

A golden Buddha statue is the central focus, set against a background of intricate golden patterns. The Buddha's face is serene, with closed eyes and a slight smile. In the foreground, a clear glass filled with a golden liquid, likely beer, is held in front of the Buddha's chest. The lighting is warm and golden, creating a sense of reverence and connection between the ancient and the modern.

Buddhism, entheogens & shamanism
the search for common ground

by Daniel Waterman

Abstract

At a superficial level the use of the entheogen Ayahuasca as a tool for expanding awareness seems to be at odds with other established spiritual disciplines. This paper addresses the various points of correspondence between Buddhist doctrine and examines questions that concerned Buddhists might well ask. The paper attempts to establish a set of rules that precede any such interdisciplinary 'dialogue' and allow for comparisons to be made, and it strives to establish on the basis of priority which questions need to be addressed. Both disciplines address matters that relate only to the experiential world, thus outwardly their benefits or drawbacks can only be judged on the basis of the visible 'behaviour' of practitioners, all other evidence is anecdotal. This paper attempts therefore to present only those claims that seem common sense and obvious, rather than making claims that cannot be validated except by experimentation.

For a long time, the use of entheogenic mind-altering substances has been condemned by all major religions, with the possible exception of Hinduism. This apparent condemnation is significant as the recent arrival of ancient shamanic entheogenic practices in the western world now competes with other spiritual traditions, such as Buddhism whose arrival and establishment in the western world coincided with the psychedelic revolution, but preceded by several decades the arrival of entheogens such as Ayahuasca.

There are obvious and well-grounded reasons for caution with such substances, but their total neglect seems to be grounded in ignorance and prejudice, and their continued moral condemnation reflects badly on the mistrust and authoritarianism of established religions, vis a vis the individual. Such condemnation has a negative effect, because it establishes a religious order as an absolute authority in matters of the mind (or soul) of the individual, instead of emphasizing the individual's role in developing a critical and responsible attitude of reflection and personal transformation. Nothing has had a more catastrophic effect on human history and spirituality than the establishment of such 'doctrinary' authority, which took away the individual's rights and substituted them for written rules, that had to be accepted on faith, or disregarded on pain of death and excommunication. Often this development directly contravenes the religion's own tenets, such as: "thou shalt make thyself no idol of stone". Obviously such directives were metaphors meant to prevent the teachings being passed on despite a lack of comprehension, and not, as some religious orders have interpreted them, to prevent the making of sculptures or three dimensional images.

It may be, that in accepting certain ideas as an article of faith addresses a number of issues connected to the trust and social cohesion that was necessary for the church or community to survive, but today we find a society bathed in information and the many conflicts of interest that have led to war, poverty and abuse of human rights have powerfully affected the relationship between individuals and authority, making the task of stimulating the development of spiritual consciousness in individuals more complex. Today spirituality is a lifestyle choice for many. The question then arises, how serious can that choice be taken? Does the decision to pray at a certain new age gathering, or to meditate or go on retreats, mean anything more than an interest in the benefits to the individual practitioner? What is spirituality and what does it accomplish, or what should its goals be?

None of the spiritual disciplines that exist today incite so much controversy and condemnation as the disciplines that originate in the use of entheogenic plants. The problem is, that the effects of such plant substances on human consciousness can only be felt by taking them. The condemnation of the use of substances stems from the very origins of religion itself: most religions have a shamanic entheogenic and animistic origin. It was precisely in the formation of modern religion, that elements of the original were discarded, and perhaps this was chiefly due to the creation of established orders, monastic orders and church authorities, and to the way such orders behaved in relation to the powers of state: shamanism is based in practice, which means that its authority derives from the individuality of the practitioner, whereas religious authority denies the importance of the individual. In order to establish itself as a cohesive authority, the behavior of individuals needs to be controlled, and thus, shamanism was perceived as a serious threat and a competitor to Buddhism.

Buddhism's shamanic roots:

The ancient roots of Buddhism are almost certainly connected to Bon, a shamanic tradition that still exists and is practiced in Tibet today. I know very little about Bon, except that it almost certainly provided the very visual symbolism that permeates every aspect of Tibetan Buddhism today. Elements of Bon survive in the trances and visual imagery of traditional dances, in the imagery of Tibetan Thankas and the music, the songs used in Tibetan monasteries are not only full of symbolic meaning, many singing styles are designed specifically to manipulate the mind into certain states of consciousness, for example the singing style named Chö (which means to cut) is intended to assist the listener or singer in cutting the bonds that hold him to the material world.

Practitioners of meditation will easily recognise the imagery of Buddhism: the demons that symbolically illustrate the senses are vivid expressions of sensations encountered during Buddhist practice. Buddhism's ultimate goal is to stimulate the individual's consciousness to arrive at enlightenment, a state in which all duplicity and boundaries fade into non-significance. Whether this is a state that is actually arrived at, or whether the simple intuitive sensing of the existence of such a state is arrived at is not clear. Presumably, it is enough to catch glimpses of the state that lies beyond our individual consciousness to arrive at a state of inner calm and happiness. How else could one explain the existence of so many individual practitioners, and so few 'enlightened' masters?

Glimpses of the sort described above may be reached through other practices than meditation. If meditation can employ powerfully evocative music to stimulate inner calm, perhaps other substances can be employed too. As we all know today, the brain is a vast and complex chemical factory, in other words, music, body position, breathing and all manner of behaviors can influence the brain chemistry. Why should the use of a foreign chemical substance be considered so harshly? Should one not examine the effects of such substances, rather than worry about the fact that it is foreign?

The very logic by which religious people condemn the use of entheogenic substances demonstrates the shortcomings of their religion, and is ultimately self-defeating. If Buddhists claim that the self is an illusion, what does it matter how that self is dissolved, whether it is through pure contemplation of the self, or through the action of a foreign substance seems irrelevant: the ultimate goal is far more important. At the same time condemning the use of such substances proves one thing, that the doctrines of such religions are so far removed from the original experiences and intentions of their founding fathers, that they have become dogma.

Meditation is intended to reveal the workings of the mind. In doing so, it affords us glimpses of the world as it is. Such flashes of illumination, called satori, are brief and do not last. That is because the mind is conditioned to interact with the material world in a certain way. Nevertheless, despite the brevity of these insights, the quality of mind begins to transform, it starts to become less attached to things and ideas, becomes more fluid and calm. For this reason, the defensive and prejudicial attitudes that are heard when Buddhist practitioners are confronted with ideas about the use of entheogens, are indicative of serious problems within the sphere of Buddhist practice in its entirety: the mind on its way towards enlightenment is certainly supposed to become more open relaxed and flexible. This does not equate to accepting every suggestion, far from it, for ideas and suggestions can only be considered properly when the mind is open. If the mind is full of prejudices and trying to control things it can easily be led astray. But frank open and relaxed consideration is the only way in which the resistance of the mind can be exposed.

If there is to be any discussion of the use of entheogens as spiritual guides, we will have to expose the prejudices and accept the limitations that our own way of being our beliefs, impose on the discussion. The and only then, is it possible to have a serious discussion of this issue, that can benefit and inform both parties, Ayahuasqueros and Buddhists.

Now that we have established the basis for a discussion of Ayahuasca and the way the use of entheogens may relate to Buddhist practice, it is important to establish that there are two methods to establish this relevance. The first method is to examine what people actually say about their experiences. Such information will undoubtedly be fraught with ambivalence, just as claims about meditation are. There will be a nucleus of truth and universality as well as an element, which for want of a better expression I shall term 'faith'. Let us not forget however that all Buddhist knowledge is gleaned from keen observation of mind, a phenomenon that cannot be measured or quantified. Thus, Buddhism is a very particular type of science, one that can only be experienced through actual practice. I could explain to you in two minutes how to become enlightened, but it would still take you a lifetime to accomplish. The information is of absolutely no use whatsoever. Thus what people say about their experiences, whether speaking of Buddhist practice or the use of entheogens, holds equal validity, and furthermore, they do address the same phenomena: the workings of mind.

The second method calls us to proceed by examining a world of information that may be deduced from what we actually know or believe about the mind, from examining it as observers: from the outside. Such knowledge about humanity is the sum total of disciplines as varied as philosophy, astrology, psychology and neuroscience, evolutionary sciences, DNA research etc. This information has been collected and must be judged according to a certain methodology that classifies it as scientific. It is important to remember that scientific knowledge is subject to change, it is not a final authority. Scientific information and methods are as authoritative as its methods. The importance of science lies not in its absolute truth, but in the questions that it raises. For example Darwin's theories about natural selection, allowed us for the first time to consider evolution from a totally new perspective, significantly from the point of view that evolution did not grind to a halt upon man's arrival, and thus that man may not be the pinnacle or even the point of evolution.(!)

Mechanisms of the mind:

Individual identification with mind, or ego identification is the natural result of the way in which we are educated. It results from the use of language to assess, and control the world around us. One could say that language was an evolutionary step that gave humans a vast control over their environment, providing human DNA with a superior mechanism for replicating itself; it is now a universal and necessary means for survival. I do not mention DNA idly: human beings perceive themselves to have been the final point of creation, but from the perspective of evolutionary forces, the victory was one entirely for DNA. It is important to remember this, for as the study of consciousness becomes deeper, we shall see that the conscious mind works through a series of automated responses that are entirely consistent with an image of a random creationary force, and not with the goals pursued through meditation: the liberation of human consciousness, or the liberation of humanity is at once a liberation from a 'natural' or innocent evolutionary imperative.

What human beings do not recognise willingly is that language is dualistic and divides the world into objects and meanings that we thereupon no longer recognise as distinct. Thus, language has a powerful and compelling effect on the way we perceive the world and consequently ourselves. Any attempt to go beyond the modifications of language entails a struggle, for we define ourselves through this medium, and as a consequence, the loss of words means the loss of the ability to define ourselves or to control anything. For most of us, that process is synonymous with death. This 'wordless' state is difficult to achieve of our own accord, because acts of volition habitually require language, hence methods must be employed that bypass the need for language.

The use of foreign substances to assist spiritual awakening:

Ayahuasca alters the way the mind works in ways that can be witnessed. Since we cannot actually step out of the mind, the only possible way we can observe it is to observe the world, as it appears when the behaviour of mind is altered. By altering the state of mind one thing can be easily established, that mind, and consciousness refer to different entities, hence the different terms. One could say that mind is *what goes on in the brain*, whereas consciousness is the *'awareness' of those processes*. What also becomes apparent is that thoughts originate within the mind, but not within consciousness.

Now although many spiritual disciplines make this claim, it is important to recognise that there is no actual irrefutable proof that the above is actually 'true', for example, there is no proof that consciousness is in fact a process that exists independently of the brain or mind, (although Buddhism claims as much). For the purposes of spiritual exploration and expanding consciousness the finality of this argument is irrelevant, because *the study of mind is the study of experience*.

Mind cannot be observed from outside, except possibly using magnetic resonance imaging which reveals neuronal activity and tells us only which physical regions of the brain are active, not what is being experienced subjectively. It is important to be aware that mind activity, the constant day to day internal dialogue that forms the backbone or 'system software' of human experience consists of a plethora of automated responses that have been acquired and adapted to meet life's needs, but not necessarily entirely our interests. (I am referring to certain evolutionary theories that propose that the adaptation of single celled creatures to symbiotic communities of cells, that has resulted in walking talking thinking human beings, may simply be a successful strategy for DNA to replicate) Thus, neuronal activity, while a means for establishing ourselves, simultaneously forms a barrier to knowing the world, 'as it is'. Such an ostensibly preposterous theory gains some evidential weight once we begin to examine the mind from within, and are able to witness mind activity and become aware that mind processes seem to take place independently of consciousness, the brain appears to produce thought, and we appear as mere witnesses, but witnesses who are very much identified with that which is being thought.

Having an open mind when examining ourselves is a prerequisite, we are attempting to break a mold that was not intentionally created, but was formed by random and unconscious forces, forces which though blind, have reached a level of complexity vast enough to become self-conscious and free.

The science of mind:

As a science of the mind, Buddhism is built entirely on experiential data. Such data cannot be verified, it can only be experienced. Buddhism is distinct from science, and faith, but it is closer to science than many other spiritual disciplines, because Buddhism's findings though experiential, are at once replicable and verifiable through practice. As such, the advantage offered by Ayahuasca should be apparent to Buddhists immediately. Ayahuasca does not so much offer a glimpse of a promised world, or another reality, as that it demonstrates very directly how 'mind' produces reality. Perhaps this effect could be useful to meditation practice, or as a method of testing the progress and depth of meditation. There is only one way to tell however, and that is for trained and dedicated Buddhists to take the plunge. In the meantime, we have only the experiences of those who have already taken the plunge to go by, and naturally such experiences will remain controversial until their value is established *by a reliable outside authority*. Ayahuasca, by virtue of its relatively recent arrival in the western 'modern' world, has yet to establish its credentials as a serious spiritual discipline.

At present, the doctrine of Ayahuasca as it is presented by institutions such as the Santo Daime (an Ayahuasca using church of Brazil) relates particularly to the use of Ayahuasca as a means for visualizing the teachings of the Bible. Ayahuasca helps practitioners to envisage situations, through a variety of processes that are caused by the drink: internal often symbolic visions, group relations, purging processes etc. Another important theme of the Santo Daime doctrine is one that all shamanic traditions have in common, and may form a central theme between established religions. I am referring to the birth-death and re-birth process. In Catholicism this subject is represented in a variety of metaphors, including the story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Issues that are not directly taught through the doctrine of the Ayahuasca churches are issues that relate directly to the expansion of awareness, for which Buddhism has an authoritative well established literature, and practices. Seeing as that Ayahuasca originates in pre-literate societies, and bridged the divide between indigenous society and the western world in one great leap it comes as no surprise that Ayahuasca still has not established its tradition in literature.

It is not the purpose of this paper to examine and make in depth comparisons between Ayahuasca experiences and Buddhist imagery, although there are certainly regions that both practices are acquainted with. It would be interesting to see how those well versed in Buddhist tradition might draw comparisons between the birth-death and rebirth experience that is so typical of entheogenic journeys (described in detail by Stanislav Grof) and their own traditional accounts of the souls journey. I am not familiar with Buddhist scripture and will leave this to others.

Is the use of entheogens really so antithetical to Buddhist practice?

Although Buddhists are said to avoid drugs of any kind, there is much evidence that certain Tantric techniques require the imbibing of alcohol, perhaps as a remnant of shamanic traditions. More significantly, Buddhist monks from Tibet practically live on Butter tea, brewed from very strong caffeine containing tea, and it is therefore misleading to say that Buddhism eschews the use of drugs. The human brain itself contains dimethyltryptamine, which is a potent hallucinogen. Who is to say that it is not the action of DMT in the brain that brings about moments of Satori? Whether such moments are brought about through one's own efforts or due to the administration of a dose of Ayahuasca is irrelevant precisely because of the goals being pursued.

Ego identification does not stop simply as a result of awareness; neither does it stop simply from the practice of meditation. Rather the process of enlightenment comes in rare and spontaneous glimpses or intuitions. To the uneducated, or misguided, the processes revealed by meditation or the use of Ayahuasca may simply result in a small adaptation, without a wider regard for the implications of insights. Neither the practice of meditation nor the use of Ayahuasca can resolve personal issues for us. It is the application of knowledge or insights that allows us to resolve problems. Meditation and Ayahuasca can provide valuable insights into the nature of mind, as well as the peace of mind and stability necessary to confront problems, but significantly both require hard work. Ayahuasca sessions of the Santo Daime churches are even referred to as 'trabalhos' (works). This is a significant point because there is a temptation to think that Ayahuasca is used to solve problems, rather than a substance used to examine and pose questions. In other words there is an expectation implicit in the way we think about drugs, that all drugs do something that the body cannot do, and that there will be a tendency to become dependent, or that Ayahuasca, because it is a hallucinogen will tempt users to believe in the 'illusions' that it produces, and grow lazy with regards to spiritual work. This belief is entirely false; it is based on a sweeping generalisation about drugs and unfortunately about human nature too. There are a wide variety of psychotropic substances, and Ayahuasca is one that holds little temptation as a drug of habit or for recreational use only: it is far too strong and it has a tendency to overwhelm users who just want to sit back and relax. The term hallucinogen is a misnomer in its own rights, Ayahuasca does not show us things that are not there, it reflects or exaggerates the illusions of the mind, the nature of which is already illusory and ephemeral. The term hallucination suggests that we suffer from delusions on Ayahuasca, nothing could be further from the truth; by seeing our illusions magnified and distorted we are finally able to pierce their fabric and see the landscape that lies beyond.

This is probably one bone of contention between Buddhist practitioners and Ayahuasqueros: Buddhists may believe that those using a substance are expecting the substance to do all the work or to reveal a (false) reality. Stranger still: imagine that Ayahuasca could actually assist one along the path to enlightenment with greater ease than sitting cross-legged and in considerable pain and mental turmoil for years and years. Would Buddhists still condemn its use, simply on the grounds that it is a foreign substance? Aren't we getting our purposes confused somewhat? Isn't the objective of the search for enlightenment the alleviation of human suffering and misery? What possible moral argument could prohibit us from reaching that goal, as long as we do no harm during that process?

Are Ayahuasca users at risk of becoming entrapped or fooled by false images (beliefs)?

Certainly it is likely that the use of a foreign substance may be misinterpreted, and the substance itself will be construed as the source of the experience. In the absence of a substance this cannot happen. Yet, the temptation to seek refuge in beliefs, prejudices, and certainties is just as powerful when meditating and there is a certain danger there too, for those who meditate can become completely stranded within the realm of ideas thoughts and imaginations, and unaided, may not be able to perceive their own 'limitations'.

People who are attracted to a spiritual path may not be ready for that path. They may feel the attraction as a means of escape from very real and serious problems and conflicts. Thus those who have been seriously traumatised by events may attempt to escape through meditation. Ayahuasca is a powerful agent that forces such unresolved personal issues to the front. The process is called purging, and it is chiefly the result of a weakening of the defenses. As a result, Ayahuasca does something that meditation cannot do: it can force someone to deal with painful issues, by bringing them to light even against their will. Thus, Ayahuasca can very quickly purge someone of problems that might require years of meditation or psychotherapy, thus preparing the way for deeper spiritual work.

How useful is Ayahuasca as a purgative?

Ultimately, people experience a great amount of difficulty and hardship in life, and as a result they are not exactly predisposed to face questions of a spiritual nature. Spirituality is no longer seen as a goal in western society, and all too often it is seen as a lifestyle choice, an option provided by the superfluous overproduction of consumer society itself. It is not surprising that spiritual seekers are unlikely to question the manner by which they came into contact with spirituality: for example many thousand of westerners travel into the deepest regions of the Amazon and the highest regions of Tibet in search of spiritual guidance, the type of spirituality they encounter is usually the type that is for sale. As a result, it focuses on personal issues, and turns a blind eye to social, environmental or political issues. I believe that this type of spirituality is incomplete: human liberation may begin with self-awareness, it certainly does not end there.

In order for people to get in touch with their innermost feelings and needs, a lot of clearing up needs to be done. Traumas dating from the earliest periods of our lives are deeply rooted in our manner of being. Such traumas cannot be bypassed through meditation alone, except possibly with dire consequences later on. It may be that Buddhist masters have developed techniques to deal with such trauma, special meditations, prayers and fasts, holding certain images in the mind, mantras, etc. Buddhism thus avails itself of a variety of methods, tailor made to deal with crises that emerge during meditation practice and as a result of a broadening awareness. Siddharta himself experienced such a crisis, when he was a prince, vowing that he would not rest until he had found a way of liberating the whole of humanity from the misery of existence. In other words, Buddhist practice grew out of a desire not simply of personal salvation, but for the salvation of all men and women. That salvation is accomplished through the modicum of compassion, which calls on people not only to work diligently to see beyond their own personal interests, but also an imperative to help others, not by doing their work for them, but by or through a recognition of the deepest spiritual meaning of each individuals struggle towards enlightenment, which brings about a wish to share the burden. This image of the pursuit of spirituality is in stark contrast to the narcissistic self seeking spirituality of the contemporary world. As such, it challenges us to find ways of reaching others, through communication and communion, solidarity and a recognition of common interests.

Ayahuasca as a purgative:

Ayahuasca has a strong tendency to purge the body and mind. It purges negative feelings and especially guilt feelings. It does so as a result of increased awareness of ones internal processes, and how these relate to the world. Ayahauasca functions at a variety of levels, depending on two factors:

-There is an internal dynamic revolving around a personal history or biography in which certain traumas seek to emerge. These traumas relate to the period of our birth and have been named the Birth Peri-Natal Matrixes by Stanislav Grof. These traumas, are compounded by later events in life, so that they either become powerful stimuli causing us to commence the search for spirituality, or in many cases they do exactly the opposite, filling us with dread at the prospect of death, or ego-death, inner silence, or the desire to rid ourselves of dependencies.

-External social factors such as education, or the doctrine of the group using the Ayahuasca have a strong ability to focus attention on specific issues or areas. They do this through prayer, song, or discussion.

Generally speaking people seem to go through the first fase, that governed by internal dynamics first, before their attention is free enough to focus on wider issues. During the first fase, fears are confronted, and a basis is layed for a new approach to spirituality, one that is self-aware, and allows one to begin studying the way the world is for the first time, because one is able to take into account ones own role in interpreting it. One could name the first fase the purgative, and the second the disciplinary fase.

In order to establish a healthy spiritual practice it is necessary for individuals to liberate themselves from recriminations and the suffering of the past. If an individual undertakes a spiritual practice without due consideration and appropriate action regarding issues that are unresolved they will most certainly weigh him or her down. Ayahuasca is able to help people at this level: through drinking Ayahuasca, and focusing on the traumas of the past, we are able to finally alter our attitudes towards them to such a degree that these traumas are no longer seen as deficits, but as beneficial experiences from which we have learned. If this process of re-experiencing trauma is carefully managed, it allows us to radically rearrange our whole way of being, freeing energy for spiritual pursuits. Ayahuasca is so powerful that it often forces us to unload, or discharge ridding ourselves of false guilt feelings and forcing us to make amends, so that we no longer carry the burden of the past. Often such a release is accompanied by profound sense of forgiveness and relief. Ayahuasca also purges the body of a number of toxins. This purging process is sometimes physical causing vomiting and defecation that expel toxic substances and drugs, particularly addictive ones. It seems that Ayahuasca causes a general purging of feelings and chemicals that enslave us, and not surprisingly, people feel very well afterwards. Their ability to concentrate and their energy levels are better after a thorough purging. A great variety of afflictions seem to be alleviated if not cured by regular use of Ayahuasca. Until now, numerous studies have not been able to demonstrate any physical harm caused by the chemicals in Ayahuasca, in the doses that are used during therapeutic session.

Conclusion:

It seems fair to say that Ayahuasca has some fairly beneficial effects, and that its use cannot be condemed outright by Buddhists without an open and fair discussion. There are a number of possible benefits for Buddhist practitioners, but Ayahuasca users may also benefit from Buddhist teachings. Seeing as Ayahuasca users can become members of Buddhist communities, the way is opne for them to practice meditation. It would be most beneficial is Buddhists, particularly experienced practitioners would keep an open mind towards this relatively recent arrival on the spiritual scene. Insofar as both disciplines are in honest pursuit of common goals, discussion of practices and the sharing of experience should flow freely and unconstrained by prohibitions. In this way, we can create an open path of understanding and sympathy, so that both diciplines may be transformed to their own and mankind's greater glory.