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Are Psychedelics the True Dharma?  
A Review Essay of *Zig Zag Zen:  
Buddhism and Psychedelics*

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Are Psychedelics the True Dharma? A Review  
Essay of *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and  
Psychedelics*

Geoffrey Redmond, MD\*

*Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*. Edited by Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey. Preface by Huston Smith. Foreword by Stephen Batchelor. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002. 238 pages. Cloth. ISBN 0-8118-3286-4.

*Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics* (hereafter abbreviated as *ZZZ*) is an attractive book, coffee table in design though not in size. The cover shows what at first appears to be a seated Buddha but is actually Padmasambhava from a 1992 painting by Gana Lama (73). Swirling colors radiate from the nose and the solar plexus, giving a psychedelic effect. Within are reproductions of attractive works by established modernists such as Odilon Redon and Mark Rothko, as well as recent ones by an emerging Buddhist avant garde represented by Mariko Mori, Alex Grey (who is co-editor) and the virtuoso Robert Beer. Lest we still fail to appreciate that this is a work of advanced consciousness, the typography indulges in such computer age quirks as upside-down headings. *ZZZ*'s publisher, Chronicle Books, specializes in lavish illustrated volumes, often on Asian subjects. Lest anyone be offended by the conspicuous consumption implied by the book's lavish production, its editor, Allan Hunt Badiner, begins by assuring the trees used to produce the book that they are "wholeheartedly thanked, honored, and appreciated."

The text of *ZZZ* is a collection of essays and interviews concerning the relation of psychedelic drug use to Buddhist practice. Many of the articles first appeared in the Fall, 1996 issue of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Most selections are by Buddhist spiritual quasi-celebrities whom we regularly see

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on the covers of *Tricycle* and other mass market Buddhist periodicals. Contributors include Richard Baker Roshi, Lama Surya Das, Stephen Batchelor, Rick Fields, Peter Matthiessen, Huston Smith, and Michael Murphy of Esalen fame. A few sections offer the reflections of ordinary practitioners on their experiences. Given this cast of characters, one might expect *ZZZ* to be an initial step toward a documentary history of the role of psychedelics in Western Buddhism. If so, the actual reading will disappoint. Fresh insights are few; the views expressed are generally familiar from many other sources. Regrettably, dates of writing of the various chapters are not given. Since attitudes toward both drugs and Buddhism have changed considerably in the past five decades, this omission limits the value of *ZZZ* as cultural history.

The opinions expressed fall easily into a few categories. Though a few reflect on unfavorable outcomes of drug use, most are economiums. Some simply recall nostalgically their early adventures during the heyday of psychedelic tripping. Other make grander claims that drug experiences awakened them to the spiritual dimension of life. A few are pure hype, making use of the breathless psycho-Blarney brought to perfection by the late Dr. Timothy Leary and Terence McKenna. (1) The glorification of drugs in *ZZZ* is pervasive, though sometimes qualified. Here is an example, from the contribution by Myron Stolaroff:

Psychedelic agents, when properly understood, are probably one of the most valuable, useful and powerful tools available to humanity (201).

Brigid Meier manages to tie the plant origin of many psychedelics to ecology:

I apprenticed to the realm of plant medicines to seek teachings from a stratum of nonhuman consciousness in order to open to the direct felt experience of Gaia, to the interdependence of all beings.

It remains my belief that sacred plants, as a frequency of planetary intelligence, have offered themselves as emissaries from the increasingly ravaged natural world. [They] do their subversive work of dismantling the cancerous human ego that is destroying the planet (129)

The notion of a “cancerous human ego” includes too many assumptions regarding the nature of humans and society for me to attempt to fully unpack it here. Pop psychology frequently attributes human problems to the “ego”

without any clear conception of what that might be. This popular use is quite different from that of Freud, for whom the ego regulated and controlled the libido. Blaming ego, as in the above quotation is really moral ranting, more akin to preaching than social analysis. Meier's environmental concerns are no doubt shared by many psychotropic users—and non-users. Yet it is hard to see how the availability of “sacred plants” for human ingestion would further the cause of environmental protection. To actually do something about the environment requires mental clarity.

At the same time they extol drugs, most *ZZZ* contributors stop short of explicitly advocating their use, whether because they are wary of attracting the unwelcome attention of the drug enforcement authorities, or because they have come to see unqualified advocacy of psychedelics as unskillful.

One barrier to serious consideration of the effects of mind-altering drugs is the terminology perpetuated by their advocates. The ubiquitous term “psychedelic,” supposedly coined by Humphry Osmond, means “opening the psyche” (79). Throughout *ZZZ* we encounter the newer term “entheogen” meaning “god generated within” (47). Terms like “psychedelic” and “entheogen” are more akin to marketing than to objective description. Do psychedelics really expand awareness? Do entheogens really generate an experience of God? These are critical questions, especially since it is difficult to conceive how such effects might be verified. This does not mean they could not be real, but it does mean that we are entitled to some degree of skepticism about the alleged benefits. Certainly, if we judge by the external behavior of frequent psychedelic or entheogen users, most do not seem to have expanded awareness, nor to be in contact with God.

In contrast, scientific pharmacology classifies neuroactive drugs by the sort of effect they have: stimulant, sedative, antidepressant, anxiolytic, and so on. When knowledge permits, they are classified based on the chemical changes they engender in the brain, for example selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI), a class that includes the familiar Prozac (fluoxetine). These terms function to describe the effects of the drugs, not to entice us to use them. (They are often, of course, marketed aggressively by other means.)

## Drugs and the Inconvenient Fifth Precept

In many places *ZZZ* does express a less ebullient morning-after mood. Thus Rick Fields summarizes the initial uncritical enthusiasm for psychedelics in this way: “There were those who claimed that psychedelics had changed the

rules of the game, and that the mystic visions once enjoyed only by saints could now be had by anyone” (38). He goes on to note that as Westerners learned more about actual Buddhist practice, drugs no longer seemed to be the easy way to enlightenment: “it turned out that practice was not really about getting high at all” Some teachers slotted drugs into the mind-intoxicant category of the precepts” (44).

The Pali version of the fifth precept for lay Buddhists, as translated by Peter Harvey is as follows:

I undertake the training-precept to abstain from alcoholic drink  
or drugs that are an opportunity for heedlessness. (2)

This precept was not mentioned much, if at all, by early counterculture Buddhists like Alan Watts and Jack Kerouac, both of whom were alcoholics. (3) Now that the ethical aspects of Buddhism, including the five lay precepts have become familiar to Western Buddhists, some popular teachers rationalize use of psychedelics by declaring that they are not intoxicants and hence not contrary to the precepts. Thus Jack Kornfeld, in what is a generally balanced series of comments, notes that there is little mention of psychedelics in Buddhist tradition and, while conceding that they would be included in the category of intoxicants, goes on to say, “there is no traditional point of view about their use” (51). This seems evasive to me. Psychedelics impair awareness, as do most other mind-altering substances, and would seem to be exactly the sort of substances specified by the term “intoxicant”. Like religious rules generally, this precept is as often ignored as followed. Nor is this the only precept which modern Buddhists tend to set aside. Few take seriously the many admonitions in both sutra and sastra against sexual activity.

## Psychedelics: The Crisis of Faith

There is no doubt that enthusiasm for psychedelics has waned. This raises the question of why, if they are such valuable spiritual tools, only few continue to praise them without reservation. Rick Fields, the historian of American Buddhism, blames this on the decline of American culture: “The young turn on now in a world in which the sacred has been trivialized into the recreational” (33). He does not mention that many of the contributors to *ZZZ* were themselves major influences in the commoditization of spiritual experience. If psychedelics were truly beneficial forty years ago, they should be now. To explain why they seem not to be, the blame is placed on changes

in “set and setting.” This phrase refers to the theory that the effect of mind altering drugs is determined in great part by the mental set of the user and his or her physical and social milieu. Those advancing this argument do not recognize that it weakens the case for psychedelics by acknowledging that the critical factors that facilitate religious experience may not be the actions of the drugs themselves. Perhaps, with the proper set and setting, the drugs are not necessary at all.

The PR-savvy early Buddhist exponents of psychedelics could freely claim similarities between drug and meditative states because many had little experience of the latter. Thus Alan Watts as described by Michael Murphy: “ ‘here we have Alan writing a book about mysticism and sex and saying drugs are another way in.’ He was not a celebrant of long-term contemplative practice, but he was a glorious human being” (83).

Since it was the writings of Watts (without concomitant drugs) which first “turned me on” to Buddhism, I agree that he had his glorious side. Yet Watts privately derided what he taught in his books and lectures, dismissed meditation as “sitting on your ass,” and died of alcoholism. Whatever his glories, he was certainly not a reliable guide to Buddhist practice. The same can be said—at the risk of offending some of his many admirers—of the late Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Trungpa was immensely popular but was openly alcoholic—he drank conspicuously and copiously during his late night harangues to his followers. Fields notes with approval that Trungpa was one of the few teachers with whom he could discuss drugs (44f). Thus Trungpa rationalized LSD as samsara but a “super-samsara” which could be useful. Trungpa disapproved of marijuana use, however, which he considered “self-deception” (45). This ignores the self-deception on Trungpa’s part in refusing to confront his own alcoholism, and that of his followers in refusing to admit it. Trungpa’s criticism of use of drugs other than alcohol is ironic but not surprising. Many who are addicted to one sort of drug criticize those who use others. I recall a former patient who was addicted to barbiturates but criticized her boyfriend’s addiction to speed. Her reasoning was that he eventually needed to take sedatives to come down anyway so why not just use downers. We tend to be more tolerant of vices we share than those we do not.

Fields omits mention of Watts’s or Trungpa’s alcoholism, which he certainly knew about. We may charitably attribute this reticence to a sense of decorum in writing about men he admired, a degree of taste rare in our era of exposés. For this he may be respected. Yet in speaking to several of Trungpa’s former followers I have often noted what the jargon of alcoholism treatment programs terms “co-dependence-behavior” that enables the alco-

holic to continue his or her addiction. Trungpa's open drinking while lecturing was rationalized as a profound teaching method. (4) One follower explained to me in all seriousness that Trungpa was not an alcoholic—because he was enlightened, his body handled alcohol differently than ordinary people.

A similar *belle indifferance* regarding addiction issues is apparent in many contributions to *ZZZ*. Thus Dokusho Villalba Sensei asserts: "Many native Americans have been able to overcome addiction to alcohol and its underlying causes through use of peyote within a ritual and traditional spiritual context" (62).

No evidence is given for this claim. Whenever one sort of drug is claimed to cure addiction to another, we should remember that heroin was originally thought to be an effective treatment for morphine addiction. (Morphine in turn was tried as a cure for cocaine addiction.) The distorted thinking associated with addiction affects even those who are not themselves addicted. This should warn us to be skeptical of the claims of the spiritual benefit and safety of psychedelics.

To balance the preponderant drug apologetics, anyone who takes up *ZZZ* should be careful not to overlook the chapter by Trudy Walter entitled "Leaning Into Rawness." Walter poignantly and honestly describes her years of daily marijuana use, clearly an addiction, and her rationalization of it with Buddhist concepts. She acknowledges an "underlying desire to feel only the good stuff" and wanting "out of the violence of my anger, confusion, helplessness, hunger, and fear. With just a puff or two, anger simply got fuzzy and rounded off" (126). She realized "The hypocrisy of living half of my life trying to wake up by meditating and the other half trying to anesthetize myself." Yet, "Without fail, I would rise every morning with the fervent vow that this would be the day I would quit" She found her feelings of anger, which Buddhism considers a mental poison, particularly distressing. Finally, she recognizes that she needs help in overcoming her addiction. There is also rather ambivalent discussion of her teacher Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, in which she seems to want to find a way to rationalize his alcoholism as somehow different from her own marijuana addiction.

Walter's article contains useful lesions. First, it reminds us that addiction can be rationalized within any system of belief, including Buddhism, despite the primary goal of Buddhism being the abolition of *tanhā*, craving. Second, practice by itself does not invariably solve the problems of *dukkha*, the distressing contents of the mind. Preaching against anger and other mental defilements may even make matters worse by engendering a sense of unworthiness. Many left Christianity to escape feelings of sinfulness, only

to find them in another form. Like Christian preachers and gurus of all persuasions, Buddhist teachers can use people's negative feelings to manipulate and harm them. Telling people that they are somehow defective and can only improve through the teachings of the master can be extremely effective in retaining disciples.

Many contributors to *ZZZ*, while not completely abandoning their belief that psychedelics can be spiritually beneficial, have come to see their value as limited at best. Ram Das, who hints that he still uses them (215), offers this assessment:

I don't see psychedelics as an enlightening vehicle, but I do see it (sic) as an awakening vehicle. I see them beginning a process that awakens you to the possibility (215).

Joan Halifax, on the other hand, seems to feel that they are not beneficial:

I didnt find that it really worked, for the kind of mind that I found emerging in meditation free of psychedelics, to do both. I don't know many people who have managed to actually keep a psychedelic practice and a mature Buddhist practice—except maybe Ram Das (215).

Michael Murphy notes:

Nondrug programs at Esalen have survived because they are the fittest. What I think will happen over time is that these drugs will have their place as initiatory agents (82).

David Chadwick:

In the Buddhist circles I'm familiar with, psychedelics are mainly seen as something to forget about and move on from(120).

Robert Aitken, notable among Western Zen teachers for his emphasis on the ethical aspects of Buddhist practice, sees little place for drugs:

I dont think drugs have particularly helped anybody arrive where they are. It's just that by the cultural circumstances of the time, in the sixties and early seventies, it so happened that people came to Zen through their experience with drugs (217).

Many Westerners were first drawn to Zen, and Buddhism generally, through a misconception: that meditation would induce a state similar to



a drug high. There seems to be a near-consensus now that this is not the case. However, we should not imagine that this was the first time Buddhism helped established itself in a new culture based on false premises—though I am not suggesting that these distortions were a deliberate subterfuge. Among the Chinese, who made profound contributions to Buddhist art and philosophy, much of the interest of the general populace and even emperors was the expectation of magical powers conferred by meditation. Even with Huayen, which some modern scholars have considered the most profoundly philosophical school, the reputation of many of its masters rested upon their supposed magical attainments. Perhaps drugs are the successor to magic in promoting the Dharma. Both involve temporary release from ordinary reality. For better or worse, such are part of Buddhist history. To put the best light on them, they can be likened to the carts that are used by the enlightened father in the Lotus Sūtra to entice his children from the burning house.

Along with abandoning of the misconception that Buddhist practice as akin to psychedelic drug experience, we seem to be leaving behind the anti-intellectualism of sixties Zen and returning to Buddhism's textual roots. Aitkin tells us: "All you have to do is pick up a good Buddhist text, and that's reality. You don't have to take drugs to wake up to it. Most people that come to me now are awakened by reading" (216). If we take enlightenment by reading as a modern equivalent of enlightenment by hearing, Western Buddhism seems to be recovering the methods that have been central to the tradition since its beginnings.

One senses that the time when psychedelics might be justified as a useful first step in spiritual development is past. Not to be overlooked as a reason for this change is the very realistic fear of legal consequences, which is a separate issue from the possible spiritual benefits and biological hazards of psychotropic use. But this is surely not the only reason. Buddhism is now practically mainstream in the West and the possibility of spiritual experience, even enlightenment is widely assumed. The patronizing view of Sigmund Freud and others who dismissed religion as illusion, to be left behind as humanity matures, is no longer dominant. If psychedelics were needed in the sixties to demonstrate that spiritual states of mind actually exist, this is no longer the case.

## Can There Be a Buddhist View of the Drug Issue?

If we grant that psychedelics were an episode in recent Buddhist history but less pertinent today, the question still remains as to what is a reasonable attitude toward their use. Some of the claims of spiritual benefit might be true, at least for some users, and they might even be justified as a form of recreation, a break from one's ordinary routine not unlike visiting an art museum or seeing a film. There are however, serious arguments against such relaxed views that I shall advance shortly. Unfortunately, dispassionate public debate on these issues has become all but impossible.

All cultures seem to be afflicted with certain issues so divisive they cannot be resolved by any process of negotiation. Often the resulting conflicts cause damage that later seems far out of proportion to any direct harm. An example is the suppression of heresy by the Christian Church. Hundreds of thousands were killed for their views on doctrinal matters, yet now it is difficult even for scholars to understand what the differences were, let alone why they seemed so important. While executions in the West for ideological differences have mostly ceased, espousing unpopular views can still be hazardous. Fraught issues for our society include abortion, gay marriage, school prayer and, of course, non-medical drug use. As the phrase "zero tolerance" indicates, non-extreme views on drugs are unacceptable to the majority and politicians generally will not risk losing votes by taking moderate positions on drugs. In jurisdictions where judges are elected rather than appointed, a record of harsh sentencing of drug offenders is a political asset. Nothing in our political system encourages a temperate approach to the drug problem. The level of sophistication of the general population is apparent in the popularity of the recent anti-drug slogan, "Just say no," which entirely ignores the problem of why so many say "yes."

The mainstream regards drugs as a major cause of social evil and tends to prefer punishment to a medical approach. The medical establishment offers a therapeutic approach. When discovered, whether drug users end up in prison or in rehabilitation is to a large degree random. Close to one half percent of the American population is in prison for drug-related offenses, a high proportion of them non-violent. It is said that the money spent on the war on drugs is twice the entire biomedical research budget. Yet despite the anathematization of drugs and the severe penalties, tens of millions of Americans indulge at least occasionally. Many escape both medical and legal consequences, reducing the effects of the dire warnings of the anti-drug advertising campaigns.

It is convenient for both politicians and law enforcement agencies to

blame drugs for most violent crime. Doing so deflects blame from social conditions and also supports the need for higher enforcement budgets. The drug treatment establishment also encourages public paranoia about drugs from similar economic interest. I am not here equating therapeutic and punitive methods; compassion and the principle of *ahimsa*, non-harming, clearly are most consistent with a therapeutic approach. My point here is that drug treatment is a lucrative industry and so its commitment to finding a solution may be incomplete. At present, the public and institutions are too attached to drugs as a scapegoat for the unsatisfactoriness of American life for a middle way to be found between the extremes of unrestricted use and severe penalties.

Even a drug skeptic like myself has to admit that many influential figures in the recent history of Western Buddhism used them. There is an obvious paradox here in that what most regard as a social disaster may also have facilitated the establishment of Buddhism, by any assessment a peaceful religion, on Western shores. Blanket condemnation of drugs, then, oversimplifies. It would be hard to maintain that society would be better off if those contributors to *ZZZ* who acknowledge prior drug use—Ram Das, Jack Levine, Joan Halifax, Stephen Batchelor, to give but a few examples—had been incarcerated instead of spending their time writing and teaching. Whether because of—or despite—their drug use, they have clearly enriched our culture.

The logic of imprisoning people for non-violent drug use seems to be as follows: Drugs can ruin people's lives and so everything must be done to prevent people from using them. Therefore, to frighten people away from using drugs, we will make sure their lives are ruined if they are caught. Thus if the drugs themselves do not injure the user, the legal system will. Though this ethical reasoning lacks cogency, it is rarely questioned. That the war on drugs is misconceived does not however mean that drug use is desirable. (5) There are of course valid arguments for stringent prevention of drug use by those who might endanger others if impaired: doctors, pilots, truck drivers, child-care workers and many others. However, protection of the public does not usually require that non-violent drug users be imprisoned, simply that they be kept from activities in which they might harm others.

I am sure it is clear by now that I regard the choice to use mind-altering drugs as an unskillful one. To the extent we can invoke the historical Buddha, he seems to have held a similar view in that the precepts for both lay and religious counsel avoidance of intoxicants. I use the Buddhist ethical term "unskillful" in preference to the more Judeo-Christian "bad" or "evil" because I regard the issue not so much as a moral one as a matter of self-

care. The legal system does not regard the matter in this way however. It is muddled as to whether anti-drug laws are to protect people from themselves or to prevent them from harming others. This sort of confusion is prevalent in social policy generally. We forbid riding without seat belts but allow the sale of tobacco products. Any law for protecting people from themselves is based on utilitarianism and so must on the balance cause more benefit than harm. Imprisoning people for simple drug use clearly fails to meet this test. Forbidding the sale is another matter. The problem here is that while such interdiction would be desirable in the view of many, myself included, it has never succeeded and often fosters crime rather than suppressing it. No one has yet proposed a solution to drug problems that would be both effective and politically acceptable. I do not have the temerity to suggest a solution when no one else has been able to. Instead, I will confine myself to two narrower ethical issues: can drug use be a reasonable choice and is it ethical to recommend, directly or indirectly, drug use to others?

## Personal Revelations

Before exploring these issues in more detail, it is only fair to make full disclosure of my own views. Though I came of age in the sixties and seventies, I never used mind-altering drugs. I did indulge in alcohol in college and for some years after, but became a teetotaler many years ago. My reasons for missing out on the psychedelic experience were threefold. The primary reason, I must confess, was simply fear. I depend on my mind to earn a living and did not want to take any chances with it. Second, I became aware of the disproportionate legal consequences that befell acquaintances who were ingenuously experimenting. Finally, my meditative practice of the past twenty years has been in a direction that led me to give up all consciousness altering substances, even alcohol and caffeine. The reasons for this have nothing to do with morality but were simply that I came to value greatly the natural clarity of the mind.

This last point requires some elaboration. My practice has at times been concentrative in the Zen tradition and at others, insight-oriented based on Theravada teachings. The former values mental lucidity while the latter is highly analytic and intended to sharpen awareness. I cannot imagine that drug experiences resemble either state. I have at times practiced techniques that might conceivably be “mind-expanding”—moving *qi* within my body and the *jhana* of concentration on infinite space. I found these valuable but not to the extent of giving them a central place in my practice. On a few

occasions I have experienced states that might be termed “ecstatic.” While I liked these, I have not felt any urgent need for them to happen again. That my practice does not regularly lead to such states may have disappointed me once, but it does not now.

I am not putting forth my own approach as an example to be followed but simply to situate myself within a wide variety of attitudes toward spiritual practice. To some it may seem that I have settled for goals that are too limited. I cannot refute this but would reply that one’s individual temperament determines to a great degree what forms of meditation are congenial. For myself, I prefer the cognitive to the affective. In sixties terminology I might be labeled as uptight. Perhaps I am, but as a physician, I cannot afford the loss of mental control that might be beneficial to the visionary artist or writer. Nor can practitioners of other occupations in which the welfare of others is at stake. Even the most ardent advocates of turning on, tuning in, and dropping out would not want their doctor, airplane pilot, or even accountant or child’s baby sitter, to follow their advice.

## Safety of Psychedelics

An additional factor in my attitude toward psychedelics derives from my work as a biomedical researcher. It happens that my particular area of specialization is adverse effects of hormones and neuroactive drugs. Conducting studies to detect harmful effects, as well as prescribing medications for patients in my practice, keeps me constantly mindful of the potential for injury of pharmacologically active substances. (6) Standards for assessing drug safety have become increasingly rigorous in recent years. As we shall see, none of the assertions about safety (or even benefits) of psychedelics meet even the most minimal standards of clinical evidence. Despite their authoritative sounding assertions of safety, the advocates of psychedelics lack even minimal background in the methodology of drug safety testing and hardly display the equipoise that is the ideal of the clinical researcher. They were—and are—biased toward seeing psychedelics as both beneficial and safe and so have been excessively selective in what data they consider. Were a pharmacologist to be as casual in studying any drug, he or she would be quickly discredited. Within science, anecdotes, that is, single events often known only through hearsay, do not constitute evidence. They may suggest a beneficial or adverse effect but cannot prove such. The reasons are multiple but two are important here. First, we all tend to perceive what we want to perceive and so objective studies require use of methods to control the

effects of subject and observer bias. Second, most adverse effects occur in only a minority of those who take a particular drug. As a salient example, the recently withdrawn diabetes drug troglitazone gave excellent control of the disease in many, but caused serious liver injury and sometimes death in about one in 4,000. As a result, it was withdrawn. Only by systematic reporting of adverse events can infrequent ones such as these be discovered. A doctor might treat hundreds of patients with such a drug without ever seeing the serious side effect. To go solely by one's own limited observations is not an adequate way to assess drug safety. Hence simple claims that one has never seen anyone harmed by a particular drug are unpersuasive.

The association of drug use, including psychedelics, with cognitive dysfunction is beyond doubt. What is less clear is the incidence of this and other adverse effects. Nor is there any means to predict which individuals can use them safely. Not least because they are illegal, no system exists for tracking adverse events of psychedelics. I recall a psychiatric nurse I met while I was in medical school who held forth to my fellow students and myself about her use of LSD. She was particularly eloquent about how drugs enhanced lovemaking for her and her boyfriend. At the time, I was envious of her apparent sophistication and her lifestyle, which seemed much freer than mine. However, when by chance I ran into her a few years later, I formed a much different impression. She was working at a much lower level job, avoided eye contact, had become sloppy in her appearance and now gave off an aura of dissipation rather than sophistication. I was saddened to observe how a few more years of the drug lifestyle had rendered this bright young woman pitiable. A single instance does not establish that drugs will cause similar deterioration in all who try them. It is within the realm of possibility that the contributors to *ZZZ* who commend drug use were not harmed by them. Even if this is so—which is far from clear—a momentous problem remains, namely, how does one know in advance which outcome one will have: enlightenment, or personal deterioration.

The critical issues of drug-induced mental disturbance and addiction tend to be passed over in *ZZZ*. Myron Stolaroff observes, “Widespread unfavorable public bias toward psychedelics has been created by very selective reporting by the media” (201). The media certainly are selectively negative about drugs, as they are about many other things, but the psychedelic advocates such as Timothy Leary and Myron Stolaroff himself have been at least as selective.

It seems self-evident to me that if claims are made for benefits of any substance, including psychedelics, they should be substantiated by systematic observation rather than mere anecdotes and opinion. Stolaroff makes a

valid point that “the illegal status of psychedelics has prevented the publication and sharing of results and effective practices” (203). Yet he goes on to enumerate his own theories about effective use, despite his admission that supporting evidence is lacking. That legal restrictions have prevented adequate research is hardly a valid reason for venturing forth into psychedelic use.

## Spiritual Illumination as a Drug Effect

A decision to take a drug generally assumes that the potential benefit outweighs the risks. As an example, let us suppose a person has advanced cancer and is considering trying an experimental drug. He or she is told that without it, death is almost certain within six months. With the drug there is a 5% chance of death within a month but a 50% chance of extending survival for another year. (Real life decisions are usually even more complex, in part because the probabilities are often incompletely known.) Most of us would probably take the 5% chance of earlier death in the hope of gaining a year. Suppose however that the drug is for headache. It has a 100% chance of curing the headache but still a 5% chance of being fatal. No one would opt for it. The difference is not in the degree of risk but in whether the value of the benefit is sufficient to justify this risk.

Applying such an analysis to psychedelics is problematic. The risks are clear enough: legal penalties, debilitating addiction and brain damage manifesting as cognitive impairment. We do not, of course, know the probabilities of the latter two, but they are at least the 5% of the previous example, and likely more. What about the benefits? What is the value of spiritual enrichment? Texts from Pali suttas to Alan Watts insist that it is the most worthy goal of human life. But do we actually live as if this is the case? Even those of us who are committed lay Buddhists spend the preponderance of our time working toward goals other than attainment of enlightenment. Many of us could become monks or nuns but choose not to. For some this is an ethical decision based on responsibilities to spouse, children and others. But of Western Buddhists without such obligations only a small fraction enter the Sangha and many of these eventually leave. (7) Thus it can be inferred that, whatever their rhetoric, as a practical matter most Western Buddhist practitioners do not give attainment of enlightenment their highest priority. I point this out in response to the argument, sometimes implied, that the spiritual benefits of drugs are so great as to be worth the risk of brain injury or incarceration.

The most prevalent motivation for drug use, though one only occasionally mentioned in *ZZZ*, is entertainment or titillation. What is for most simply the pursuit of pleasure is inflated into a quest for spiritual improvement. Such conundrums are not unique to drugs. The back pages of many free urban newspapers contain advertisements from attractive women describing themselves as “escorts,” some of who offer “tantric” services. I think we can assume that the background of these enterprising ladies is not philological and that the motivation of those who presumably respond to such advertisements is more the relief of biological drives than the hope of enlightenment. Given the faddishness of spirituality in our culture, Buddhist jargon can be a convenient camouflage for behavior which otherwise would not be considered admirable. Both drug taking and visits to escorts are risky behaviors and, while many are willing to take the risks, few would recommend such behaviors. It is notorious that the young often make poor judgments on risk-benefit issues; the decision to smoke is the most obvious example. Much of the sixties drug use can be attributed to the fondness of youth for risk-taking.

## Do Psychedelics Bring Spiritual Benefits?

The most obvious problem regarding spiritual effects of drugs is barely addressed in *ZZZ*: why do the vast majority of psychedelic drug users not derive any recognizable spiritual benefit? My contact with regular users has not convinced me that as a group they are particularly spiritual. More common is an apparent impoverishment of character (“spaciness”), a pervasive restlessness (*uddhacca* in Abhidhammic terminology), and inability to relax or find enjoyment with their own resources. (8) These traits are the opposite of the comfort with one’s own mental content and patience which meditation develops. So, even if we grant that drugs can have spiritual benefits for a few, for the majority they appear to have the opposite effect.

## State Dependency and the Promotion of Psychedelic Use

Buddhism is not a proselytizing religion, for the most part. Though it tries to attract adherents, it describes its claimed benefits in a rather restrained fashion. The same cannot be said for the drug culture which, particularly in the sixties, marketed its products relentlessly. Why drug users so often want to “turn on” others remains a puzzle. Though many drug users engage



in dealing, there is no reason to think that the vocal advocates like Timothy Leary praised psychedelics out of economic self-interest. (9) The most likely explanation for the blandishments of the psychedelic advocates is a curious but pervasive aspect of mind-altering substance use: people in a drug state want their companions to be in the same state. Everyone has noticed how heavy drinkers usually press their companions to keep up, round for round. No doubt this reassures the drinker that his (usually; women are more likely to try to conceal the extent of their alcohol consumption) intake is appropriate. However there is probably something neurological also. Our thoughts and behavior are different in different mental states. Consider a couple when one is sexually aroused and the other is not. The discordance produces definite discomfort and often anger on both sides. When in a particular state we want the others around us to be in a similar state. For the drug advocates, a turned-on companion was more congenial company than a straight one. For the rest of us, being around those in a drug state is hardly edifying.

## Drugs, Culture and Art

A possible argument favoring drug use is that it has inspired some remarkable art. *ZZZ* exemplifies this; many of its illustrations seem to be of the genre of psychedelic art. (Whether this art really has its source in drugs rather than other art of the same genre is a relevant question.) Many Tibetan mandalas resemble drug art—for which they were a source of inspiration—but there is no evidence that drug use influenced their creation. Though psychedelic art is not admired by the fine-art establishment, it is widely popular. It is easily found in book illustration and in such locations as New Age CD liners and Tarot cards. I do not mean this to be derogatory. Postmodern ideology has driven most visually attractive art out of contemporary art galleries and museums. We clearly do have drugs to thank for this often striking art that perhaps even offers a taste of the psychedelic experience without the risks of the drugs themselves.

Yet conceding that some meritorious art may have been inspired by the drug experience does not by itself mean that taking drugs is desirable. Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock were alcoholics. We can be moved by their art without wanting to live their self-destructive lifestyle. Nor does admiration for Van Gogh makes us yearn to be schizophrenic. Similarly, we can enjoy Gauguin's paradisiacal settings without therefore abandoning our wives and families.

Not only in the arts but also more broadly, the reports of psychedelic explorers helped bring to American culture a sense of the freedom and possibilities of the mind that was lacking in the Eisenhower era. Yet, this was not entirely new. Interest in altered states of consciousness was an important element in the European avant-garde long before the mid-twentieth century. The Beats and hippies did however bring the transgressive values of the avant-garde into the mainstream. (10) Leary's infamous formula, "Turn on, tune in, and drop out" is simply a catchy phrasing of a previously existing Bohemian stance. The dropping out was always a delusion—where else is there to go?

In contemporary culture, what begins as transgressive often becomes mainstream. Elvis Presley, once denounced as dangerously lewd, is now on a U.S. postage stamp. Allen Ginsberg, despite the obscenity-ridden rants of his early poetry, also became an American icon. Buddhism, too, has moved from Bohemian to respectable. The alcoholic and cool Chogyam Trungpa seems to have paved the way for acceptance of the sober and judicious Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama.

## Conclusion

*Zig Zag Zen* is appealing on several levels. Its trendy layout, somewhat reminiscent of *Wired* magazine, together with its well-chosen art make it a pleasure to browse. Yet there is reason to be suspicious of its attractions. Though *ZZZ* does not univocally commend drug use, in its lavish design and production it clearly celebrates it. Those who, like the present reviewer, lived through the sixties and seventies will feel a sense of nostalgia for an era which thought itself sophisticated but was, in retrospect, perilously naïve.

Despite its attractions, *ZZZ* does not make much contribution to our understanding of psychedelics. The views expressed are not new and contributions are often repetitive. Reading only the initial chapter by Rick Fields and the final "Roundtable with Ram Das, Robert Aitken Roshi, Richard Baker Roshi and Joan Halifax Roshi" gives a sufficient idea of its entire contents. Too many sections are reminiscences by well-known figures who have said the same things in print many times before; these tend to have the stale quality of celebrity interviews. Deeper analysis of the social, psychological and medical issues surrounding psychedelics is lacking. The ethical issues are barely addressed. For those interested in the place of such drugs in recent American life, a much more useful account is available in Jay Stevens' *Storming Heaven*. (11) In short, *ZZZ* exemplifies the superficiality of the

era it chronicles.

Can we reach any conclusions regarding the place of drugs for Buddhist understanding and practice? I propose that we can. First, even if we allow that many were helped along by drugs, many, perhaps far more, were harmed either biologically or legally. We must remind ourselves that non-harming is central to Buddhist ethics. For this reason, I think we should not encourage drug use, either on a personal level or by the sort of media advocacy exemplified by Timothy Leary. This does not mean on the other hand, that drugs should not be discussed honestly. My suggestion is that psychedelic use is an unskillful choice, not an unethical one. Encouraging others to try psychedelics or persist in their use is ethically questionable. I say questionable rather than unequivocally wrong because drug issues do not justify suppression of freedom of speech. The ethical question is not whether adults should be permitted to alter their consciousness; I see little justification for suppression of mental freedom of any kind. Rather the issue is whether the price paid for achieving altered states is too high.

That drugs often harm those who use them does not justify the repressive measures of the war on drugs. Like all other wars, this one inflicts considerable collateral damage. Americas prisons are filled with non-violent drug offenders, a magnitude of oppression comparable to the Inquisition, witch hunts and the Chinese “Cultural Revolution.” In a century or two, the motivation for imprisoning so many for use of mind-altering substances may seem as incomprehensible as do trials for heresy. Those incapacitated by drug use, especially those whose impairment may affect the welfare of others should be pressed into treatment and not allowed to work in their professions unless drug free. This seems beyond argument. And those whose drug use is associated with violence must be accountable for the harm they inflict. For those whose drug use does not harm others, however, criminal penalties have only done further damage.

I have made my jaundiced view of psychedelics clear throughout this review. *ZZZ* did nothing to alter these views. Nor does it, unfortunately, contain anything likely to moderate the views of the majority of Americans who seem to support the atrocities of the war on drugs. Regrettably, *Zig Zag Zen* leaves the drug issue where it began.

## Notes

(1). Here is an example of the latters style: “In my confrontations with the personified Other that is resident in the mushroom, part of its message

was its species-specific uniqueness and its desire for a symbiotic relationship with humans” (Terence McKenna. *The Archaic Revival*. New York: HarperCollins 1991, p. 117). This seems to suggest that certain mushrooms produce mind-altering chemicals as a way of having a relationship with humans. Such verbiage is enjoyable to read, at least in limited doses, but cannot be taken as a serious contribution to understanding effects of psychedelics.

(2). Peter Harvey. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, p. 67.

(3). These writers are now out of fashion among serious Buddhists, even though many, like myself were first attracted to Buddhism by their books. Recent scholarship has been highly critical of them. Yet perhaps they merit some indulgence from us. While hardly scholarly, they were not always wrong. For example, Kerouacs notebooks on Buddhism, *Some of the Dharma* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1997) demonstrate, at least to my reading, a serious effort to understand Buddhist teachings. While sometimes describing meditative states as if they were akin to drug highs, the book also considers the more austere aspects of Buddhist philosophy such as the Five Aggregates of Grasping and the twelvefold Chain of Causation (p. 19). Significantly, this book was turned down by publishers when some of Kerouacs other works such as *On the Road* were best-sellers. They must have judged that the relative asceticism of actual Buddhism was not what Beats and flower children were hoping to find.

(4). In San Francisco’s Chinatown is a grungy bar named “Buddha.” Yet peeking at its denizens through its murky windows does not suggest that it functions as a center for propagation of Dharma. Misapplying Buddhist terminology obscures, but does not change, the reality.

(5). I am not referring to efforts to interdict drug supply or to capture and prosecute large-scale drug dealers. These law enforcement activities are clearly appropriate, though their success is limited.

(6). At least two drugs that I studied were discontinued due to harmful effects shown by my research.

(7). An important question regarding contemporary Buddhism is why monkhood seems to be losing its attraction. It can even be questioned whether monastic life is the best setting in which to seek enlightenment. I set these interesting questions aside and simply assume that if spiritual development is the highest value for someone, Sangha entry would be a serious consideration.

(8). Television may have similar effects and has been at least as damaging to our culture as drugs, but it is not the subject of this review.

(9). In our culture, the desire for media coverage seems to be almost as strong as the desire for wealth. Advocates of bad behavior make great copy because the media loves nothing so much as provoking its readers' anger stimulates them to tune in the next day. Here Leary's use of the term "tune in" may be unintentionally revealing, as if the drug experience is akin to "turning on" the TV.

(10). This making *epatier le bourgeoisie* into a bourgeois activity in its own right is highly paradoxical. I will leave this matter unaddressed except to say that psychedelic use too is practiced by the establishment.

(11). Jay Stevens: *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*. New York: Harper & Row, 1987.

In the essay collection *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics* (released in a new edition in May), a number of prominent thinkers in both disciplines come together to address these questions, and more. I caught up with Allan Badiner, author, activist and editor of *Zig Zag Zen*, to learn more about the intersection of Buddhism and psychedelics, and to find out why both philosophies are more relevant today than ever. Here's what he had to say. There's some people who insist that psychedelics have no place in a Dharma practice at all, and some people who insist that psychedelics are a legitimate gateway or opener to Buddhism, and others who think that Buddhism and psychedelics make a great pair of practices. People take positions along that spectrum. *Zig Zag Zen* launches the first serious inquiry into the moral, ethical, doctrinal, and transcendental considerations created by the intersection of Buddhism and psychedelics. With a foreword by renowned Buddhist scholar Stephen Batchelor and a preface by historian of religion Husto Buddhism and psychedelic experimentation share a common concern: the liberation of the mind. Start your review of *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*. Write a review. Jun 15, 2016 David rated it it was amazing · review of another edition. Shelves: 2016. I've shelved this as eBooks that changed me and it couldn't be more true. Guess my only complaint is I wanted to hear more from the people opposed to using psychedelics in Buddhist practice. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* - Volume 11 - 2004 -- *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics* -- Reviewed by Geoffrey Redmond, MD - Center for Health Research, Inc. 303 East 83rd St # 25C, New York, NY 10028. - GPRedmondaol.com. *Buddhism and Psychedelics: "Zig Zag Zen"* - A review by Geoffrey Redmond, MD - (hereafter abbreviated as ZZZ ) is an attractive book, coffee table in design though not in size. The cover shows what at first appears to be a seated Buddha but is actually Padmasambhava from a 1992 painting by Gana Lama (73). The text of ZZZ is a collection of essays and interviews concerning the relation of psychedelic drug use to Buddhist practice. Many of the articles first appeared in the Fall, 1996 issue of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*.