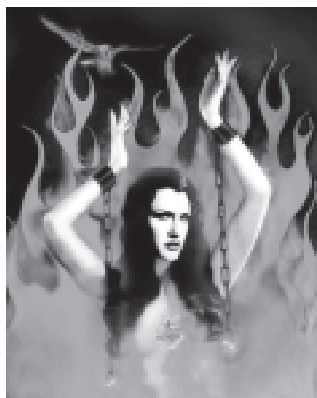


E-ticket to Dharmaland



Sara Tonin

I was living—if you can call it living—in Los Angeles at the corner of atheism and agnosticism. It was the end of 1990. I had just moved to the “left coast” from a tiny hamlet in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, a rural area filled with Amish people, horses and buggies, and lots of mullet hair and ill-cut acid wash jeans. As you could imagine, I had to get out. I found myself sitting at a coffee house I frequented on La Brea on open-mic night to kill some time rather than myself. The guy I’d run away with to La-La-land had just dumped me, but I was getting over both him and the devastation. I couldn’t help but notice over the bad poetry, the intense eyes of a dark, curly-haired artsy dude who bore somewhat of a resemblance to Tim Burton staring back at me. During the intermission, I slid onto the stool next to him at the bar.

We struck up a conversation and somehow landed on the topic of MDMA. I expressed my interest and my fears. I’d heard about Ecstasy in college, but Nancy Reagan and McGruff the Crime Dog, as well my staunch Republican, right-wing, evangelical Methodist local magistrate of a father all conditioned me to “Just Say NO!” I was 23 and I hadn’t ever even smoked weed. I barely dropped Tylenol when I had a headache! However, as he described his experiences with the substance, I was intrigued.

“And the best place to do it,” he said, slyly smiling, “Disneyland.”

We exchanged numbers and continued to converse and hang out over the next couple of days and soon set a date to go to the happiest place on earth and get happier.

That day in Disneyland was a much-needed reminder that there was an unseen world around me. I felt a oneness with not only the crowds of people waiting in line at Space Mountain but with the universe-at-large. Ingesting MDMA was a gift that put me on the neon yellow brick road to self-discovery and renewed my lost lease on spirituality.

Rather than hoping to find through faith a belief in someone else’s story in a

long out-dated Sunday school myth, I finally opened up to my own numinous experience. To paraphrase the great Rudolf Otto, the “Numinous” can be described as a distinctive experience of God, ineffable and transcendent, the primary source of beauty and love. Feelings of awe, fascination and elements of overpowering-ness, urgency, and that which is “Wholly Other” are present in the psychedelic experience.

Fate would have it that I quickly met more folks in the underground that enjoyed entheogenic compounds. I began experimenting and researching. Soon I was off to my first psychedelic conference, ironically held on the conservative Christian campus of Chapman University. It was there I met several mentors and friends that would pop up again and again in my life, among them the late Terence McKenna, who dubbed me “The Shamanatrix.” Before leaving, I picked up a publication called *Psychedelic Illuminations*. In it, I found an article written by Rick Doblin, talking about his experience as a subject in a psychedelic study. In the same issue, I found an ad seeking subjects for an upcoming MDMA study at UCLA, sponsored by MAPS and headed by Charles Grob, MD. Inspired by Doblin, I myself became a subject in the study.

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Soon I saw how the Buddhist and psychedelic paths share certain commonalities in the expansion of consciousness in both theory and practice. Both philosophies can serve to make one a more compassionate, sentient being. Practice in Buddhism's mindfulness, like well-planned and intentioned sessions with psychedelics, give people the power to overcome habitual behaviors and attachments.

The heart-centered serenity feeling I first felt in the dark cave from MDMA (what is sometimes referred to as the "Buddha-drug") loosens the bondage of individual ego and clears the pathway to an unusually high level of honesty, intimacy and communication. If psychedelics do correspond with mysticism and esoteric Buddhism, some argue that the empathogen MDMA could be seen as the bodhisattva's pharmaceutical. In my own research, I've encountered many folks that have included the substance in their personal practice of loving-kindness.

I remember an old *Tricycle* magazine interview written by Robert Forte I'd read some time ago, which resurfaced in Alan Hunt Badiner's book, *Zig Zag Zen*, in which psychedelic shaman/researcher/Buddhist Jack Kornfield said:

"It is important to say that there is no Buddhist point of view on psychedelics. They are rarely found in the Buddhist tradition, if at all, and generally would be lumped in the precepts under 'intoxicants.'"

Kornfield feels officially that there is no common traditional point of view about the use of psychedelics in Buddhism itself, as there is very little written about them. Forte reminds Kornfield of a story of someone asking the Dalai Lama if one could use drugs to attain enlightenment. His Holiness joked, "I sure hope so." The basic training precepts in Buddhism tell the practitioner not to kill, steal, lie or engage in sexual misconduct, and lastly, to refrain from using intoxicants to the loss of mindfulness or loss of awareness.

But entheogens can help create awareness. Using attorney or teenager logic, one could interpret that as "not saying not to use them."

Without question, psychedelic usage, like crossing the street, can be dangerous. But I agree with Dr. Charles Tart—not using them can also be dangerous. Psychedelics alter the senses and can challenge notions of authoritative control. They promote a worldview from a different vantage point than so-called "normal" western society. Then again, so does mysticism. The left-hand path can be full of disappointment, disassociation, and delusion. Wacky things happen to even the most substance-free meditative mind when isolated.

But we humans are wired for such states in our neurophysiologic makeup. Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), for example, is a powerful entheogenic substance that exists naturally in the mammalian brain. If it is already inside of us, is it really an intoxicant to be avoided?

Regardless of whether it is induced by meditation or chemicals, what is really happening when we have transcendental experiences? From the materialist's viewpoint, mystical experiences are simply a result of pathological and delusional brain dysfunction. Recent evidence, however, supports the hypothesis that the human brain's temporal lobe plays a key role in producing mystical states of consciousness. Dr. Rick Strassman points out that certain brain centers and neural transmitters are mobilized in altered states of consciousness and spiritual awareness, regardless of whether they are induced by the ingestion of substances or by a control of will.

Fast forward through my own long strange trip and I currently find myself not a casualty of a drug war, but an adventure capitalist: a responsible co-head of a family, a business owner and founder of a non-profit organization. The psychedelic path led me to my current status as a grad student getting my masters in Consciousness Studies, wherein I look less for God, but find G.O.D., the works of a Grand Organizing Designer. I can now access my inner pharmacy through mindfulness, meditation and yoga. I had to lose my spirituality to find it. When I moved West, my heart and mind migrated East. Like I felt in the cave, it's a small world after all. •