

Douglas Osto. *Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. xxvi + 300 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-17730-6.

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There have been several recent books on the revival of research on psychedelics. Douglas Osto's *Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America* is unique among them in that it is addressed to a specific audience, Buddhists. Osto is a senior lecturer in Asian studies at Massey University. He has written extensively on the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*, is an experienced meditator, and has used entheogens within his Buddhist practice. He notes that, while Buddhist subculture and psychedelic subculture overlapped somewhat in the early years of Buddhist development in America, as Buddhism became more mainstream and the backlash against psychedelics became more intense, a divide began to grow between the two subcultures dating from the 1980s.

The objective of *Altered States* is to open a conversation between Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality, more specifically, between those Buddhists who use psychedelics as an adjunct to Buddhist practice (psychedelic Buddhists) and those who do not. The population that forms the basis of his research and also the audience to whom he speaks is the American convert Buddhist community. Osto believes that a conversation between Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality could be mutually beneficial. This conversation, however, cannot occur due to a powerful cultural bias against the nonmedical use of drugs, particularly

psychedelics. If there is to be a conversation between Buddhists who see benefit in using psychedelics as part of their practice and those who consider them solely as a distraction or a danger, then this bias must be dispelled. As he states in the introduction, "By investigating the origins and interactions of convert Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality within the United States, this book aims in part to undermine the prejudicial outlook of the hegemonic cultural discourse on the nonmedical use of drugs, and to shed light on new forms of alternative American spirituality" (p. xviii).

The survey data Osto presents in chapter 1 provides evidence of precisely why he believes Buddhists should be more open to discussing alternative spiritual practices as a legitimate part of Buddhist practice, at least for some. There have been few surveys: the *Tricycle* survey of 1996 (titled "Psychedelics: Help or Hindrance?") was the largest with 1,454 responses; James Coleman's survey of seven Buddhist centers (2001) was second with 359 respondents; and Charles Tart's survey (1991), which focused solely on the Rigpa Fellowship, was the smallest at 64 respondents. Osto's own online survey (2010–11) of psychedelic Buddhists had 196 respondents.

Osto points out that, while all of these surveys are targeted at American convert Buddhists, and

are few in number and small in size, they do provide some interesting results. Generally, the majority of respondents felt that psychedelic use was compatible with Buddhist practice, but a significant number believed that it provided insight into the path or an entrance to it, rather than being part of the path itself. Use tended to decrease as Buddhist practice increased. Referring to Tart's survey, Osto states that "Tart's data seem to show that for members of ... [the Rigpa Fellowship], psychedelic use largely dropped off as they became more involved in traditional Buddhist practice" (p. 3). More to Osto's point, each survey showed that a significant minority of Buddhists, 24 percent in the *Tricycle* survey and 33 percent in Osto's, continue to use psychoactive drugs as part of their practice. Further, of those 33 percent, almost 62 percent considered their use of drugs as part of their spiritual path (p. 3). Thus, many respondents regard psychedelic drug use as compatible with Buddhist practice even if only as a starting point. Significantly, they consider their use as spiritual, and some continue to use drugs as an adjunct to their Buddhist practice. Even so, Osto states that "psychedelic Buddhists I have interviewed often keep their use of psychoactive substances a secret, not only from the legal authorities and the wider community but also from their Buddhist communities" (p. xxii). How did it come to be that psychedelic Buddhists feel somewhat alienated from the mainstream Buddhist community? There are several reasons for this, other than the fact that the nonmedical use of drugs is illegal.

Osto begins his investigation in chapters 2 and 3 in which he traces the overlapping social development of Buddhism and psychedelics. Chapter 2, "The Psychedelic Revolution," traces the history of psychedelic research and use in the 1950s and 1960s. Discussion focuses on the United States and the path from research to counterculture.

Research into psychedelics began as a search for the biological basis for mental health issues, such as addiction and schizophrenia. It was hoped that drugs could be developed as an effective form of treatment.[1] The first major figure to take a hallucinogenic "trip" was Aldous Huxley in 1953. He was supervised by psychiatrist Humphrey Osmond who coined the term "psychedelic" in 1957. Huxley considered his experiences to be religious. He asserted that his experiences were of ultimate reality and that regardless of the terms used by different religions, they referred to the same ultimate reality.

The 1960s was the era in which psychedelics, especially LSD, moved from the laboratory to the street. While not mainstream, it was a major component of the countercultural revolution. Such researchers as Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (Ram Das) were psychologists but found themselves more and more interested in the mystical experiences that hallucinogens engendered in many people. Leary was one, if not *the*, major figure. While he did talk about the importance of the right mind-set and right physical and social context, and *The Psychedelic Experience* is meant to be a guidebook for those taking psychedelics, Leary's belief was that this mystical experience was universally available.[2] This view led him to the widespread promotion of the use of psychedelics outside of a scientific, therapeutic setting and it brought him into conflict with many of the researchers and advocates who wished to take a more measured approach—researchers such as Al Hubbard. Of Hubbard, Michael Pollan states, "Hubbard was the first researcher to grasp the critical importance of set and setting in shaping the psychedelic experience." Hubbard also insisted on a trained guide in LSD sessions. When Pollan was interviewing guides, almost all of them could trace their lineage back to Hubbard, Stanislav Grof, Leo Zell, or Leary (through his graduate students).[3]

While radically different from each other, these groups and others shared the desire to “turn on” as many people as possible, and a naïve view that psychedelics were inherently good and would make people better (p.39). The deathblow to the optimism surrounding psychedelics and their potential to change consciousness and transform society into a peaceful and just society was Charles Manson. Certainly, the counterculture of the 1960s was not uniform in the type of change groups were seeking but there was a broad-based movement for social change. Combined with generally unknown, powerful drugs, it is not surprising that mainstream society panicked and that in 1971 the “War on Drugs” was instituted. This essentially put an end to research on psychedelics.

In chapter 3, Osto traces the major developments in the history of convert Buddhism during the same time period. The 1950s were the time of D. T. Suzuki, the Beats, and Allan Watts. Watts divided Zen into “Beat Zen,” the Zen of non-conformity, and “Square Zen,” exemplified by Philip Kapleau and Robert Aitken who studied extensively in Japan and practiced a traditional Japanese Zen, which Watts called “Straight Zen” (pp. 60-61). The 1970s saw the broader recognition of Tibetan Buddhism, and Insight Meditation. The 1980s was a time of scandals, examination, and reformulation of Buddhism in the United States. The 1990s and 2000s, Osto states, “witnessed the continued growth and maturation of convert Buddhism in America” (p. 74). Specific Western themes, such as socially engaged Buddhism, queer Buddhism, and “mindfulness,” propelled Buddhism into the mainstream of American religion.

Though many readers will be familiar with these histories, Osto’s presentation of them in tandem highlights certain factors he believes have contributed to the marginalization of psychedelic Buddhism. First, teachers’ views on drugs have varied: some have always rejected the use of drugs (for example, Robert Aitken and Richard Baker); others felt that psychedelics could provide

an opening to meditation but would be given up through serious Buddhist practice (for example, Suzuki Roshi); some felt that psychedelics produced genuine experiences but were not useful because they were not achieved through self-effort (for example, the Dalai Lama); and a few felt there was a possibility to use psychedelics in conjunction with Buddhist practices if used responsibly and with knowledge of the potential dangers of these powerful drugs (for example, Jack Kornfield). Second, the moral panic about psychedelics and social conflict, the War on Drugs, and the scandals of the 1980s caused Buddhism to begin to distance itself from psychedelics. Osto states, “This mainstreaming of Buddhism, I believe, also has further divided the psychedelic subculture and the Buddhist subculture in America” (p. 75).

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are follow-up interviews from Osto’s survey. Chapter 4, “Opening the Door,” discusses the experience of those who used psychedelics as a gateway into Buddhist practice. It also begins to introduce some issues regarding drug-induced mystical experiences and possible explanatory models. An example is the neuropsychological model of altered states of consciousness (ASCs) by David Lewis-Williams. Lewis-Williams describes consciousness along a spectrum, stage three of which produces “iconic hallucinations” that combine images from personal experience and culture. Osto notes that Lewis-Williams’s model has limitations, but it “accounts for how ASCs are both culturally determined and innate in human physiology (p. 116). Osto notes an ethnographic survey that indicates that about 90 percent of cultures surveyed institutionally recognize some forms of altered consciousness. These states of consciousness are induced not just through the ingestion of psychotropic plants but also through sleep deprivation, fasting, pain, trance dancing, hypnosis, intense concentration, and meditation. Osto’s current research on the experiences of those who have taken one or more S. N. Goenka ten-day meditation courses tends to support this model of consciousness and its acces-

sibility through meditation. Given this, the question arises: if these shifts of consciousness can occur through means other than psychotropic drugs, why use such drugs? Osto answers these questions in chapters 5 and 6.

Chapter 5, “Closing the Door,” discusses the views of those who discontinued the use of psychedelics. Those respondents who no longer used drugs (91 of 135) gave various reasons: declining interest, increased focus on meditation, concern about the negative effect of alcohol or drugs on the mind, or a teacher’s instruction. Roshi Joan Halifax, Lama Surya Das, and Lama Tsongyi outlined their reasons for discontinuing the use of psychedelics, reasons that mirror those of many of Osto’s respondents. Halifax, for example, commented that she felt as if she had “graduated from psychedelics” when she stopped using them, although they had been a part of her “psychological or developmental maturation” (pp. 14-15). Her experience with “mix media” was unsuccessful for her and she felt the mind developed in meditation was qualitatively different (p. 15). The use of psychedelics in Buddhist practice naturally raises the question of the fifth Buddhist precept, the prohibition against mind-altering substances. Osto notes that, “based on the survey data, it appears that, although some people are aware of and follow the five precepts, strict adherence to the fifth precept is not considered an essential part of the Buddhist path for many contemporary American convert Buddhists” (p. 123).

Chapter 6, “Keeping the Door Open,” examines the views of those who have continued to use psychedelics as an adjunct to their practice. All see the use of psychedelics as part of their spiritual practice, useful in breaking habitual mental patterns, as doors to higher consciousness, and for realizing Buddhist truths, such as interdependence, emptiness, and equanimity. Osto unearths three themes that run through the accounts: psychedelics are tools to train the mind and develop insight; psychedelics are “spiritual medicine or

plant teachers,” and the right context and intention are necessary if their use is to be efficacious (p. 174).

Chapter 7, “Are Psychedelics ‘The True Dharma?’” examines the various debates, attitudes, and issues regarding the use of psychedelics, drug-induced mysticism, and ASCs. The central question is, what constitutes the religious experience? As Osto notes, the underlying assumption on the part of both convert American Buddhists and psychedelic spiritualists is that it is an unmediated experience of some truth or reality. Following the critiques of Wayne Proudfoot and Robert Sharf, Osto agrees that no unmediated experience is possible.[4] If there is no universal, *sui generis* category “religious experience,” how can scholars speak of the “religious” or “mystical” experience? Again, following Proudfoot and Ann Taves’s *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (2009), he suggests that we use an ascriptive model when referring to mystical experiences—that is, such experiences are those that are deemed religious by those who have them. With this in mind, Osto then discusses three major experiments and their possible interpretations: the Good Friday experiment and John Hopkins’s experiment, both of which involved psilocybin, and Rick Strassman’s DMT experiments.

Osto concludes the chapter with some explanatory models. An interesting example is the model titled “Psychedelic Buddhism as Tantra,” which draws on Erik Davis’s metaphor of psychedelic Buddhism as a “home-grown American Tantra” in the sense that it deals with the secret use of transgressive substances for religious purposes: “a heterodox praxis” that began in the 1960s and continues today (p. 208). This metaphor appears apt as it also captures the sense that these heterodox substances are dangerous and one needs a guide.

Osto then briefly discusses the relationship between ASCs in Buddhism and the description of the Buddha's visions during the four watches of the night to the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*. Pre-Mahāyāna schools attribute these visions to a one-pointed *samādhi* while later notions of *samādhi* change. *Samādhi* in early Mahāyāna sūtras appears often as a type of mental transformation or altered state, distinctive from the use of *samādhi* in mainstream Buddhist sources. In Mahāyāna sources, *samādhi* is often equated with a trancelike state that induces visions of infinite buddhas, bodhisattvas, and jewel-encrusted pure lands, all interpenetrating and pervading all space and time. Moreover, numerous Mahāyāna sūtras emphasize the particular importance of attaining this new type of *samādhi*, "as an ideal form of spiritual cultivation or cognitive perception" (p. 211).[5] Based on his observations, Osto suggests that there is a connection between psychedelic Buddhists and Indian Mahāyāna and Tantra, a "mutual interest in and a valorization of certain states of altered consciousness" (p. 212).

Osto concludes the chapter with some predictions about the future of psychedelic Buddhism in America. As the desire for transcendence appears to be cross-cultural, this desire is likely to continue. Cultures have devised various means of attaining ASCs, including psychoactive plants and drugs. Thus, "psychedelics and Buddhism will continue to mix, at least for certain members of the population" (p. 214).

Can the conversation Osto wishes between psychedelic spirituality and Buddhism, psychedelic Buddhists and mainstream Buddhists, occur? At the moment, I would say, "no, but...." The reason for that can be found in Osto's own words. In speaking of rational debates and attitudes about the use of psychedelic drugs as part of Buddhism or even of spiritual practice, Osto concludes, correctly, that "the use of chemically induced altered states as a part of religious practice has as much or more to do with one's private experiences, val-

ues, personal dispositions, psychology, and pre-suppositions as with rational arguments" (p. 175).

Buddhists and Buddhist teachers are still divided and, I would argue, along the same lines. Roughly, the arguments against psychedelics are that they are dangerous and not "natural" and therefore do not produce "authentic" insights. They are shortcuts, are no substitute for experience on the meditation cushion, and are a violation of the fifth precept. The counterarguments are that, yes, psychedelics are dangerous, their use needs to take into account mental and physical set and setting, and a guide should be available. Shamanic models can be a guide, as can the use of peyote in the Native American Church. ASCs have been valued for spiritual insight throughout history and across cultures. Since the 1960s many Buddhists have come to Buddhism through psychedelics and some continue to use them as a tool in their Buddhist practice. But the divide remains and will continue.

An excellent article in a recent issue of *Tricycle* by Gabriel Lefferts indicates that a space for discussion may be opening up.[6] Recent research on consciousness and the medical use of psychedelics and the psychoactive drug MDMA have shown promise in treating not only depression, addiction, and PTSD but also fear of dying. Further, while scientists are still somewhat cautious about mystical, religious, or transcendent experiences, studies on consciousness have shown that the use of psychedelics can quiet the default mode network of the brain, during which the subject experiences a loss of sense of self. Lefferts quotes Pollan, "The psychedelic experience of 'non-duality' suggests that consciousness ... survives the disappearance of the self, that it is not so indispensable as we—and it—like to think." [7] There is also the current discussion about microdosing to enhance creativity and productivity, including Ayelet Waldman's book *A Really Good Day: How Microdosing Made a Mega Difference in My Mood, My Marriage, and My Life* (2017) about

how microdosing helped to stabilize her moods. The UK-based Beckley Foundation and the Imperial College London have recently begun a placebo-controlled study to see if there are benefits from taking small but regular doses of LSD.[8] Should mainstream society become supportive of psychotropic drugs as a means of enhancing life and easing the fear of death, then it is likely that mainstream Buddhism will follow.

There are things that Osto has not done. He has not advocated the use of psychedelics by anyone. He is clear that they are not for everyone. And that's just fine. He urges that people who are interested should thoroughly research them: they are dangerous. They are also subject to "diminishing returns" that can lead to a craving for new and exciting experiences that, in turn, become addictions (p. 240). He has also not dispelled myths or undermined prejudices against the nonmedical use of drugs. As he has stated, people's views on this are not determined by research but by personal experiences, values, psychology, and so on. If one is interested in research, I would begin with Pollan.

Altered States is a valuable and timely book. What Osto has done is to open the conversation he wishes to have through providing insight into how some Buddhists (and others) have used entheogens as an adjunct to their spiritual practice within the context of the somewhat overlapping history of psychedelics and Buddhism in America. He has discussed some issues that arise, presented some detailed research on drugs, and allowed psychedelic Buddhists to speak for themselves about how entheogen use has informed their Buddhist practice. He has situated himself as a sympathetic researcher and psychedelic Buddhist within the body of the book.

I am uncomfortable, however, with the placement of the arguments that appear in his preface and postscript. In literature, frame stories structure our understanding of the central story. Osto's preface is an argument that psychedelic sub-

stances used for religious purposes should be covered by one's right to freedom of religion, sovereignty of one's body, and individual conscience. I do not object to the argument, only to its preferential placement at the beginning of the book. Likewise, the postscript is a short biographical sketch of his experiences with entheogens and how they "have shaped my life and views." The reason he gives for including this is "to locate the current study vis-à-vis my own subjectivity" (p. 223). This is not necessary as it has already been established in the body of the text. My concern is that, taken together, they may lead some readers to simply dismiss the central content of the book. This would be a shame, since otherwise this is a worthwhile study of an important topic in Buddhism in America.

Notes

[1]. P. W. Barber, *Psychedelic Revolutionaries: LSD and the Birth of Hallucinogenic Research* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2018), 24.

[2]. Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, and Ralph Metzner, *The Psychedelic Experience* (1964; repr., New York: Citadel Press, 2007).

[3]. Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 169, 225.

[4]. Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Robert Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen* 42, no. 3 (1995): 228-83; and Robert Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94-116.

[5]. Citing Florin Deleanu, "A Preliminary Study on Meditation and the Beginnings of Mahāyāna Buddhism," *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism at Soka University* 3 (1999): 65-113.

[6]. Gabriel Lefferts, "Psychedelics' Buddhist Revival," *Tricycle* (July 27, 2018), <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/psychedelics-buddhist-revival/>.

[7]. Ibid.

[8]. Sarah Boseley, "First Ever Trials on the Effects of Microdosing LSD to Begin," *The Guardian*, September 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/sep/01/first-ever-trials-on-the-effects-of-microdosing-lsd-set-to-begin>.

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