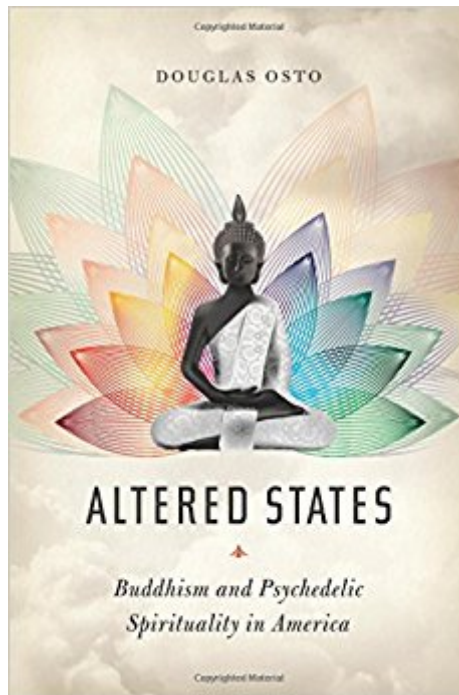


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# Altered States: Buddhism And Psychedelic Spirituality In America



## Synopsis

In the 1960s, Americans combined psychedelics with Buddhist meditation to achieve direct experience through altered states of consciousness. As some practitioners became more committed to Buddhism, they abandoned the use of psychedelics in favor of stricter mental discipline, but others carried on with the experiment, advancing a fascinating alchemy called psychedelic Buddhism. Many think exploration with psychedelics in Buddhism faded with the revolutionary spirit of the sixties, but the underground practice has evolved into a brand of religiosity as eclectic and challenging as the era that created it. *Altered States* combines interviews with well-known figures in American Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality—including Lama Surya Das, Erik Davis, Geoffrey Shugen Arnold Sensei, Rick Strassman, and Charles Tart—and personal stories of everyday practitioners to define a distinctly American religious phenomenon. The nuanced perspective that emerges, grounded in a detailed history of psychedelic religious experience, adds critical depth to debates over the controlled use of psychedelics and drug-induced mysticism. The book also opens new paths of inquiry into such issues as re-enchantment, the limits of rationality, the biochemical and psychosocial basis of altered states of consciousness, and the nature of subjectivity.

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## Customer Reviews

*Altered States* genuinely moves forward in laying a path for new, insightful, and valuable information on the American Buddhism that is developing in our global society. Douglas Osto's groundbreaking

research will be appreciated by scholars, and his accessible style will be enjoyed by nonacademic readers. (Charles Prebish, author of *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America*) *Altered States* deftly guides us through the neglected territory of psychedelic Buddhism. This is a fascinating story, full of vivid characters and supported by solid research. Still, I believe it makes a greater contribution by situating these practices and persons within the larger contexts of tantra, of American religion, and of cutting-edge neuropsychology and consciousness studies. The result is a mind blowing. (Franz Metcalf, author of *What Would Buddha Do?: 101 Answers to Life's Daily Dilemmas*) "[*Altered States*] mixes statistics and surveys, historical overview, personal experience, and ethnographic texture to uncover the intertwining history of two fast-growing movements in American spirituality.... This overview will appeal to anyone interested in Buddhism, psychedelic possibilities, and understanding how both are forging a controversial new American religious experience. (Publishers Weekly) Provocative.... The book is worth buying, reading, and quoting. (PsycCritiques)

In the 1950s and 1960s, Americans combined psychedelics with Buddhist meditation to achieve direct experience through altered states of consciousness. As some practitioners became more committed to Buddhism, they abandoned the use of psychedelics in favor of stricter mental discipline, but others carried on with the experiment, advancing a fascinating alchemy called psychedelic Buddhism. *Altered States* combines interviews with well-known figures in American Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality and personal stories of everyday practitioners to define a distinctly American religious phenomenon.

An accessible exploration of the history and use of psychedelics in Buddhist spiritual practice. The interviews and in-depth data give a broad picture of meditation, Buddhist spiritual practices and other ways of reaching an experience of the divine. Well done!

If you became interested in Zen by first taking psychedelics, this is a fascinating and highly informative survey of attitudes among American "convert Buddhists" about psychedelics, based on numeric data taken from a number of sources, including an online questionnaire (196 respondents). These sources include a 1996 article published in *Tricycle* (1,454 respondents), a study of Western Buddhist by James Coleman, and one by Charles Tart of members of the Rigpa Fellowship (64 respondents). Astoundingly, 89% of the *Tricycle* respondents considered themselves Buddhists, and 83% reported that they had taken psychedelics, indicating that at least three-quarters of the

1,454 respondents (over 1,000 individuals) had both taken psychedelics and were converts to Buddhism. Over 1,000 also said that "psychedelics are not a path, but they can provide a glimpse of the reality to which Buddhist practice points." Douglas Osto's online survey reported similar overlap between Western converts to Buddhism and psychedelic use. These figures are startlingly different from the overall population of the US, of whom an estimated 8% have taken psychedelics, based on government surveys. This is a good place to point out that any such survey suffers from "reporting bias," namely, self-selection among respondents...those who are interested or have used psychedelics are more likely to respond than those who haven't. This is a key problem faced by actuaries who are trying to determine how prevalent a phenomenon is among our population: self-selection based on interest or participation in a particular form of behavior. It is an especially difficult issue when the behavior being examined is illegal. The fact that the behavior is illegal generally leads to under-reporting, while self-selection tends to lead to over-reporting. Still, the sample size for the Tricycle article is impressive, and even for Osto's book, is large enough that the results, though anecdotal, still carry enough weight to be interesting, and to hint at the possible underlying composition of the group under examination. *Altered States* starts out with a discussion of methodology and of its findings. Osto is clearly versed enough in statistics and sampling to realize the difficulties he faced in drawing reliable conclusions. Still, the book is a fascinating look at two phenomena which appeared in American culture at approximately the same time: use of psychedelics and conversion to Buddhism. One lament I have is that the book does not even attempt to estimate the number of what Osto refers to as "American convert Buddhists." This is an important demographic question. How many such converts are there? Is it in the thousands, tens of thousands, or even as high as a million? Here we can get some sense of the answer by turning to *The Statistical Abstract of the United States*, which contains Table 75, showing a breakdown of the US population by religion. According to this source, in 1990, slightly over 400,000 people self-identified as Buddhist whereas 11 years later nearly 1,100,000 people identified themselves as Buddhists, an incredible increase of 175% in decade. For comparison, 7 years later, 1,189,000 reported an affiliation with Buddhism, an increase of "only" 10%. Clearly, based on government sources, the 90s saw a huge increase in Buddhists in the US. Some of this is likely to be due to immigration, but most of it is probably due to conversion. Thus it is likely that the number of "American convert Buddhists" exceeds half a million. This huge surge in Buddhists during the 1990s corresponds with my own observations. I was on the Board of Directors (and finally President) of the Berkeley Zen Center during this period, and one of our major problems was figuring out where to put all those new students who wished to sit sesshin, as our fairly spacious Zendo was

overwhelmed. I have also heard a number of students discuss what led them to Buddhism, and many of them mentioned psychedelics, though not nearly as much as 75%. I highly recommend Douglas Osto's *Altered States* for any convert Buddhists, anyone interested in the psychedelic revolution in America, or anyone interested in comparative religious studies.

Terence McKenna used to tell a story of giving a huge dose of DMT to a very old Tibetan monk whilst travelling through Asia. The monk was "not one of those alcoholic fundraiser Lamas, but the real thing" (McKenna) and the monk told him that the DMT experience was the lesser lights and that you cannot go further than this and return to your body. The monk told him that when we die our mind is cut off from its host (brain) and falls through the brain's physical barrier and journeys back through the lesser light and into the spirit realms. ("I believed him, McKenna said," the guy took it like a man, I mean; he must have been over 90 years old"). In the presence of this spirit then, all the capability of human conception sinks exhausted, with nothing to hold onto but a fall into a place outside of metaphysics; a palace of radiant light. The misery of trying to pin down weird experiences with words, and saying that it would be like trying to eat fire with an axe. Profound experiences you see can never be embodied or wrapped up into words. Those who know would never tell anyway! This is the original doctrine of awakening you see; the original Buddhahood. When done correctly, this doctrine will break open your hopelessly dreary reality and set you on your way to Nirvana. Unfortunately, only the special adepts achieve this goal; Nirvana was not meant for the peasants. (Forget all that Mahayana 'everybody for the ride' rubbish peddled in the west). Fortunately, we now have the new-kids on the block; the psychedelic experience and the DMT flash. These drugs can open the gates to worldwide Enlightenment, that is, they are for the masses. The DMT flash is an especially fast track to the above. It is even more unfortunate then that the DMT experience really is impossible to describe with a voice box and a pen. It's this impossibility of 'solid' evidence that leads those who refuse to step off the merry-go-round of consumerism to conclude that these things are mere hallucinations. It is all an illusion apparently and so smart people just refuse to look at DMT and other possible worlds. Yes sure, they believe in the possible worlds the quantum physicists tell them, but only because they don't believe it! They will never try DMT, why? This great refusal to see isn't a new phenomenon. Galileo experienced the same frustrations with his peers a few centuries ago when his fellow professors refused to take a look through his telescope. So it behoves us to remember that it wasn't the peasants who refused to look through Galileo's telescope but the scholars with their learning from Aristotle and the Bible. That was 400 years ago but this conservative archetype resonates today. Today it is the psychologists and philosophers, with their

learning from Darwinism and Einstein, who refuse to take a glance at psychedelic drugs (they argue that it is all an illusion), whilst outside the academy, the peasants if you will, are partying hard! So those today, who are claiming it is all an illusion, have to remember that the same thing was said about Galileo's discoveries. Casare Cremonini, the most renowned Aristotelian philosopher of the early seventeenth century, is remembered today as the professor who refused to look through Galileo's telescope (for this Galileo called him 'simplicio'). It was in 1610 when Galileo looked through his telescope and saw the moons of Jupiter. He then realized then that what Aristotle said must be wrong, and the Bible too. Galileo hurried to tell his fellow peers, including his good friend Cremonini, that what they have all been doing for 2000 years was completely wrong and that he had the proof, "look through here and see the proof for yourselves", Galileo would have said. But amazingly, instead of wanting to see these new truths for themselves, Galileo's peers stubbornly refused even to look through the lens! The churchmen of Galileo's day dismissed his telescopic insights as being an optical illusion or hallucination and so not worth further investigation. These medieval professors didn't have to look through Galileo's telescope because they knew what they saw with their own naked eyes (they just knew they 'knew' from 'pure reasoning' in those days!). For thousands of years the naked eye was the only tool available for science and it worked just fine; from advanced mathematics in Greece and India to gothic architecture and beautiful art, this progress was all done with the naked eye. We naturally induce that 'this is all there is', but paradoxically, without evidence. This has become known as the paradox of inductive reasoning. It is not logical to infer from an observation, even if that same event happens a thousand times; but the old dogma just kept sticking around. So if Galileo saw the heavens in conflict with the prevailing Aristotelian dogma, then what he saw must be a hallucination. Because astronomers could already see, they concluded that a greater seeing was not possible and so a telescope was impossible! (Cremonini was well rewarded for his junk philosophy by the way. Just like today's academics). Today it is the professors of psychology and philosophy dons who refuse to look into psychedelic drugs. Humanity has made great progress with the naked (unperturbed) mind they say; indeed, we have built brain splittingly complicated intellectual atom smashers with just our normal conscious awareness and so conclude that this is it and that nothing lurks beyond the normal local mind space. Well today telescopes (and microscopes) are legal and thus we have made progress in the material places. It's a crying shame then that the perturbing of mind is frowned upon by otherwise very intelligent people who really should know better. (Even some reviews of this book dismiss it as some sort of druggy fuelled stoner hippy fest! This is a stupid point to take, but as the saying goes, "against stupidity the Gods themselves contend in vain": Schiller). Today it is worldwide illegal to

study these spiritual molecules or even to disprove this spiritual springboard hypothesis. Instead we only allow science which completely gives up the ghost in favour of advanced technology, but, in so doing, reduces all matter to flying atoms screaming through empty space, blind and indifferent to our whims. Nobel laureate physicist Steven Weinberg captured this weltanschauung beautifully when he said: "All the explanatory arrows point downward, from societies to people, to organs, to cells, to biochemistry, to chemistry, and ultimately to physics." He thus concluded, "The more we know of the cosmos, the more meaningless it appears". Thus science is meaningless for salvation. Are we not taught this version of reality in school? Human institutions are carved up into many metaphysical millstones, grinding away at our spirits and, according to this world view, printing stamps of stupidity onto the minds of men; alas, this is a very hard stamp to shake off. This stupidity has forced psychedelics underground with the other good things of life! N,N-Dimethyltryptamine is seen as evil because it does not fit the prevailing orthodoxy of our times, and even more so, Terence McKenna argued that it threatens our moral bourgeois institutions and the entire capitalist ethic of fearing your neighbour as you fear yourself. This stamp of fear runs deep in our nature. We naturally fear weirdness and clench our fist in moral rage at anything deemed divergent. This fear archetype is imprinted deep in our collective history. For example, in ancient Rome, charitable Christians had to contend with furious emperors and a blood thirsty colosseum. During the middle ages, hurried and harassed families had to dodge an oligarchical priesthood and a stern Church dogma; and today's free spirits must look over their shoulder, in fear of a furious busy-body class, cultural cardinals (politicians, media editors), and an overly enthusiastic police force. The stamp of human nature runs deep indeed. It may well be a human nature which deems the laboratory of mind as escapism. This is wrong. It is not escapism, or cheating, to use drugs in philosophical endeavours, just as it is not cheating to use a telescope to view the moons of Jupiter. Ok you need an education to use a telescope (or microscope) so educated people should be able to at least have the chance of disproving Strassman's hypotheses. This is how science is done. The collective stamp or the foot print of genius then has come so far. Our foot is printed on the map of the ontological process, and all progress is driven by a cerebral cortex and the imagination; DMT will turn this purple prose into a reality argued McKenna! This other world is a puff away (if smoked that is).

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