

Psychedelics, **Deep Ecology**, and Wild Mind



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In 1969, in an essay in *Earth House Hold*, Gary Snyder wrote that “Peyote and acid have a curious way of tuning some people in to the local soil.” While exceptions abound, some of the more salient characteristics of the psychedelic revolution that blossomed in the 1960s and continue to this day are an embracing of things “natural,” including natural foods, natural childbirth (and breast-feeding), an easy acceptance of nudity and the human body, and, for many, a return to Earth-centered living. Many favored the outdoors as a place to open their minds in the new way, and interest in vision quest and traditional nature-based lifestyles followed.

In traditional cultures less shielded from the natural seasons and the cycles of birth and death, the powers of the wild are everyday occurrences. People lay offerings at springs, or perform dances to acknowledge these powers and to maintain an exchange. For the industrial culture of the twentieth century, it took the tremendous power of visionary plants and chemicals to open many minds to what had been obvious to most human cultures for millennia.

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*H*ard-headed rationalists and cynical materialists often found themselves humbled by a looming mountain, a stream flowing on bedrock, or by a wild animal that stepped out of its camouflage to say hello. Many hold these liberating experiences as the most important in their lives and have never returned to the old paradigm. In seeking to understand such soul-moving events, people have rediscovered what human societies for thousands of years have acknowledged: that we are a part of a great living fabric, and that certain wild plants, animals, or places are endowed with something that we might call presence, or energy, or resonance. This feeling of special resonance or presence is usually glossed as “the sacred” by Western intellectuals, though no one is certain what that actually means. Such recognition has led many beyond the re-

source management ethos of conservation to what has been called “deep ecology.”

Being tuned in to the local soil means being at home—the root of “eco.” As trivial an example as orange peels highlights the difference between the tourist and someone who can feel that he is standing on the bones of his mother. Anyone who has spent much time in the back country has seen orange peels thoughtlessly tossed along the trail or at the base of a rock. People who would otherwise be careful about packing out their trash leave orange peels because they are not “trash” (though they wouldn’t do the same in their own living rooms). But “presence” has to do with what was there before we came—call it power, or beauty, or suchness—it has nothing to do with our ideas of what is trash and what is not-trash.

Encounters with the wild always have an awe-inspiring quality—that is their nature—but most of us are conditioned from birth to block out these experiences. One of the great gifts of visionary plants and substances is that these cultural filters are temporarily suspended, so that the wild has free access to mind. The downside, of course, is that everyday mind, with filters back in place, may dismiss the experiences as hallucinatory, forgetting that the filtered interpretation is also hallucinatory. That is, the very special and extraordinary quality of the visionary experience itself tends to allow us to relegate the profound insights of that experience to the visionary realm only, as if it were separate and not a part of “reality.”

In his book *A Zen Wave*, Robert Aitken presents two haiku of the Zen poet Basho. The first goes:

*Wake up! Wake up!
Be my friend
sleeping butterfly.*

Basho is not on psychedelics, but he is intimate with the butterfly. There is a joy and playfulness that form a shared reality—the oneness is the reality. The other poem goes:

*The morning glory!
This too cannot be
My friend.*

Aitken’s point is that Basho also recognized the absolute independence and separateness of the other being. That’s deep ecology! The many beings, the many rocks and crevices and waterfalls and streams, all exist in and of themselves, entirely without reference to the human world and human uses. At the same time, all of it is linked together in an indissoluble web.

The true mythologies of a culture are the stories that everyone accepts as true, without question. While the cosmological systems of other cultures are easily dismissed as myth, one’s own never are. For us, that myth includes the belief that there is an “objective” physical world that exists wholly independently from the self—from mind or consciousness. It’s even called “the Reality Principle,” as theistic an appellation as one could come up with. To free the mind, to recover that wildness that is equally jaguar and peony, leaf rustle and dew on a spider web, requires both insight and training.

On psychedelics, even “ordinary” experiences can be hair-raising. That is a clue for us to the true nature of the wild—that the wild doesn’t end or begin at a fence, and that wild mind is something that we know about from our own experience. If psychedelics can help with that realization, they are truly, in the best and most ancient sense of the word, sacred. Mind is wild by nature. Presenting wild mind, sharing wild mind, is benevolence. •

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