

The influence of the psychedelic movement on essay



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In an attempt to synthesize my own personal academic area of interest, that is: the history of the psychedelic movement in twentieth century America, with the content of the Asian Religions course, I have elected to study the relationship between the influx of Buddhist philosophy and the psychedelic counter-culture movement of the 1960's and 1970's. The subject, although highly specific, has nonetheless generated intellectual interest substantial enough to warrant a sub-field of study, in terms of Buddhist/American History examination. This paper will focus on the thought of the main harbingers of this movement, specifically Aldous Huxley, Alan Watts, and Dr. Timothy Leary. This study will also examine the corruptions of classical Buddhist philosophy wrought by these intellectuals concerned with integrating the psychedelic experience in an Eastern context.

The connection between Buddhism and psychedelics in the American experience is a subject of contention because of the controversial associations of chemically altered perception as compared to traditional Bodhicitta, or the mind of enlightenment.

The author Emma Layman, in her book *Buddhism in America*, asserts: " Of all the Buddhist groups in America, those focusing on meditation have been most attractive to young people from the drug scene, and it is these groups that have taken the strongest stand against drug use. The psychological literature as well as the literature on Zen abounds in descriptions of the altered states of consciousness experienced under the influence of LSD-25 and other hallucinogenic drugs. Descriptions of these drug-induced states often compare them with the experience of satori or enlightenment which

may result from Buddhist meditation. Frequently the opinion is expressed that, under certain circumstances, the LSD experience is a satori experience.

” The popularity of Buddhism in America became most pronounced in the period after World War II. It is interesting to note that the United States had just concluded the most devastating war in human history, with the first use of the atomic bomb on the Empire of Japan, yet the Japanese style of Buddhism took hold in America more than other schools after the war.

It could be said that the main figurehead of Japanese, or more precisely, Zen Buddhism, in America was the author and intellectual Dr. D.

T. Suzuki. In terms of the American expression of Buddhism, Suzuki had more influence over the interpretation of Zen philosophy than any other writer of the time. His reception by the lay student of Buddhism was warm and appreciated, however his stance with the academics of the country may not have been so strong. “ Although D.

T. Suzuki’s scholarly efforts have not always been praised, the overall estimate of his work and mission must be unequivocally favorable, especially because it offered Americans a “ serious” Zen amidst the curious “ Beat Zen” and “ Square Zen” that developed in the 1950s. ” It must be mentioned, however, that this “ Beat Zen”, and other westernized forms of Buddhism had a significant impact on the experience of American Buddhism. The Beats, the counter-culture movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s, offered an attitude that indicted the current social systems in America.

With their whole scale questioning of traditional values in America, they sought out new avenues for spiritual exploration. Hence Zen is where the Beats turned vent their frustrations with the American spiritual traditions.

“ The “ Zen boom” of the 1950s is considered a major watershed in this American Buddhist history and lineage. Two individuals, D.

T. Suzuki, a lay student of Shaku Soyen, and Alan Watts, an Episcopalian priest and popularizer of eastern religions, were instrumental in introducing Buddhism, and the Zen tradition in particular, to the United States. Together with the Beats, they helped thrust Buddhism into mainstream America. ” Not only were the Beats influential, in terms of popularizing Buddhism, but they also heralded the use of psychedelic chemicals as a means of altering consciousness. Consciousness, it seemed, was an untouched horizon in the mainstream history of American exploration.

However, prior to the Beats, a pattern of consciousness alteration had already been established by a minority of psychologists and intellectuals. For instance, the famous psychologist William James was experimenting with the psychoactive effects of nitrous oxide and authors like William Butler Yeats and Havelock Ellis were experimenting with the little know peyote buttons coming from areas around the southwest United States and Mexico.

Thus it was only a matter of time before the culture of psychedelia and the philosophy of Zen started to make connections on the American Beat scene.

Jay Stevens describes the Beats: “ They smoked marijuana and talked about satori, that flash of recognition that was a byproduct, but not the essence, of

Zen. ” The Beat movement of the 1950s marked the beginnings of the <https://assignbuster.com/the-influence-of-the-psychedelic-movement-on-essay/>

associations between chemically altered consciousness and Zen Buddhist philosophy. Although, Aldous Huxley, an intellectual with loose connections to the Beat movement, was also drawing connections between hallucinogens and satori experience.

Huxley, may have played a just as important, if not a more important role in the serious study of Buddhism and the viewing of psychedelics more as sacrament, rather than recreational drug. “ Later much would be made if the Beats’ infatuation with Zen, mostly negative. Scholars of Eastern religions were quick to jump on inconsistencies and misreadings.

Even Alan Watts, who was a seminal influence due to his position as director of San Francisco’s Academy of Asian Studies, felt compelled to criticize the “ fake-intellectual hipster” who was “ name-dropping bits of Zen and jazz jargon to justify disaffiliation from society.

” Aldous Leonard Huxley, born July 26, 1894 , was one of the most profound writer and intellectual of the twentieth century. Huxley is most renowned for his futuristic dystopian novel, Brave New World. Huxley, an investigator of the eastern religious traditions, established an influential position in the American psychedelic movement of the post war years with his books concerning his thought, The Perennial Philosophy, and his experience with psychedelics in The Doors Of Perception. In Huxley’s paramount psychedelic essay The Doors of Perception he describes his mescaline induced brush with satori: “ And then I remembered a passage I had read in one of Suzuki’s essay’s. “ What is the Dharma-Body of the Buddha?” (“ The Dharma-Body of

the Buddha” is another way of saying Mind, Suchness, the Void, the Godhead.)

The question is asked in a Zen monastery by an earnest and bewildered novice.

And with prompt irrelevance of one of the Marx Brothers, the Master answers, “ The hedge at the bottom of the garden.” “ And the man who realizes this truth,” the novice dubiously inquires, “ what, may I ask, is he?” Groucho gives him a whack over the shoulders with his staff and answers, “ A golden-haired lion.” It had been, when I read it, only a vaguely pregnant piece of nonsense. Now it was all clear as day, as evident as Euclid.

Of course the Dharma-Body of the Buddha was the hedge at the bottom of the garden. At the same time, and no less obviously, it was these flowers, it was anything that I - or rather the blessed Not-I, released for a moment from my throttling embrace - cared to look at. ” Huxley’s conclusions about the effect of psychedelics like mescaline or LSD were that they freed the senses from the thought filter that our normal modes of perception upheld daily. His view was that the mind, or more accurately, the ego, acted as a filter, sorting out relevant information from non-essential information.

In Huxley’s view, by removing this filter on reality, therefore eliminating the rationalizing objectification of reality, one steps closer to realizing the true absurd nature of things. To quote Blake (Huxley’s source of inspiration), “ If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite .

" Huxley explains this absurdity in an Eastern context ten years prior to *Doors* in his philosophical treatise *The Perennial Philosophy*: " Zen has always specialized in nonsense as a means of stimulating the mind to go forward to that which is beyond sense; so perhaps the point of the bar resides precisely in its pointlessness and in our disturbed, bewildered reaction to that pointlessness. " It may have been that the prime connections between the psychedelic experience and the satori experience for Huxley was that of the this-worldliness of the respective experiences. Being the social critic that he was, the emphasis that certain elements of the psychedelic experience and Buddhism place on the importance of right action drew the two concepts even closer together.

Dana Sawyer, author and academic, wrote an article for the latest issue of *Tricycle* magazine concerning Huxley (" Aldous Huxley: Brave New Buddhist?"). She writes: "[Huxley] preferred the Mahayanist cultivation of compassion and social responsibility to the Theravada goal of arhatship, or " solitary realization.

" As he makes clear in *Doors of Perception* (1956) and in other later works, he agreed with the Mahayanists that one must become a bodhisattva, a being whose wisdom expresses itself in compassion and whose avowed goal is to forward the enlightenment of all beings. " Huxley presents an interesting aberration in terms of the relationship between Buddhism and psychedelic, for in his case the study of Buddhism brought him to an interest in psychedelics. In terms of the history of Buddhism in the American tradition, it is a common trait for the practitioners of Buddhism to be drawn to the practice by their initial encounters with psychedelic substances.

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When considering the rise of the popularity of Buddhist practice within the United States, especially with the “ Zen boom” of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, it seems that the role of psychedelics factors in to be a key component with that popularity. These chemicals sped up the processes of psychic experience and tended to have the effects of introspection and reflection by the user.

The elements of intense introspection of the experiences were life changing in their scope and depth. It was this chemically induced introspection that lead many to seek out more permanent, safe modes of “ consciousness expansion” based on a historical tradition rooted in a respected lifestyle. “ The Beat Buddhism of the fifties had largely been literary, but with the sixties, the dramatic rigors of Zen practice galvanized the most zealous white Buddhists. Psychedelics may have had more to do with this than most would like to admit these days, but I would suggest that the mind-blowing intensity of the psychedelic experience gave practitioners in the sixties a taste - at times a thirst for extreme experiences.

White Buddhists who came of age during the sixties wanted enlightenment, and they wanted it immediately. If white Buddhism grew out of a heady countercultural mix of antiwar activism and psychedelic consciousness, it was also in some ways a response to the extremes of the same counterculture. Meditation came to be seen as a way to “ get high” without the dangers or inevitable come-downs of drugs; and cultivating peace through meditation was seen as a more effective way to achieve peace than by taking part in the increasingly strident antiwar demonstrations. ” The prospect of “ turning on,” a term used by the harbingers of psychedelia, was <https://assignbuster.com/the-influence-of-the-psychedelic-movement-on-essay/>

a prime factor for recruiting the populous to a theory of internal self-determination represented by the practice of zazen. People were looking for an outlet to the “ spiritual crisis” of the post-modern world, and Zen happened to be this “ exotic wisdom” which attracted so many followers.

The indictments of paternal Christian spirituality, an issue raised by Freud, were analogous to the indictments of the bureaucratic “ establishment” raised by the counterculture. This breakdown of tradition only helped to pave the way for the psychedelic explosion and subsequently the ensuing popularity of Buddhist practice. Seager writes about this relationship in Buddhism in America: “ Tricycle, a highly regarded Buddhist review associated with a Beat-hip strand in convert Buddhism, conducted a poll among its readers in 1996 regarding the relationship between Buddhism and the use of psychedelics. Of 1, 454 people who replied, 89 percent stated that they engaged in Buddhist practice, and 83 said they had also taken psychedelics.

Over 40 percent said that their initial interest in Buddhism had been sparked by taking LSD or mescaline. While statistics indicated that most respondents no longer took drugs, 71 percent believed that “ psychedelics are not a path but they can provide a glimpse of reality to which Buddhist practice points ” With this being said, in terms of the initiations to Buddhist practice by the impressions of the psychedelic experience, the figureheads that expressed a direct correlation must be examined more in depth.

Topping this list is the thought expounded by Alan Watts, a thinker whose writings directly affected the world view of this paper’s author. Alan Watts, is

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considered to be a preeminent authority on Zen in the West, if not, however respected by the academics of Eastern studies. His translation of the esoteric Zen worldview sat well with lay audiences not familiar with the specific cultural connotations of Eastern thought or the perplexing nature of the Zen Koans.

His analogies of satori or the foundations of Zen mysticism included language that could be processed by minds linked to Western rationalist philosophy, especially in the later years of his life when he was lecturing to young audiences caught up in the times; which were characterized by challenging the institutions of academia and traditional values. Around the time of the late fifties and early sixties the delineations between his thought on psychedelics and Zen started to become blurred. His run in with psychedelics, although, may have knocked him off the Zen course for a bit into a more broad projection of “ Eastern” thought.

This projection into the more vague realms of “ Easternism,” however proved to be short lived, as can be seen by examining his later lectures and literature, which had a pronounced Zen flavor. Jay Stevens writes about Watts’ first experiences with psychedelics: “ Watts wasn’t an immediate convert to Huxley’s high opinion of psychedelics. It struck him as “ highly improbable that a true spiritual experience could follow from ingesting a particular chemical.

Visions and ecstasies, yes. A taste of the mystical, like swimming with water-wings, perhaps.” The first time he took LSD he had a “ hilarious beautiful” but “ hardly what I would call mystical” time. But then he took it again, and

this time he had a full blown mystical illumination that was as embarrassing as it was enlightening - embarrassing because that moment of cosmic Oneness was something Watts had devoted his whole adult life to finding, and now he had achieved it not through proper spiritual discipline but because he had poured an ampule of twentieth-century science into a glass of distilled water; and it was enlightening because what came through the Door wasn't Zen Buddhism, which was Watts's specialty, but something with an unmistakable Hindu cast, as though Hinduism " was a local form of some uncovered wisdom, inconceivably ancient, which everyone knows is in the back of his mind but will not admit it.

" Watts, with his penchant for expressing the subtleties of the politics of psychedelia, as is seen in his account of the " mystic drugs" in his pamphlet *The Joyous Cosmology*, with an introduction, no less, by Dr. Timothy Leary and his contemporary Richard Alpert (later Ram Dass), still had reservation about approaching the psychedelic experience.

Watts felt that proper spiritual training might be necessary for exploring the inner terra incognita, if one was to steer clear of delusions of Easternism. Rick Fields writes of Watts' attitude toward proper uses of psychedelics in his study *A High History of Buddhism in America*: " But if one were not trained in yoga or Zen, warned Watts, this insight might lead one to believe either that " you are the helpless victim of everything that happens to you," or that, like God, you are " personally responsible for everything that happened." To go beyond this impasse, one needed either " an attitude of profound faith or letting-go to you-know-not-what." In that case, " the rest of the experience is total delightwhat, in Buddhist terms, would be called an experience of the <https://assignbuster.com/the-influence-of-the-psychedelic-movement-on-essay/>

world as dharmadhatu, of all things and events, however splendid or deplorable from relative point of view, as aspects of symphonic harmony, which, in its totality, is gorgeous beyond belief." And yet, the most interesting part of the experience for Watts was not this ecstatic and sublime state, but the moment of return to the ordinary state of mind.

There "in the twinkling of an eye" lay the realization "that so-called everyday or ordinary consciousness is the supreme form of awakening, of Buddha's anuttara-samyak-sambodi." But this realization, remembered clearly enough, soon faded. "It is thus," concluded Watts, "that many of us who have experimented with psychedelic chemicals have left them behind, like the raft which you use to cross a river, and have found growing interest and even pleasure in the simplest practice of zazen, which we perform like idiots, without any special purpose." Watts, it seems, had adopted the opinion of those who participated in the poll for Tricycle magazine in 1996. It may be that psychedelics can offer glimpses into the Buddhist view of reality, a path towards a Buddhist vehicle, but that psychedelics are to be relied upon to release one's self from the problem of samsara.

Watts comes to the conclusion that psychedelics could be used as a tool for those experimenting in the altered states of consciousness that novice western students may see zazen as manifesting.

A tool, however, is not a vehicle, hence Watts' leaving behind of the tool; like a "raft which you use to cross a river" and then discard. Layman explains Suzuki's point of view on the subject in Buddhism in America: "Daisetz Suzuki, writing on "Religion and Drugs," concedes the superficiality

similarity in the context of the content of the experience from hallucinogenic drugs and those resulting from religious practice. However, he contends that they are not equivalent because the drug-induced experience represents illusion and fantasy, whereas the religious experience reaches the true man. That is, what is crucial is not the experiences themselves but the one who does the experiencing. " Suzuki recognizes the psychedelic experience not as a glimpse, but as a distorted peek into the Buddhist experience.

He brings up the notion that experience is not what matters, but rather the experiencer. However, Suzuki does not disregard the psychedelic experience completely, he expresses concern about delusion and misrepresentation that the experience may impart on the user, so as to not confuse psychedelia with the traditions of Zen. Watts leaves the scene of the psychedelic and Zen movements with his death in the early sixties.

His impact, like Huxley's, would still be felt later in the peak of the psychedelic and Zen movements culminating around the 1970's. His was not so much replaced, but filled in by Dr. Timothy Leary, who was not a scholar of Buddhism, but used Buddhist terminology to describe the psychedelic experience.

Leary was joined by Richard Alpert, who later became Ram Dass after his visit to India, and Ralph Metzner. The three made up the group of the Harvard bad boys, with all three being kicked out of Harvard for their endorsement of psychedelics. Leary came out to be the most outspoken and charismatic of the group and therefore having the biggest impact on the psychedelic movement in America. Leary was a fan of Eastern mysticism,

modeling some of his books after famous Asian texts. For instance, *High Priest*, an assemblage of trip reports with famous intellectuals and scholars (including Huxley and Watts), was based on the *I Ching*, a Chinese divination text. Also Leary's most famous work, *The Psychedelic Experience*, is " a manual based on the *Tibetan Book of The Dead*" as it says on its cover.

The Psychedelic Experience is actually dedicated to Aldous Huxley, " with profound admiration and gratitude.

The Harvard " bad boys" go on, in *The Psychedelic Experience*, to co-opt the language of Tibetan Buddhism in order to better describe the elements of the trip. In the general introduction the authors give some explanations of the book as it relates to Buddhism: " The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is ostensibly a book describing the experiences to be expected at the moment of death, during an intermediate phase lasting forty-nine (seven times seven) days, and during rebirth into another bodily frame. This however is merely the exoteric framework which the Tibetan Buddhists used to cloak their mystical teachings.

The language and symbolism of death rituals of Bonism, the traditional pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion, were skillfully blended with Buddhist conceptions. The esoteric meaning, as it has been interpreted in this manual, is that death and rebirth of ego that is described, not of the body. Lama Govinda indicates this clearly in his introduction when he writes: " It is a book for the living as well as the dying." The book's esoteric meaning is often concealed beneath many layers of symbolism.

It was not intended for general reading.

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It was designed to be understood only by one who was to be initiated personally by a guru into the Buddhist mystical doctrines, into the premortem-death-rebirth experience. These doctrines have been kept a closely guarded secret for many centuries, for fear that naive or careless application would do harm. In translating such an esoteric text, therefore, there are two steps: one, the rendering of the original text into English; and two, the practical interpretation of the text for its uses. In publishing this practical interpretation for use in the psychedelic session, we are in a sense breaking with the tradition of secrecy and thus contravening the teachings of the lama-gurus. " Leary and his cohorts recognized the burgeoning Buddhist movement that was branching out of psychedelia, which would explain their motivations behind co-opting the Tibetan Book Of The Dead.

The actual similarities between the psychedelic experience and the movement through the Bardo planes could be viewed as a stretch considering the randomness of the LSD trip.

The psychedelic experience is fraught with unknowns. Leary even presents a control mechanism for a trip to regulate the experience into a more comprehensible, discernable journey. Leary remarks in *The Psychedelic Experience*, " The nature of the experience depends almost entirely on set and setting. " It may have been that with the rising tide of the psychedelic wave Leary, Alpert, and Metzner, felt a responsibility to keep people in check from going of the psychic cliff into oblivion.

The users of psychedelics, unlike the practitioners of Buddhism, had no foundation to turn to when confronted with the " clear light of void." In other

words, they wanted a source for which to turn to when freaking out on the impersonal, anatman, nature of reality. They were trying to put the hallucinations in a cultural context that those psychonauts using the entheogen would be attracted to, a Buddhist context. There is a story behind the inspiration for using the Tibetan Book of the Dead: " One day, while guiding a session for Metzner, Leary had opened up the Tibetan Book of the Dead and read a few pages, and Metzner, after initially fighting the strange Tibetan concepts, had felt his mind go lifting up through the layers of consciousness just as the Tibetan lamas had written.

Everyone had been stunned. Had they just unwittingly stumbled across an ancient psychedelic guidebook? As Alpert later put it, the Tibetan Book of the Dead contained " the most vivid descriptions of what we were experiencing with psychedelics but hadn't been able to describe. We were saying it was ineffable, and there it was, described in a book that was 2500 years old. " Leary may have done more than any other in bringing those interested in psychedelic to an interest in Buddhism. Although, it must be said, that Leary took the most " artist license" when interpreting the Eastern religions.

Not only did he write books about psychedelics based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead and the I Ching but also he published Psychedelic Prayers, a book based on Lao-tzu's Taoteching. It may be that when looking back at the connections between Buddhism and psychedelics, Leary represents an embarrassment to the traditions of American Buddhism. Their interpretations of Buddhism marked a definite movement from the traditional practice of Buddhist philosophy, with pop influences and social readings into classical

Buddhist texts. It is evident that psychedelic movement in American history played an influential role in the development of American Buddhism.

In the field of the twentieth century, psychedelics have a profound effect on the western world.

Some have compared the synthesis of LSD in 1938 and the subsequent first intentional use of LSD on April 19, 1943 to the creation of the atom bomb which was first intentionally used July 16, 1945. The contention is that what the bomb does to the environment on an external scale can be compared to the converse internal effects of LSD, in terms of the profundity of the event. This comparison, however is not meant to conjure a negative connotation, it is simply expressing the extreme actions of both the bomb and LSD. Both have profound effects that upset the cultural static state.

A person taking psychedelics can expect to be changed forever. The experience is profound, and can be both negative and positive. The changes come in the form of reorganization or alteration of ones perception of the world. A common occurrence is the recognition of other modes of reality, which can lead to feelings of tolerance. As one sails through the many fold systems of perception the feeling is of complete recognition, a realization of the Other (the Other being a rather esoteric term for the Logos, Over-mind, or the source of all knowledge).

These experiences led the users of hallucinogens to seek out a more structured and traditional way to interpret their intense disassociative elements of psychedelia. With one of the core elements of Buddhism being anatman, it seems only natural that people who have had experiences with <https://assignbuster.com/the-influence-of-the-psychedelic-movement-on-essay/>

psychedelics would look towards Buddhism as a permanent vehicle to expand upon their new found realities. Seager writes: " The Sixties," a phrase that generally refers to a period from about 1963 to the mid-70s, are likely to be looked back upon for some time as the most important turning point in American Buddhist history. At around the same time, convert Buddhism in this county grew from a small community of seekers preoccupied primarily with Zen to a far larger and more differentiated community, as people in the burgeoning counterculture went in search of spiritual alternatives and found them in Zen, Nichiren, Tibetan, Theravada, and other kinds of Buddhism " In conclusion, it can be said the psychedelic movement in the United States, had a large impact on the development of Buddhism in America.

The harbingers of the psychedelic movement found it necessary to use Buddhist terminology to relate their experiences to a broader concept served as a frame of reference in which to describe these powerful drugs.

It seems that people who had initial contact with substances like LSD, psychedelic mushrooms, or mescaline, turned toward the practice of Buddhism, or in particular the zazen of Zen Buddhism. The profound life altering events of the psychedelic experience sent many looking for a way to expand on their new found interest of consciousness exploration, and Buddhism seemed to be the logical outcome.

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