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*Altered States:  
Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America*

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# A Review of *Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America*

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*Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America.* By Douglas Osto. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, 328 pages, ISBN 9780231177306 (hardback), U.S. \$35.00.

This book offers a wide array of information about the use of psychedelics in America for spiritual or mind-expanding purposes in general and in Buddhism in particular. It places focus on the views and reported experiences of American converts to Buddhism interviewed by the author. The initial chapters provide statistical information about this topic before turning to a narrative history of psychedelic spirituality in the U.S. and then chronicling psychedelic use in American Buddhism. Afterward, the book reports on interviews conducted by the author with twenty-nine primary informants who responded to an online survey he posted. These interviews reveal three main opinions about the relationship or lack thereof of psychedelics and Buddhism. Osto says that he intentionally, rather than randomly, selected these individuals to help achieve the goal of the book, which is to understand what he rightly calls “a subculture within a subculture,” that is, “psychedelic Buddhists.” The author

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also says that he is a libertarian and that part of his goal in writing the book is to normalize the use of psychedelics for spiritual purposes. He provides an autobiography at the end of the volume, meant to disclose any biases in his study that might have resulted from his own demographics. The following is a selective summary of the chapters, which are much more imbued with thoughts about experimentation and brimming with insights about historical and personal outcomes.

Osto begins Chapter one, “Buddhism and the Psychedelic Connection,” by considering surveys and interviews published on the topic in *Tricycle*, *the Buddhist Review* and elsewhere. Accordingly, anywhere from 62 to 80 percent of the American Buddhist converts who responded report having used psychedelic substances. The author offers the opinion that this should not be surprising considering that, like Americans in general, American Buddhists tend to place a high value on experience including that of meditation, as opposed to embracing devotional practices more widely found among Asian Buddhists. It also turns out that most of these informants are white, middle-class males.

Osto continues to set the stage for his study, legitimizing it in a sense by referring to an interview with a widely respected American teacher of Buddhism, Jack Kornfield. Kornfield says that (1) he has used psychedelics; (2) he believes the experience was truly related to Buddhism; and (3) he recommends that more research be done on it. The author then turns to a *Tricycle* interview with Terence McKenna, a leading researcher on shamanic use of psilocybin mushrooms and ayahuasca. McKenna’s view is that Buddhists cannot be serious in their practice if they do not include psychedelics. Osto next considers the influence of Ram Dass, the famous American convert to Hinduism, and three additional famous American teachers of Buddhism, Joan Halifax, Robert Aitken, and Richard Baker. The Buddhist teachers are less enthusiastic about psychedelics than Ram Dass.

From a different perspective, in his chapter on the book *Zig Zag Zen*, edited by Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey, Erik Davis says that the

Buddha's descriptions in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* sound significantly close to psychedelic experiences. Accordingly, Mahāyāna Buddhism has embraced the idea of expanding the imagination whereas Theravāda Buddhism has rejected this. He speculates that the closeness of the description is more than coincidence.

Chapter two, titled "The Psychedelic Revolution," summarizes the use of psychoactive substances in America from the 1950s to the present. It begins by discussing Aldous Huxley and Gordon Wasson and then turns to Timothy Leary's Harvard experiments. It is interesting that Huston Smith and Andrew Weil were among the many people associated with those experiments. Eventually, Leary moved to a mansion in upstate New York and this became the center of the east coast psychedelics experimental scene.

Meanwhile, on the west coast, Ken Kesey volunteered to ingest psychedelics for a series of CIA mind-control experiments, Project MKUltra. He used this along with his on-the-job experience at a mental institution to write his famous novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Next, Kesey, along with a number of people who would form The Grateful Dead, came together as a group calling themselves the Merry Pranksters. This group organized acid parties, as chronicled in Tom Wolfe's bestseller, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, eventually taking their festivities on the road in a painted school bus called "Furthur," traveling to the Woodstock rock festival among many other places. Although their name sounds like it could refer to the collective heroes of all kōans, according to Osto, the Merry Pranksters were not generally interested in religious experience but in testing the limits of sensory overload. They also seem to have had a goal of turning on as many people as possible, believing they could help make the world a better place through psychedelics, perhaps a somewhat religious belief.

The chemist Owsley Stanley, otherwise known as Bear, further aided this pivotal Bay Area movement by privately manufacturing mass quantities of reputedly high-quality LSD and distributing it widely and

free of charge. In these connections, Haight-Ashbury became the center of psychedelic culture on the west coast as somewhat captured in Ram Dass' famous book *Be Here Now*. Osto says that the 1967 Human Be-in or Gathering of the Tribes in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park may be seen as the culmination point of this culture. There, Leary appeared with flowers in his hair declaring his well-known slogan, "Turn on, tune in, drop out." This has also been viewed as the prelude to the Summer of Love.

However, the idea that psychedelics were a spiritual panacea came to a hard stop in 1969 when the American media established a close association with them to the Charles Manson murders. The Manson family trials attracted the most media attention in U.S. history and Manson himself went on to receive more mail in prison than anyone ever had. Hunter S. Thompson also wrote about the foolishness of people who believed that salvation could be bought for three dollars a hit. Not long after this, President Nixon began his "war" on drugs.

This all being the case, there was a turning away from the idea and practice of using psychedelics without first being trained in how to do so, and a corresponding turning toward shamanic experience. With this change came new research into potential uses of MDMA. In the 70s, those whom the author calls the "psychedelic intelligentsia" rebranded such substances as "entheogens" to highlight their uses as sacraments and distance themselves from the earlier LSD use. By the late 1980s, MDMA, also called ecstasy, had become central to the rave scene.

In the 1990s, serotonin-related neurochemicals became the most important drugs for psychotherapy. According to Osto, research into this was a direct result of the LSD experiments of the 1960s. The Burning Man gatherings of the 1990s also promoted cultural values associated with the use of ayahuasca and MDMA, including the idea that participants in the gathering were a large, interconnected family. After the 90s, neo-shamanism continued to increase in popularity in America, along with the idea that it could provide a cure to the problems of modernity. The

author sees digital dance culture as a part of this. The internet, coupled with brain science, also continues to spread the ideology that these substances have spiritual benefits.

Chapter three is called “The Buddhist Revolution” and considers the rapid growth of Buddhism in America. According to Osto, psychedelic Buddhism in America has become kind of an underground type of tantric Buddhism. Explaining this development, he writes about the influence of D. T. Suzuki on Americans’s understanding of Buddhism, particularly that of influential writers in the late 1950s, including Kerouac and Ginsberg. Osto says that these writers presented Buddhism as anti-establishment and countercultural by nature, even though Asian Buddhism often appears to be the opposite. The chapter also considers the influence of the writings of Alan Watts on the development of American Buddhism. Watts thought that Zen transcends both countercultural and conservative politics. With new teachers, including Philip Kapleau and Robert Aitken, by 1975 there were over 100 American Zen centers.

Osto next considers the work of two important teachers of Rinzai Zen in America during the 1960s, Joshu Sasaki and Eido Tai Shimano. In terms of Sōtō Zen, the author considers the impact of Shunryū Suzuki, who took over as head of the San Francisco Zen Center in 1959. According to reports, Suzuki became concerned that practitioners were taking LSD and suggested that American Zen needed more rules than its Japanese counterpart. American Sōtō Zen also developed through Hakuyū Taizan Maezumi. Because a large number of converts were associated with the psychedelic culture, Osto says these and other Zen teachers became compelled to address the issue, largely disassociating Buddhism from psychedelic use.

In this way, Zen dominated American Buddhism of the 1970s. However, interest in Tibetan Buddhism also began to grow at that time. In considering this, the author describes the arrival of the Tibetan Nyingma tradition in Berkeley, the establishment of a Nyingma meditation center there, and the founding of Dharma Publishing and Dharma

Press. He also describes some of the eccentricities of the teachers of American Buddhism of the time, including Chögyam Trungpa, who founded Naropa University in Boulder in 1974. Trungpa was sympathetic to LSD use and, following the title of one of his fourteen books, was seen by students as having the “crazy wisdom” of tantric saints. Osto also describes a few of the numerous sexual scandals involving leaders of the American Buddhist community in the 1980s. The chapter ends by recounting some of the trends in American Buddhism that have recently gained popularity. These include vipassanā meditation and various types of socially engaged Buddhism.

The next three chapters respectively explore the three main varieties of views held by American convert Buddhists that the author interviewed. Chapter four is titled “Opening the Door: Psychedelics as a Gateway to Buddhist Practice.” In it, we learn that the “opening the door” metaphor was a recurring theme among many of the respondents. The author believes that this may have to do with a common human psychological response to mind-altering substances. In contrast, Chapter five is titled “Closing the Door: The Fifth Precept and Graduating from Psychedelics.” It reports on respondents who said they gave up their use of psychedelics, often because of Buddhist practice, especially the fifth precept, which requires adherents to abstain from using intoxicants. Many in this group said that their Buddhist practice had “matured” or that they had “graduated” from the use of psychedelics. Chapter six, titled “Keeping the Door Open: Psychedelics as an Adjunct to Buddhist Practice,” investigates converts who continue to use psychedelics as a part of their practice. This group generally believes that these substances can help in realizing Buddhist truths such as emptiness and dependent origination. In the second part of the chapter, the author looks at the lives of five American practitioners who each have a different perspective on the relationship between psychedelics and Buddhism.

Chapter seven, titled “Are Psychedelics ‘the True Dharma?’ Debates, Presuppositions, and Philosophical Issues,” further investigates

various perspectives and assumptions about the use of psychedelics in Buddhism. Although the author considers both academic studies and personal accounts of the relationship of psychedelics and spirituality, he finds that no conclusive answer can be given regarding whether there is a real connection. Instead, he suggests, it seems to depend on the user's mindset. As Osto stated in the introduction of the book,

In my own ethnographic research, I have taken participants' statements about experiences as "religious," "mystical," or "spiritual" to mean that those experiences were deeply significant to them and refrained from making ontological, philosophical, or theological judgments. Whether people choose to use psychedelics as an adjunct to their religious practice seems to depend more on their personal beliefs, philosophy, theology, or deeply held convictions about the world than on rational arguments. (xxvi)

After briefly surveying relevant findings of brain research near the end of the book, he suggests that some form of psychedelic spirituality will likely continue to develop in American Buddhism.

*Altered States* is a book that could be adopted as a text in a class on American Buddhism or in courses that focus on drugs in history and the use of psychoactive substances in religions. It not only pulls together information on the subject from otherwise scattered sources, but also contributes original data and ideas. In addition to its potential as a course book, it is engaging writing that may appeal to general curious readers. While the author indicates that he feels people should be free to experiment with drugs if so desired, such opinions do not enter the main text or analysis, which remain social scientific. As a final note, if the author were to expand the notion of who is a Buddhist beyond overt self-identification, it would be easy to provide many examples of individuals identified with the same counter cultural experiments as Leary or Kesey, behaving as bodhisattvas. For example, Wavy Gravy (Hugh Romney) is documented as carrying out deeply compassionate acts and be-

having mindfully at Woodstock, with the Seva Foundation. In such cases, however, the line between what is called religious and non-religious, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, become blurred, making such a study more difficult and nebulous.