making glimpses of transpersonal realities (however brought about) part of one's *being*. instead of passing excitements, is what is essential for real growth. To put it another way, altered states of *consciousness* are important, interesting and probably necessary growth steps, but permanent altered states of *being* are the long-term goal. Traditional spiritual teachings, especially those from the East, were frequent vehicles for integrating the psychedelic insights into one's being, as well as various forms of psychotherapy and the new psychological growth techniques that were developing in the 1960s and 1970s.

*altered  
states of  
consciousness  
and  
altered  
states of  
being*

#### PSYCHEDELICS AND TIBETAN BUDDHISM

As part of my professional researches into the nature of altered states of consciousness over the past two decades, as well as my personal work on transpersonal growth, I have been a student of various spiritual traditions. Buddhism has been particularly attractive and helpful to me because of its practical meditative techniques as well as its intellectual and psychological sophistication. Tibetan Buddhism has been of special interest to me because of its knowledge and use of altered states of consciousness and the parallels between the Dzogchen school and Gurdjieff's teaching (Tart, 1986).

My own experiences with psychedelic drugs included aspects which seemed deeply transpersonal to me, even though they occurred in a laboratory setting (Tart, 1983). These experiences were important in attracting me to Buddhism and continue to influence, for better or worse, my understandings of Buddhism (and other

traditional spiritual paths). My case is not unique: there is considerable folklore in Buddhist student circles about how psychedelics attracted people to Buddhism. As one of the respondents to the survey reported herein wrote, "Tibetan Buddhism or Hinduism, with its flashy trappings and enormous numbers of deities and practices, was more like my psychedelic experiences than anything else I came across. Although the essence of Christianity might be the same, what I learned in church was more the opposite."

As another example of the folklore, an anonymous referee of a first draft of this paper remembered a conversation among North American Buddhist teachers where all but one said that they had come to meditation in part via drugs; the exception said jokingly that she had come to drugs via meditation. But these beliefs are anecdotal knowledge rather than something specific that would be of psychological use for transpersonal understanding or of practical use in teaching Buddhism.

*anecdotal  
knowledge*

Similarly, informal conversations with other students of Buddhism have indicated that while psychedelics are seldom used by practicing students, previous psychedelic experiences may continue to constitute a mental framework, a more-or-less explicit paradigm, that affects the way students hear and understand (or misunderstand) Buddhist teachings, the way they practice, and how some meditative experiences are interpreted (and perhaps shaped). Again, this is almost exclusively anecdotal knowledge, rather than anything specific.

*Personal Example: The Five Perfections*

I shall give one personal example of such influence. A key concept in Tibetan Buddhism is the Five Perfections. As I currently understand it, this refers to striving toward taking a special attitude toward a teaching situation in order to understand the teachings better. We almost always approach any situation with some set *a priori* attitudes that affect how we perceive, understand and react to it, so why not try to take a set of healthy attitudes?

The practice of the Five Perfections is to aspire to the attitude that you are listening to the Perfect Teacher, you are the Perfect Student, this is the Perfect Place, you are supported by others who constitute the Perfect Assembly, and now is the Perfect Time to learn. The more one succeeds in this attitude, the more open one will be to actually hearing the higher teachings.'

When I am reminded to practice this, I almost always recall some long ago psychedelic experiences. Even though my memory is faint and the knowledge is at least partially state-specific (that is I

cannot really grasp it fully in my ordinary state), this dim memory influences and inspires me. I recall that I have seen/felt/tasted the god-like perfection shining in otherwise ordinary human beings, knowing that at some higher level this is always there; we just don't see it. This is my model for knowing that it is possible to experience perfection in the teacher, the student (me), my fellow students. I recall that I have experienced my environment as beautiful and perfect, a palace of perfect jewels and harmony. I recall that I have experienced past present moments as the perfect spot in time, as eternity in the moment.

In recalling these memories, am I indeed increasing my chances of opening to the perfection of the higher truths taught through the vehicle of Buddhism, or deluding myself with an irrelevant or misleading experience? I do not know, but I would like to know.

### *Effective Transmission of the Dharma to the West*

While I have found traditional Buddhist teachings of enormous psychological and transpersonal value, I have also been aware of many cultural trappings and artifacts mixed in with them that tend to block effective transmission of the essential knowledge to Westerners. What were clear metaphors in a particular Asian culture at a certain historical period, for example, may strongly mislead contemporary Western students. Some Buddhist teachers are aware of this problem and have already begun experimenting with adapting Buddhist teachings to be more effective in our culture (see, e.g., Tart, 1990b, for an in-depth discussion with one Buddhist teacher about this, and Tart, in press, for a general discussion). This is not an easy task and it will probably be generations before we have an effective Western Buddhism.

*cultural  
trappings  
and  
artifacts*

An important factor in adapting Buddhism to the West *may* be the effects of previous psychedelic experiences. I say *may* because we have little specific data. Are students with such experiences such a small minority that they could be ignored or treated as unusual cases, or are they the bulk of the students? Even more importantly, What *specific* psychedelic experiences and memories of such experiences are affecting students' understanding of Buddhism?

The present study is an initial attempt to explore these questions.

#### SURVEY OF A TIBETAN BUDDHIST GROUP

I have been a member of the Rigpa Fellowship, a branch of an international organization supporting the teaching of Sogyal Rinpoche, for four years. This lama represents the Nyingma tradi-

*about  
a  
hundred  
dedicated  
practitioners*

tion of Tibetan Buddhism and emphasizes the path of Dzogchen, considered by various scholars to be the highest form of Tibetan Buddhism' (see, e.g., Sogyal, 1989, as well as Lipman & Peterson, 1987; Norbu, 1986; 1987; Rangdrol, 1989; Reynolds, 1989; Thondrup, 1982). The Rigpa Fellowship usually holds two ten-day retreats in California each year, as well as others at various locations in Europe, England and Australia. These retreats are attended primarily by Buddhist students who have already attended previous retreats led by Sogyal, many of whom are members of the Rigpa Sangha, although there are always some newcomers and Buddhist students from other traditions. I decided that the fall 1990 retreat, held in Oakland, California, would be a good opportunity to survey a group of about a hundred dedicated practitioners about their previous psychedelic drug use and its effects, if any, on their approach to Buddhism. I say about a hundred, rather than give an exact number, as a significant number of people only came to a few days of the retreat. Many of the retreatants were personal acquaintances, so I expected a high level of openness and responsiveness.

### *The Questionnaire*

I passed out a two-page questionnaire to retreatants which had the following instructions for its first part:

Many people believe that experiences with psychedelic drugs were an important factor in both attracting people to Tibetan Buddhism and in their interpretation of teachings. This is true for me, but there is no actual data on this. If this is true for only a tiny minority of students, it's mainly a curiosity (except to those of us who have been so affected), but if it's true in a major way, that's not only of interest to us, but *the* teachings may need to be modified in some ways as part of effectively integrating Tibetan Buddhism into Western culture.

At the last retreat Sogyal Rinpoche and I discussed this and agreed it would be helpful to have some actual data. Thus this survey, which gets both background information and asks for your specific ideas. I'm a research psychologist, teaching at UC Davis, and have carried out these kinds of surveys before. I may publish the results and will certainly make them available (within the limits of protecting each respondent's confidentiality) to Rinpoche (who may talk to his teachers about them) and to Sangha members.

Could you please take a few minutes to fill out this voluntary survey, even if you haven't had any personal experience with psychedelic drugs? Your responses are absolutely confidential-don't put your name anywhere on it. I don't want to know who you are, and I will present results only in ways that don't allow identification of individuals.

I will try to come up with some summary information about the results for us during this retreat if we are fast in completing them. Please try to return your completed survey to me, in its sealed envelope, in the first day or two. I will try to give us a rough idea of results while we're still at the retreat.

Look over all the questions before you start answering. If one doesn't make sense in your experience, or you don't know how to answer it, feel free to write "Doesn't make sense" beside it, or otherwise explain your responses.

Thanks for your help!

Charley Tart

### *Background Data*

About a page of multiple choice questions (the questions are given in Appendix 1) then asked for (a) age range [I used range rather than exact age to help protect respondents' anonymity]; (b) sex; (c) whether they considered themselves a member of the Rigpa Sangha and, if so, for how long; (d) how much time they usually devoted to *formal* Buddhist practice (sitting meditation or guru yoga, e.g.) each day; and (e) previous personal experience with marijuana and, separately, with major psychedelic drugs such as LSD, mescaline or psilocybin." Respondents with no personal experience with these drugs were finished with their questionnaire at this point.

*multiple  
choice  
questions*

Although most people think primarily of the major psychedelic drugs in connection with profound transpersonal experiences, an early study of mine (Tart, 1971) on the phenomenology of marijuana intoxication found many experienced users reporting transpersonal experiences, even though marijuana is a weaker drug (unless used in very large doses). Thus the inclusion of separate questions on marijuana in this study.

For those with previous drug experience, there were further multiple choice questions about (f) whether they still used marijuana, whether they might in the future, and how long it had been since their last experience with marijuana; (g) ditto for major psychedelics; (h) how important marijuana experiences were to their spiritual life in general and in attracting them to Tibetan Buddhism in particular; (i) ditto for major psychedelics; (j) how much their drug experiences in general had both helped and hindered their understanding and practice of Tibetan Buddhism; and (k) if they had rated degrees of both help and hindrance, whether, on balance,

they had been helped or hindered. We will look at these results before considering the second part of the questionnaire.

### *General Background Characteristics*

Sixty-four retreatants returned completed questionnaires, a high response rate. Seventy-five percent were women, reflecting the typical predominance of women I have observed at most transpersonal and Buddhist functions in California. Fifty respondents (83%) considered themselves members of the Rigpa Sangha. The mean length of membership of these Sangha members was 5.3 years, ranging from a month to *eleven* years in a fairly flat distribution, with almost half the respondents being members for more than five years.

These figures should not be taken as an estimate of the total amount of time spent as students of Buddhism *per seot* in spiritual practice overall. Many, if not most, of the members of the Rigpa Sangha spent years in other Buddhist and spiritual work before coming to Tibetan Buddhism.

In examining the remainder of the questions, note that the number of people reporting on various items varied somewhat due to occasional skipping of particular questions, but in general the number of respondents was greater than fifty.

*average  
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per day  
in  
formal  
Buddhist  
practice*

Respondents reported that they spent an average time of one hour per day in formal Buddhist practice. The average is misleading here, however, for 40% of the people who reported on their practice time spend half an hour or less in formal daily practice. Half an hour is the modal formal practice time, with 29% of the respondents reporting this. The few who spend two or more hours a day practicing pulled up the average a great deal. The questionnaire did not *ask* for estimates of time spent in less formal practice, which might be considerable for some people. Given the common stereotype of Americans as wanting instant gratification or they try something else, this is a fairly serious group of practitioners.

### *Previous Psychedelic Drug Use*

Ninety-four percent of the respondents reported previous experience with marijuana. Using analysis categories taken from my earlier phenomenological study of marijuana intoxication (Tart, 1971), twenty percent reported 1-10 previous uses, 16% 11-50 uses, and 58% 50 or more previous uses. Seventy-seven percent reported previous experience with major psychedelics: 49% had 1-10 experiences, 18% 11-50, 10% 50 or more experiences, and only 23% no experience at all.

It is clear that, insofar as this sample is typical of students of Tibetan Buddhism (an empirical question to be resolved in future studies), most such students have had previous experience with psychedelics, often quite extensive experience. These students also have considerably more experience with drugs than people in general.

Since much of the drug use of this group was five or more years in the past, we can look at a few older surveys of marijuana use for comparison. There is no perfect comparison group that was surveyed, but several groups were of interest. A 1983 poll of Californians (Fay, 1990, p. 59), for example, found that 43% had tried marijuana, but only 11% were still using it at the time of the poll. A 1979 poll of 498 adults in San Francisco (Brain/Mind, 1979) found 42% had used marijuana at least once. These two surveys are especially relevant because a majority of the retreatants were Californians. Nineteen seventy-nine and 1980 surveys by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (Brain/Mind, 1990) of a younger sample, high school and college students in the United States, found 37% of high school and 34% of college students had used marijuana at least once in the previous month, down to 17% and 16% respectively for 1989.

Another interesting, but again younger, group to compare these Buddhist students to are the students in my upper division psychology class on altered states of consciousness at UC Davis. As this is not a required course, students' main motivation for electing it is interest in altered states, similar to one of the motivations people express for studying Buddhism. In a 1987 survey of my students, 75% of them reporting having tried marijuana, and 33% of them major psychedelics. The Buddhist retreatants still rank considerably higher than this highly selected group.

*a  
younger  
comparison  
group*

It is also clear that these serious Buddhist students have largely (but not completely) given up psychedelic drug use. Seventy-six percent report they no longer use marijuana, 15% that they use it more than once per year but less than once per month, 7% more than once per month but less than once per week, and only one respondent uses it more than once per week. This 24% still using marijuana at least occasionally, is a higher rate than the 16% reported for a national sample of college students noted in the previous paragraph, although not too much should be made of this comparison since rates of use are unclear in the two samples.

Although their marijuana usage dropped greatly from the past, many of the present respondents are keeping their options open. Twelve percent report they expect to use marijuana in the future and 42% that they might. It has been an average of 6.2 years since the last use of marijuana, with times ranging from 2 weeks to 25 years.

Similarly, 90% of the respondents report that they no longer use major psychedelics, 10% that they use them at least once per year but less than once per month. Nineteen percent indicate they expect to use major psychedelics in the future and 32% that they might. It has been an average of 9.1 years since the last use of a major psychedelic, with times ranging from 2 months to 24 years.

At the present time, we could characterize these serious students as relatively infrequent users of marijuana and major psychedelics. Remarks on the questionnaires indicate that Buddhism (with its central emphasis on not being attached to or dependent upon *anything*) was often a major factor in giving up or reducing drug use. But note that a majority indicate that they expect to or might use marijuana (54%) or major psychedelics (51%) at least occasionally in the future. How much of this is a serious intention to use and how much a liberal insistence on personal freedom cannot be assessed from the present data:

#### *Importance of Psychedelics to the Spiritual Life*

Regarding the question of how important marijuana experiences were to their spiritual lives in general, 11% reported *very*, 16% reported *fairly*, 14% reported *some*, and 59% reported *not at all*. As to marijuana's importance in attracting them to Tibetan Buddhism in particular, none reported *very*, 7% reported *fairly*, 12% reported *some*, and 81% reported *not at all*. Thus marijuana experiences are significantly more important to the retreatants' spiritual lives in general (27% *very* or *fairly* important) than in attracting them to Tibetan Buddhism in particular (only 7% *very* or *fairly* important), a difference significant at  $P < .01$ , one-tailed" (Chi-square  $\chi^2 = 8.85$  with 2 df).

*major  
psychedelics  
and  
their  
spiritual  
life*

With major psychedelics, on the other hand, 35% reported they were *very* important to their general spiritual life, 17% reported *fairly*, 24% reported *some*, and 24% reported *not at all*. As to importance in attracting them specifically to Tibetan Buddhism, 13% reported *very*, 6% reported *fairly*, 13% reported *some*, and 68% reported *not at all*. As with marijuana, experiences with major psychedelics are more important to their spiritual lives in general (52% *very* or *fairly*) than in specifically attracting them to Tibetan Buddhism (19% *very* or *fairly*),  $P < .001$  (Chi-square  $\chi^2 = 18.54$  with 3 df), but psychedelics are clearly of importance to almost a fifth of the respondents in attracting them to Tibetan Buddhism.

This greater importance of major psychedelics to respondents' spiritual life in general makes sense in light of the generally far more intense psychedelic experiences that typically occur even

than with strong marijuana or hashish. Experiences with major psychedelics were *very* or *fairly* important to 52% in terms of their general spiritual life compared to 27% for marijuana (Chi-square = 15.24 with 3 df,  $P < .005$ , 1-tailed). Similarly psychedelics were significantly more important than marijuana (19% versus 7%) in attracting people to Tibetan Buddhism, although the difference is suggestive rather than significant (Chi-square = 3.59 with 1 df,  $P < .06$ , 1-tailed).

Respondents were asked to rate how much their overall combined experience with marijuana and/or major psychedelics either helped and/or hindered their understanding and practice of Tibetan Buddhism on separate *helped* and *hindered* four-point scales. Almost all of the respondents rated the helped scale, but about one third skipped rating the hindered scale. This might mean that they did not see a need to rate the hindered item when they had already indicated that psychedelics had helped, or it might mean some confusion over the question. Rather than presenting percentages, then, we will look at actual numbers of respondents.

Twenty-one respondents reported psychedelics helped a *lot*, 13 *some*, 11 *a little*, and 13 *not at all*. Twenty-three respondents reported psychedelics had hindered a *lot*, 8 *some*, 7 *a little*, and 4 *not at all*. Asked to check whether on balance psychedelics had helped or hindered, 19 reported helped, 4 reported hindered, with many people skipping this question. The preponderance of helping over hindering was significant (Chi-square = 3.59 with 1 df,  $P < .05$ , one-tailed).

*a  
preponderance  
of  
helping  
over  
hindering*

#### INTERACTIONS BETWEEN PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCES AND TIBETAN BUDDHIST CONCEPTS

In the second part of the questionnaire, respondents, treated as expert witnesses, were asked for their help in beginning to clarify more specifically how psychedelic experiences might have affected their understanding of Tibetan Buddhist concepts.

Now we need to get more specific. Please briefly describe two or three of the most important drug-associated experiences you have had that affected your spiritual perspective. What drug were they associated with? Aside from indicating their general spiritual meaning to you, can you then go on and indicate what specific aspect of Buddhist or Tibetan Buddhist ideas that you associate them with? Might some experience strongly affect your understanding of "emptiness" or "rigpa," for instance? Don't force things into a perspective if they don't really fit.

Don't describe circumstances so uniquely that it might make it possible to identify you.

No need to keep writing that words are inadequate to fully describe your experiences; I understand!

Use the second sheet of paper if needed, and return this survey ASAP. Just hand me your sealed envelope any time you see me. Thanks again for your help!

Most respondents provided descriptions and comments, and I shall summarize the basic types of spiritually relevant experiences that I gleaned from studying these responses. I have tried to stay with the actual reports as much as possible, rather than implicitly analyzing them by abstracting them more than slightly. Some of the categories are related to one another, perhaps being different facets of the same basic experience, while others are fairly discrete. Almost all categories had three or more reports falling in the category. I have not reported a few possible categories that were only sparsely described by a single respondent, such that I did not feel sure of what they meant.

I did not fill out a questionnaire myself, incidentally, in order to lessen *my* personal biases in working with others' responses. Nevertheless the following descriptions are undoubtedly influenced to some extent by my own psychedelic experiences, in spite of my attempts to be as objective as possible. On the other hand, I believe the fact that I have personally experienced many of the types of phenomena described below, even if a long time ago, gives me a greater sensitivity in understanding and reporting them.

*the  
beginnings  
of  
a  
catalog*

The categories of experience below are the beginnings of a catalog, not a study of what proportion of people experienced each, how they are interrelated, or the like. Some respondents may have had many of the experiences listed below but only reported two or three of them, as per the instructions. Such questions are the work of future studies.

Note also that in relating the reported experiences to Buddhism, these are the respondents' and my *interpretations* of what various Buddhist concepts are and may be distorted by our Western background, as well as various personal idiosyncrasies.

*Opening to a Wider Perspective*

Gautama Buddha's first teaching was called the Four Noble Truths. These are, in simplified form, (1) the reality of suffering, (2) the causes of suffering, (3) the fact that a way out of suffering existed, and (4) an outline of the way out of suffering. With regard to point two, the three principal causes of suffering are attachment,

aversion and ignorance. We can view ignorance as not only a simple lack of knowledge but as the existence of a too narrow perspective on life, a prejudiced mind set that is both automatized and habitual and which is driven by conscious and unconscious attachments and aversions. A narrow mind set has its maximal power when you do not even know you have a narrow mind set. Thus realizing the limitations of your habitual mind set and seeing that there are wider ones is a basic step toward liberation. Traditional Buddhist paths tend to produce a gradual widening of one's view. Dzogchen, as I currently understand it, tries to produce and then stabilize an instantaneous glimpse of a relaxed, open view. Psychedelic experiences can also do this.

*Dzogchen  
and  
psychedelic  
experience*

A 35-year-old<sup>8</sup> woman (R9)<sup>9</sup> wrote that "My first psychedelic drug experience was a very spiritual one. My whole narrow little perspective of myself and life as I perceived **it** were suddenly blown open. I became aware of the conscious energy of mind, which was not the same as the thoughts or thinking part of mind, and my sense of self and self identity loosened up." A younger woman (R13) reports that her drug experiences "... blew holes in my high school perspective ... ," but adds wryly, "... holes that stayed for too many years." A 52-year-old man (R57) reported "...an experience of heightened awareness which indicated a much vaster human capacity than was usually experienced."

This drastic opening up may be frightening and cause resistance to further opening, as in the case of a 39-year-old woman (R27): "The exposure of emptiness to the point of dissolution of all concrete phenomena. Life to a pinpoint of existence that wasn't even existence, but probably more a point of consciousness. This was frightening rather than enlightening, and probably exists as a reason not to open rather than to open. The fear gets in the way, fear derived from the memory of the fear of the experience."

*Treating Our Own Lives and Karma*

Psychedelic insights consonant with Buddhist teaching include the fact that we do not simply experience the "real" world, and that our ignorance, attachments and aversions did not just passively happen **t** **Q**s: we play an active part in creating and maintaining them. As a **26-year-old** woman (R43) noted, "... the way the mind influences everything so strongly on a trip helped me understand how we determine our reality by the attitude or view we have."

A man (R6) reported that his psychedelic experiences gave him insights into "... how we can actually hallucinate (create things

that appear to be there for me, but others might not see it so) in everyday life, e.g., paranoia, fears, doubts, usually on the negative side. Also though can be on positive side, like successes or perfection of some thought or idea that doesn't pan out in experience." A 45-year-old woman (R29) succinctly put it that her "... experiences simply convinced me of the personal and mutable nature of reality-set and setting, both consciously and unconsciously."

An older woman (R15), describing an experience with MDMA, said "... it became clear that one makes one's own life. It is all in our mind. It became clear that our parents and educators are just an *excuse*, although I had a heavy, turbulent and suppressing youth." In Buddhist terms, we might call these insights a recognition of the reality of karma.

### *Going Beyond the Intellect*

*levels  
beyond  
mind*

One could argue that the insights listed above are not very intellectually profound, as most philosophers and psychologists would generally agree with them. Buddhism, psychotherapists and contemporary growth psychologists would point out that it is not the intellectual content of such insights per se that is so important, but realizing them on emotional, bodily and transpersonal levels beyond mind. This is particularly emphasized in Dzogchen:

"Buddhahood is not attained by fabricated Dharmas; Meditation made by the mind, fabricated by the intellect is the deceiving enemy" (Dudjorn Rinpoche, no date, p. 3).

The psychedelic experiences reported here go beyond the intellect. As a 41-year-old woman (R14) put it, "I totally went beyond intellect, couldn't communicate verbally, ..." Another woman (R9) said, "... I became aware of the conscious energy of mind; which was not the same as the thoughts or thinking part of mind ...",<sup>10</sup> and an older man (R57) wrote, "All my experiences had a common feature: an experience of heightened awareness which indicated a much vaster human capacity than was usually experienced."

One description recognized the state-specificity of some knowledge, when an older woman (R15) reported that "... we all *live* on different levels at once. When Rinpoche says, for instance, that this is important, but at the same time says it's not important ... it makes sense. That we all chase after a hundred unimportant things, yet they are necessary, what I call 'the small plan,' our daily life, and at the same time we work on a much, much wider scale, on a cosmic plan. which I call 'the big plan.' And the two ... are connected."

### *Clarity and Luminosity*

Just as understandings can go to a new depth and clarity beyond the ordinary, sensory perception can be experienced with a new clarity that seems to be a kind of knowledge in itself. A fundamental Buddhist concept is that we ordinarily live in samsara, a state of clouded perception and thinking, full of ignorance, attachment and aversion. Achieving a state of clarity is thus highly valued.

A **51-year-old** man (R24), describing an experience with peyote taken with American Indians, reports: "Had *definite* experience of clarity for about two hours. Saw every leaf, tree, plant, local animal, persons as exactly as they were-which was perfectly in harmony within their physical space, location and relationship to all. The beauty of just the beingness of all things ... mind was clear, present and empty and completely aware."

As a scientist I feel a need to distinguish the experience of clarity per se from the implication that it is necessarily a more accurate perception of reality, but this is a complex topic that we will not go into here. Needless to say, the experience of clarity is quite gratifying regardless of its relationship to other aspects of reality.

In mystical traditions the world over, clarity is usually associated with the experience of luminosity, a shining quality of things that is very meaningful. That was the case here. A **46-year-old** woman (R52) wrote, "I fully perceived all phenomena as transient and transparent, but beautiful and luminous," while another notes that "I totally went beyond intellect, couldn't communicate verbally, but just relaxed into that golden shower of loving light."

*clarity  
and  
the  
experience  
of  
luminosity*

### *Illusory, Empty Nature of Phenomena*

The term "samsara" is often translated as "living in illusion." What we take to be straightforward perception of a real, concrete world is actually the end result of a complex, automatized, and highly biased psychological construction process (Tart, 1986; 1991). The continuously changing flux of events is readily overly concretized, created as if it were an eternal object. A major goal of Buddhism is to understand and experience the continuous flux and impermanence of events.

Several respondents reported that their psychedelic experiences had given them direct knowledge of the "illusory" nature of phenomena. One 39-year-old woman (R27) wrote of "The experience of emptiness to the point of dissolution of all concrete phenomena ...," an experience which frightened, as well as educated her. A man (R45) wrote "I fully perceived all phenomena as transient

and transparent, but beautiful and luminous .... " Another man (R42) wrote that "... when I saw an object dissolve before my eyes ... I related that to emptiness." A woman (R61) reported that "It is also very useful to have experienced solid objects, such as walls, becoming fluid," in understanding the concept of emptiness.

### *Feeling Connected with the World and Others*

An especially common problem in Western culture, given our high valuation of rugged individualism, is a feeling of isolation. This includes feelings of isolation from other individuals and a feeling of lack of connection with the universe, often tying in with feelings of living a meaningless life in an inherently meaningless universe (see Tart, 1989, especially chapter 22 for an extended discussion of this). Buddhism regards the feeling of separateness as an illusion, arising from the illusion of having a separate self.

### *transcending the feeling of separation*

Transcending the feeling of separation was an important psychedelic experience for respondents. A young man (R25), for example, writes that "... it was a very powerful experience of having a big mind, being connected to the world through energy channels ... ," while a 35-year-old man (R28) reported "Connection to cosmos and life force. Felt similar energy vibrations (but smaller) with different lamas during empowerments or retreats."

A middle-aged woman (R4), who had taken MDMA in the past, experienced that the people she was with were connected on two levels: "... one was the everyday world and the other a different world like a 'soul connection' or spirit world-difficult to describe ... everyone just doing their thing, going through experiences of various kinds. There was no judgment, just acceptance and understanding. . . . I also felt very connected at a very deep level to others not present with whom I have been with in spiritual endeavors."

One 35-year-old woman wrote that " ... the use of peyote allowed me to experience a deeper interconnectedness with all beings and all phenomena ... thus some preparation for faith-the unquestioning faith in Tibetan Buddhism which can arise when you have experiential knowledge." A woman (R41), looking at a picture of Padmasambhava, " seeing many changes in it: "The whole experience with this picture increased my faith in and connection to Padmasambhava as a 'universal guru figure' for me."

### *Union and Harmony*

To put the overcoming of separation more positively, it is the experience of union and harmony. This can be union with animals,

as with a 45-year-old man (R7) reporting "I remember lying on my back and having a cat jump up on my chest. It seemed that the cat and I became one entity," or a woman of the same age reporting that "On mushrooms, with my animals in the woods, we could easily understand each other's minds/hearts and we just hung out together in a non-dual state."

A young woman (R21) noted that marijuana "... gave me (on an increasingly inconsistent basis) a sense of union with the universe ... that was similar to that which I experience in meditation." A middle-aged man (R54) and a younger woman (R61), writing about their peyote experiences, said "We're all in this together, part of each other," and " ... the use of peyote allowed me to experience a deeper interconnectedness with all beings and all phenomena."

Experiences of union can be accompanied by feeling of "... heightened levels of communication (ESP) ... ," as a 23-year-old woman (R58) reports.

### *Love and Compassion*

The development of compassion, in parallel with the development of wisdom and insight, is central in Buddhist thought. Many respondents felt psychedelic experiences had helped them in this.

*the  
development  
of  
compassion*

"I had a feeling of love for everyone and everything," wrote a 57-year-old woman (R4), and a younger woman (R9) reports, "I also had a deep heart experience which was more like a universal love experience than anything I can describe."

Another woman (R61) notes "... It is easier to have more compassion for other people when they are suffering after having seen how the human mind can produce the various exaggerated states of happiness, terror, joyousness and sadness-all the emotions."

Many psychedelic experiences are usually seen as a recognition of a fundamental, always existing truth, not something created by the drug. A young woman (R58) writes that with MDMA, "... I felt a universal love coupled with a non-ordinary thought, 'This experience is always available, just let go of ego, and from now on, do it without drugs.' "

### *Big "Self" Beyond Ordinary Self*

Many of the experiences reported above can be seen as transcending our ordinary self and experiencing what is called the Big Self. Buddhist teachings frequently talk about the unreality of the

self or ego but, as I currently understand it, two concepts are mixed together here.

One theme, perhaps representing my Western interpretation, is that the concept of no self is about the unreality of the ordinary self, not necessarily a denial of *any* kind of identity. After all, the idea of karma working from one incarnation to another would make no sense if there were not "something" that went on from life to life that the karma was associated with, although we must be careful with the *thing* part of "something." This theme motivates us to not identify with the limited, transient ordinary self.

The second theme, which I believe must be experienced to be fully understood, is that of no inherent self or identity at all. I should note that I do not clearly understand this concept or have a proper experiential basis for evaluating it, and this ignorance may influence my discussion of it.

*part  
of  
something  
much  
greater*

Respondents definitely reported transcending their identification with their limited, ordinary selves and experiencing themselves as part of something much greater. How much reported experiences transcended any identity whatsoever cannot be judged.

This was expressed as simply as a 51-year-old man's (R12) "... having a big mind" to a young woman's (RIO) "... it gave me a deep realization of a release from ego, of 'I know who I am.' "

Another woman (R9) wrote, "I became aware of the conscious energy of mind, which was not the same as the thoughts or thinking part of mind, and my sense of self and self identity loosened up." Another person (R62), echoing the motivation that led many people to try psychedelics, wrote, "I suspect that I had always hoped or known that there was more than my limited mind. I think that psychedelic only confirmed and gave me experience of that:"

#### *Experiences with Energy*

Development is not just a matter of concepts and insights about self and reality, but also the ability to *do*, to experience and eventually use various kinds of non-physical (to our current understanding) energies. Several respondents reported experiences with energy, manifesting in various ways.

A 26-year-old man (R12) reports "... it was a very powerful experience of having a big mind, being connected to the world through energy channels, also very playful and luminous, feeling of being god." Another man (R28), writing about his experience with MDMA, reports that he "laid on the bed with massive energy

vibrations going through me for several hours. Connection to cosmos and life force ... open clear state of energy and mind."

Energy is not always experienced as inherently positive. A 35-year-old man (R28), reporting on a marijuana experience, writes that he "stepped outside and encountered an enormous archetype of the Devouring Mother. Had clear experience of reality of energy forms. Clear both negative and benevolent energy forms."

Energy can also be disruptive: as a woman quoted several times above said, "I became aware of the conscious energy of mind, which was not the same as the thoughts or thinking part of mind." Also, "As far as the meditation went, I found the drug obstructed rather than enhanced the quality. The energy was too intense to be able to stabilize in the practice. My mind was distracted by its own energy." (R9) Recognition of the potential disruptiveness of these kinds of energy experiences is probably one of the reasons for the emphasis on developing stability of mind in Buddhism.

*energy  
can  
be  
disruptive*

#### *Importance of Perfect Environment*

An important theme in Tibetan Buddhism, discussed earlier, is the Five Perfections. In order to maximize the effectiveness of teaching and, especially in Dzogchen, transmission of the enlightened consciousness handed down through the lineage, you need the perfect teacher, the perfect students, the perfect lineage of transmission, the perfect time and the perfect place. A 43-year-old woman (R1) writes:

My most memorable, meaningful psychedelic experience was with mescaline I took in company with friends on a day hike in the mountains of Colorado. We stopped at my favorite spot, a meadow with a rushing stream, to "trip." I perched on a boulder in the middle of the stream and found myself absolutely riveted to the movement of the trees or whatever I looked at—my first experience with the illusory nature of all phenomena! I was also struck with how perfect a spot I just happened to be in to discover this, a fact that surfaced many years later in Tibetan Buddhist teachings.

#### *Reassurance that Consciousness Survives Death*

Shinzen Young, a pioneer in adapting Buddhist teachings to our Western culture, notes that:

Buddhism is rather unique in the world's spiritual traditions in that it is the only religion in which you do not have to buy the whole package at once. If you become a Moslem, for example, it means you buy the whole Moslem package, the whole belief system. Buddhism encour-

ages people to accept those aspects that work for them. For example, somebody may see the value of developing concentration or compassion but may find it impossible to believe in many lives, rebirth. All traditional Buddhists believe in reincarnation, and the Buddha himself definitely believed it, but if a person does not believe it, they can still take other parts of Buddhism, like the concentration and compassion, and use those, and that is fine. As experience grows, one may want to buy more of the package (Tart, 1990b).

Reincarnation and survival of death are difficult for many to accept in modern Western culture. You can practice a great deal of Buddhism as a sort of "mental health" discipline, but it goes further than that.

A 51-year-old man (R24), who took peyote with Indians, writes that he "Came to the edge of a cliff overlooking a large valley and plateau. I looked up at the moon and had an inner, persistent sensation of bright white light along with hearing the words, 'Your consciousness will survive death, but you must work for it.' I never questioned the authenticity or clarity of the statement ... it was very real."

*Psychedelics as Preparation/or Bardos  
of Death and Dying*

*teachings  
on  
the  
nature  
of  
death*

Tibetan Buddhism has detailed teachings on the nature of death, covering the process of dying, experiences in the afterlife state, and the reincarnation process. The most well known version of these is the well-known *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, originally translated by Evans-Wentz (1957) and available in a more accurate translation by Freemantle and Trungpa (1975). Sogyal Rinpoche also has a book in preparation on this subject (Sogyal, in press). While the general Buddhist teachings on death are that your karma, the consequences of your actions in life, determine how you will be reborn, Tibetan Buddhists believe that the altered states of consciousness occurring in the dying process and after death state are what we might call "high leverage" periods: mental actions and practices carried out then have an especially strong influence on karma since the mind is not constrained by the physical body. Indeed, immediate and permanent enlightenment can be attained in these periods with skillful enough practice.

This is not easy, however, as the *bardo* states, as they are called, are tremendously intense and different from the state we are used to when consciousness is stabilized, dampened, and conditioned by residing in the physical body. Some bardo experiences are perceived as gods and bodhisattvas, others as demons. To grossly oversimplify, the attainment of enlightenment involves being able to perceive both godlike and demonic manifestations as projections of your own mind.

The written descriptions of the bardos of death sound rather like psychedelic experiences. Indeed, Leary and his colleagues (Leary, Metzner & Alpert, 1964) wrote a guidebook for psychedelic experiences using the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* as an inspiration. Thus several respondents mentioned that their psychedelic experiences made the idea of bardo states more understandable and may have helped prepare them for the bardos. For example, a 42-year-old woman (R1) writes:

I liked acid or mescaline trips that provided that cozy feeling of absolute love and warmth. I tried to avoid the acid trips that degenerated into paranoia and terrifying demons. I never "freaked out" with any of the "scary visions" or feeling of paranoia, but always tried to see them as projections of the mind. This was a helpful way to deal with it, but, nonetheless, I did try to avoid it! Now, I'm glad I had this practice in preparation for the bardos!

A man (R42) writes:

Morning glory seeds. Went first on a "bad trip," triggered by nausea, where time stood still and I felt like lead and then had bats flying in my head. I remembered Timothy Leary's version of the *Tibetan Book Of the Dead* (this was before I knew anything about Tibetan Buddhism) and was able to "let go" and accept the delusions as creations of my mind ....

### *Relaxed, Open Space of Rigpa*

At the heart of Dzogchen teaching is the experience of rigpa, the relaxed, natural, uncontrived and open space of existence from which all phenomena arise as the natural play of existence. Intellectual mind, being only an incomplete manifestation of the totality of rigpa, cannot come up with any logical definition of it. The importance of the lineage of the teacher, the lama, in the Dzogchen tradition is that each authentic teacher has experienced the state of rigpa as a result of his or her own teacher having introduced them to it. Thus the lineage is an unbroken chain of teachers able to introduce students to that state through their own direct, experiential knowledge of it.

*the  
experience  
of  
rigpa*

There are frequent questions and debates among students as to whether they have really experienced rigpa, but students aspire to experiencing it, stabilizing their experience of it, and learning to act in life from that state of rigpa,

Whether students have actually experienced rigpa or not, the appeal of psychedelics is expressed in the report of a 44-year-old woman (R1) who writes, "Even now I still occasionally smoke marijuana to remind me of that relaxed, open space that I've come to know as rigpa."

### *Understanding Interdependent Origination*

Our minds, as discussed earlier, tend to overly concretize aspects of experience, mentally creating discrete, independent, everlasting objects. Such conceptualization interferes with a more valid experience of reality as continuous process. A key *Buddhist* doctrine in this respect is that of *interdependent origination*, that processes are continuously affecting one another, that what appears to be a "solid" object or situation at one moment is the result of interacting forces and in turn will change into other things, acting as an interacting force itself.

Several students felt their psychedelic experiences had helped them appreciate this: "... definitely aided my understanding of some aspects of Buddhism, for example interdependent origination, emptiness and non-duality;" (R21) or "... contributed to an appreciation of the nature of change, interdependence and emptiness;" (R52) and the report of a woman (R61) that because of her psychedelic experiences "... you can trust your own inner knowledge or wisdom that everything is interdependent."

### *Non-Duality*

*the  
experience  
of  
non-duality*

In earlier discussion we touched on the importance of experiences of unity and harmony. A more specifically Buddhist expression of this is the experience of non-duality. Ordinarily we always and automatically divide everything in our experience into me and not-me. While this may be useful on a biological level (you don't want to eat your own arm when you feel hungry), it creates inherent feelings of separation and isolation when applied on all levels. Transcending duality is usually listed as one of *the* qualities of enlightenment.

Psychedelic experience" ... definitely aided my understanding of some aspects of Buddhism, for example interdependent origination, emptiness and non-duality," reports a 23-year-old woman (R21), and, more specifically, "... we all relaxed on a hillside and reached a state of very profound non-duality, with the four of us sharing awareness, and we felt entirely integrated into the universe." (R26).

### *Presence*

Another key concept in Dzogchen is that of *presence*. The late Dudjom Rinpoche states that "... pure awareness of Newness is the real Buddha ... " (Dudjom Rinpoche, no date, p. 2). Ordinarily

we are not very present to what is happening in the moment (Tart, 1986), but instead are absorbed in the past or future, in fantasies, hopes, fears, and plans about the future. Although presence, like non-duality, is beyond verbal definition in an absolute form, people can become sensitized to degrees of presence in the balance between being aware of sensory input relating to the moment as opposed to unawareness of current sensory input and dominance of thought and fantasy.

Psychedelics can give dramatic experiences of presence. A 51-year-old man (R24), describing his peyote experience, wrote, "Mind was clear, present and empty, and completely aware." A woman (R47) reported psychedelics "Made me feel I understood concepts like 'vibration,' the 'Five Certainties,' and 'Be here now!' "

#### *Understanding the Reality of Visualization Practices*

A common characteristic of psychedelic experiences is intense visual imagery, often so intense and real that it is described simply as seeing things, rather than as images. Visualization is an important aspect of many Tibetan Buddhist practices.

*seeing  
things,  
rather  
than  
images*

A 57-year-old woman (R47) writes, "I felt I understood visualization practices because I could easily imagine how someone could be in a state of mind where 'Buddhas filling the whole of space' and 'lights streaming out in all directions' could manifest."

#### . DISCUSSION

##### *Limitations on the Present Findings*

Before discussing the present findings, we should recall some limitations on their generality. For one thing, the respondents of the present study are students of one particular teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, drawn to the teaching style of Sogyal Rinpoche. How different they are from other students of Tibetan Buddhism is unknown, although the general folklore is that generally such students have had extensive psychedelic drug experiences.

Further, Tibetan Buddhist students may be only partially representative of students of Buddhism in general. The austere practices of Zen, for example, or the fundamental and basic practices of the Theravadin traditions may not be as attractive to people who have had psychedelic experiences.

Note too that the respondents are *students* of Tibetan Buddhism, not learned authorities on it. Thus their comparisons of psychedelic experiences and Buddhist experiences and concepts may not be completely accurate representations of the latter. Certainly the language they describe their experiences in is not classically Buddhist in many instances.

Bearing these and other limitations mentioned earlier in mind, let us now look at the meaning of the main findings of the present study.

### *Drug-Induced Transpersonal Experiences are Important in the Lives of Students of Tibetan Buddhism*

The present study focused on two areas, namely the question of whether past psychedelic experiences had been important in attracting students to Tibetan Buddhism and an initial exploration of some of the ways such influence might have acted.

The results obtained clearly show that this sample of students of Tibetan Buddhism is an especially "drug literate" group. Most of the respondents reported *that* psychedelics were important to their spiritual life in general, and a fifth that they were specifically important in attracting them to Tibetan Buddhism.

*glimpses  
of  
possibilities  
beyond  
the  
ordinary  
self*

Many of the specific experiences reported are not only transpersonal in a general sense, taking the person beyond the bounds of the ordinary self in a variety of ways, but sound similar (although not necessarily identical) to experiences I believe are valued in Tibetan Buddhism. The specific experiences that show glimpses of possibilities beyond the ordinary self include seeing life in a much wider perspective, seeing how we create the narrow patterns of our personal lives, comprehending in ways that go beyond intellectual thought, experiencing vital clarity and luminosity, seeing the illusory nature of much of life, feeling vitally connected to the larger world and others, union and harmony with the universe, deep feelings of love and compassion, transcending duality, and glimpsing a "big self" far beyond the ordinary self.

### *Implications for Teaching the Dharma*

Some teachers of Tibetan Buddhism are strict traditionalists and teach only in the way they were taught, with minimal adaptation of the Dharma to contemporary Western culture. The present results are of interest, however, to teachers who are trying to be as effective as possible in the Western cultural context. The empirical

findings of the present study strongly suggest that psychedelic experiences and their long-lasting after-effects must be dealt with. They are not an irrelevant influence among a tiny number of students, but widespread and of considerable importance to many serious students. While I focus on the Tibetan Buddhist tradition here, these points are applicable to the Westernization of Buddhism in general.

To mention a few of the issues: from a Tibetan Buddhist perspective, are the kinds of psychedelic-induced transpersonal experiences reported herein "genuine" spiritual experiences from a Buddhist perspective? Are they essentially the same kinds of experiences resulting from traditional Buddhist practices, implying a common transpersonal domain or end point, even if different means are used to enter that domain? If they are different in important ways, can students' previous psychedelic experiences be put on in a manner that helps students of Tibetan Buddhism realize enlightenment? If they are different enough to hinder students' realization, how can such problems be minimized or overcome?

I shall attempt to answer these questions with my limited knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism, but they must be posed and eventually answered by those qualified to do so.

*questions  
and  
implications*

would be tempting for Tibetan teachers to simply tell their students to forget about their previous psychedelic experiences and study the Dharma with a fresh mind, thus trying to not deal with the issue of psychedelics by dismissing it. In one way, this is formally correct: Buddhism stresses that one should examine and transcend previous habits of belief and discover the truth for yourself. This was beautifully expressed by the Buddha in the Sutra to the Kalamas (Buddha, 1989, p. 4):

- Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it.
- Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations.
- Do not believe in anything because it is spoken and rumored by many.
- Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books.
- Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders.

!Binding on a practical note, the Buddha advocated:

- But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason, and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.

Such advice to transcend your previous beliefs and conditionings is, unfortunately, easier to give than to follow! This would seem especially likely with powerful transpersonal influences like those induced by psychedelics. An interesting example of previous beliefs influencing behavior in highly educated Westerners even when they know they were being examined for such influence and it was important not to show it has been reported elsewhere (Trofer & Tart, 1964).

To expect Buddhist students, then, to disregard *their* previous psychedelic experiences as they try to understand and practice does not seem realistic. Indeed, if such advice is taken as a command to consciously forget these experiences, we would expect them *to* go psychologically underground where they might exercise an even more pervasive influence, but one harder to deal with.

#### *Further Questions*

*further  
explorations  
are  
needed*

Many questions, of both a scholarly and practical nature, are raised by the findings of this study. Some *have* been partly raised, but not answered, in the text. Further explorations on theoretical, empirical and experiential levels are needed. To consider a few:

Just exactly *how*, for instance, do past psychedelic experiences influence later Buddhist practice?

One dimension might be motivational: knowing there are profound experiences available would encourage the student *to* practice. A second might be conceptual: the memory of a past psychedelic experience might serve as a model to judge later experiences by and so guide practice. This could be helpful *as* a demand for, for example, profundity, or it might be harmful, causing a student to discount genuine transpersonal experiences because they do not have the glamour of past psychedelic ones. Thirdly, to what extent might past psychedelic experiences set up patterns of expectations and biases that guide future meditative and practice experiences? Will this guidance be along helpful or non-helpful lines, given current desires and practices? A fourth dimension involves the question of just how much a past psychedelic experience might have sown a vital seed for a new transpersonal experience to grow from, regardless of our expectations.

It is also important to note that there are possible negative aspects to past psychedelic experiences not well covered in this questionnaire study. The spectacular quality of psychedelic experiences, for example, might make a student impatient with the slow path of meditative practice, discouraging the student from continuing.

Traumatic psychedelic experiences might discourage a student from following any spiritual path, or of distorting a particular path so as to emphasize only control over self in order to avoid further traumas of any sort.

Note too that the current study has focused on a particular form of Tibetan Buddhist practice, but questions could be raised in general about which of the many spiritual paths in the world's transpersonal traditions would best benefit (or be inhibited by) psychedelic experience.

#### SUMMARY

In general, we may characterize the retreatants who responded to the questionnaire as serious students of Tibetan Buddhism. They are predominantly female, with an average of five years of membership in the Rigpa Sangha and a history of other practices before that. Most spend about thirty to sixty minutes in formal practice each day. Almost all have had previous experience with marijuana, and 77% have had experience with major psychedelic drugs. This is an exceptionally high rate of "drug literacy" compared to either the general American population or a California population. Current drug usage is low, but more than 50% indicate that they might use marijuana or psychedelics in the future.

*characterizing  
the  
retreatants*

About a quarter of them reported that marijuana experiences had been important to their spiritual life in general. Twice as many reported major psychedelics as important. For about a fifth, major psychedelics were important in attracting them to Tibetan Buddhism.

Many kinds of transpersonal experiences were reported in conjunction with earlier psychedelic drug use. These are of importance in influencing their current expectations and practice of Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhist teachers attempting to adapt their teachings for maximum effectiveness in contemporary Western cultures would be advised to take these experiences into account.

I have entitled this study a "preliminary exploration" for good reasons: there are many more interesting questions raised by this than settled by it. I hope the present data and discussion will inspire others to explore this area in more depth.

APPENDIX 1: THE QUESTIONNAIRE

As the instruction part of *the* questionnaire has been reproduced in the text above, only the question items are given here.

- (1) Age Range:  
20-30\_ 31-40\_ 41-50\_ 51-60\_ 61 or older\_
- (2) Sex: Female\_ Male\_
- (3) Member Rigpa Sangha? Yes\_ No\_  
If yes, about how many years? \_
- (4) About how much time do you usually spend in some son of formal Buddhist practice (sitting meditation, e.g., or Ngondro, devotional practice, etc.) each day? \_
- (5) Previous experience with marijuana:  
None\_ 1-10X\_ 11-50 X\_ More than 50 X\_
- (6) Previous experience with major psychedelics: (drugs like LSD, mescaline, psilocybin)  
None\_ 1-10X\_ 11-50 X\_ More than 50 X\_

If you checked "None" to both of *the* above, you can just turn in your questionnaire without bothering with the rest of it. But please, do turn it in.

- (7) Do you still use marijuana?  
No\_ > 1/year\_ >1/month\_ >1/week\_
- (8) Might you use marijuana in the future?  
Yes\_ NQ\_ Maybe\_
- (9) About how long since your last experience with marijuana?\_
- (10) Do you still use major psychedelics?  
No\_ > 1/year\_ >1/month\_ >1/week\_
- (11) Might you use major psychedelics in the future?  
Yes\_ No\_ Maybe\_
- (12) About how long since your last experience with major psychedelics? \_\_\_\_\_
- (13) How important were your *marijuana* experiences in your spiritual life *in general*?  
Very\_ Fairly\_ Some\_ Not at all\_ Not applicable\_
- (14) How important were your *marijuana* experiences in attracting you to Tibetan Buddhism *in particular*?  
Very\_ Fairly\_ Some\_ Not at all\_ Not applicable\_
- (15) How important were your experiences with major *psychedelics* in your spiritual life *in general*?  
Very\_ Fairly\_ Some\_ Not at all\_ Not applicable\_
- (16) How important were your experiences with major psychedelics in attracting you to Tibetan Buddhism in particular?  
Very\_ Fairly\_ Some\_ Not at all\_ Not applicable\_
- (17) How have your drug (marijuana & major psychedelics) experiences affected your understanding of Tibetan Buddhist ideas and practices? (may have both helped and hindered)  
Helped A lot\_ Some\_ A little\_ Not at all\_  
Hindered A lot\_ Some\_ A little\_ Not at all\_
- (18) If you checked both helped and hindered, on balance, your drug experiences mainly  
Helped\_ Hindered\_

X means "times," > means "more than."

## NOTES

In addition to many excellent books on Buddhism, I am particularly indebted to many fine teachers. These include James Baraz, Dhiravamsa, Jack Komfield and Shinzen Young, and for Tibetan Buddhism in particular Lama Govinda, Namkhai Norbu, Tarthang Tulku and my current teacher, Sogyal Rinpoche. The anonymous referees of the first draft of this paper were also helpful in clarifying it and raising further questions for exploration.

I want to emphasize, too, that I am a *student* of Buddhism, in an early learning phase, so I want to apologize in advance to more realized Buddhists and academic authorities on Buddhism for any misleading or erroneous statements about Buddhism in this article.

Like all spiritual practices, this one can be used stupidly to blind oneself to important realities, but we will not follow this up here.

"The word "Dzogchen" derives from Tibetan roots meaning "great perfection."

"Sangha is a term used to indicate, among other things, members of a Buddhist practitioners' organization.

Several respondents counted experiences with MDMA (street names "Adam," "Ecstasy," "XTC") under the major psychedelic category, not knowing where else to put such experiences. Some correctly commented, though, that MDMA is an entirely different class of drug than the psychedelics (see Adamson, 1985), more properly an "empathogen." Future studies should probably include a separate category for MDMA. Its long term effects can certainly be as powerful as those of psychedelics in some cases.

Significance tests were Chi square, with adjoining categories collapsed when necessary to avoid expected cell frequencies of less than five.

To further safeguard respondents' anonymity, I did not open any envelopes until I had large batches of them, so I would not associate a particular envelope with the memory of a particular person giving it to me.

While the age of a respondent may not be relevant to the experiences presented, I include an age in many cases simply to make these reports more readable. As part of protecting respondents' anonymity, the ages given are not the actual ages but are picked randomly within the 10-year age range checked by the respondent.

numbers were assigned to the returned questionnaires in random order.

I occasionally repeat a remark of respondents if it illustrates more than one point.

Padmasambhava is the central figure of Tibetan Buddhism. Traditionally he brought Buddhism to Tibet, subdued demonic forces opposed to Buddhism and turned them into protectors of the Dharma, and was himself a second Buddha, so high was his realization.

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