
PSYCHOACTIVES AND PSYCHEDELICS IN YOGA

Historical Contexts and Contemporary Culture

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Abstract: *In this paper, I examine the relationship between the mind-body disciplines of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain systems of yoga, focusing on the use of psychoactive substances in the Indic religious context and the ways that modern cosmopolitan forms of yoga have been intersected with the use of psychedelic substances. The foundation of the study is a comparative examination of the semantic field of psychoactive substances in Indic texts related to yoga and tantra, including typologies such as soma (extract), viṣa (agent or poison), auṣadhi (herbal), amṛta (ambrosia), rasāyana (essence), and dravya (substance), and the utilization of specific plant agents such as dhattūra (datura), bhaṅgā (cannabis), and ahiphena (opium). These concepts are, in turn, connected to relevant strata of Indic religion and philosophy, from the Vedic, classical, and medieval contexts, with attention to discussions in The Yoga Discourse of Patañjali (Pātañjalayogaśāstra) and Buddhist Abhidharma literature of siddhi and ṛddhi (accomplishments) and nirmāṇacitta (constructed minds) arising from the use of herbs. I examine how the use of psychoactive substances, particularly psychedelics, has played an important role—and perhaps will play an increasing role—in the culture of yoga in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, whether through the intersection of global countercultural trends, retreat and festival culture, or emerging paradigms of the psychedelic “facilitator” that parallel yoga teacher training. I demonstrate how linkages between yoga and psychedelics in contemporary contexts parallel psycho-experimentation characteristic of the Indic context but are also thoroughly modernist, illustrating the cosmopolitan nature of transnational yoga traditions. Lastly, I offer an analysis of how the Second Wave movement or Psychedelic Renaissance as exemplified by the work of neuropharmacologist Roland Griffiths is deeply indebted to Hindu yogic and tantric traditions linked to the psychedelic counterculture of the First Wave psychedelic movement in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Ultimately, I argue that though the use of psychedelics is of relevance in yoga—especially in the contemporary context—it is important to avoid the dangers of “psychedelic exceptionalism” and recognize the importance of a larger variety of psychoactive substances that have been part of its ethnobotanical and ethnopharmacological history.*

INTRODUCTION

For the past seventy-five years, the academic study of early Indic religion and of yoga has been intimately tied to questions regarding the role of psychoactive substances in ritual and contemplative practice. This is particularly the case with respect to soma, a sacred beverage utilized within the ancient Vedic (*vaidika*) tradition—especially as popularized by the publication of R. Gordon Wasson’s *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* in 1968.¹ The academic study of religion has queried the role of psychoactive substances in religious traditions with theories ranging from them being marginal at most to being virtually universal in the history of religions.² This discussion has been amplified in recent years by a series of popular publications that revisit such issues in light of contemporary archeological discoveries, such as Brian Muraresku’s *New York Times* bestseller *The Immortality Key: The Secret History of the Religion with No Name*.³ These conversations are further paralleled by debates about the authenticity of experiences inspired by psychoactive substances, especially psychedelics, one of the most famous historical examples being the debate between Aldous Huxley and R. C. Zaehner, which in many respects helped set the stage for contemporary academic discourse on psychedelics.⁴ Such issues have taken on a new



urgency amid the Psychedelic Renaissance currently sweeping the western hemisphere, and scholarship in this area has been increasingly engaging with the study of philosophy and religion, as well as the fields of psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience.

The First Wave psychedelic movement of the 1960s and 1970s, associated with countercultural figures such as Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (later known as Ram Dass), was punctuated by appeals to Indic and Tibetan ideas and practices as a means to guide, interpret, and explain psychological and spiritual transformation. This work laid the foundation for a generation of seekers for whom psychedelics served as a gateway to self-exploration that, in turn, often led to commitments to guru- and lineage-based yoga and meditation traditions. The Psychedelic Renaissance, or Second Wave psychedelic movement, led by scientists such as Roland Griffiths, Robin Carhart-Harris, Rachel Yahuda, and others, has avoided the controversy associated with the earlier psychedelic movement, being consciously and carefully centered within the laboratory and utilizing a therapeutic framework focused on depression, addiction, PTSD, and end-of-life anxiety. Despite the conservatism of the therapeutic model, deep connections between psychedelic therapy and various methods adapted from Indian mind-body discipline (yoga) are nonetheless evident upon closer inspection. For one, we have high-profile researchers appealing to a parallelism or complementary relationship between psychedelics and yoga—Griffiths, for example, argues that “meditation is the tried and true method of understanding the mind” and psychedelics the “crash course.”⁵ Griffiths’s work at Johns Hopkins University yielded results suggesting that participants in his study who experienced the most powerful transformations, referred to using William R. Miller’s rubric of “quantum change,” were, in fact, the ones that reported having had life-changing “mystical experiences.”⁶ Notably, Griffiths and his team also studied the effects of a combined regimen in psilocybin-based therapy and meditation training, suggesting that the pairing of the two amplified the salutary therapeutic effects of either one as done independently.⁷ Likewise, Carhart-Harris and his collaborators have forwarded a significant body of research on the neuroscience of psychedelics, explicitly theorizing about the ways in which psychedelic experiences can be compared to, and correlated with, the practice of meditation.⁸ Research in this sphere has turned toward the investigation of potential therapeutic synergies between psychedelics and the practice of meditation, given a range of common phenomenological and neurobiological features among them and the potential for enhanced therapeutic outcomes.⁹ In many respects, the adaptation of yoga practices, such as meditation, to the therapeutic context reflects a larger modernist impulse that situates yoga within a secular, scientific, or medical, as opposed to a soteriological, frame of reference—or seeks to collapse these together (such as when the mystical is equated to the therapeutic).¹⁰

The intersection between psychoactives and the practice of modern forms of yoga is evident in yoga’s pervasive use within both underground and legal psychedelic facilitation and psychedelic-infused yoga tourism. In the case of psychedelic facilitation, the use of mantra, posture (*āsana*), breath control (*prāṇāyāma*), and meditation (*dhyāna*, *bhāvanā*) serve as elements of the toolbox of the psychedelic facilitator or guide, supporting preparation, journey, and integration. Programs such as Oregon’s InnerTrek provide state-mandated training for Psilocybin Services with a structure paralleling the modular approach of the two-hundred-hour Yoga Alliance yoga teacher training.¹¹ In addition, a growing number of global yoga practitioners are pursuing experiences with psychedelics through organizations such as MycoMeditations, Silo Wellness, Lotus Vine Journeys, Synthesis, and Stellar Folk, ranging geographically from Jamaica, the United States, Costa Rica, and Brazil to the Netherlands and Spain. These organizations integrate the mind-body disciplines of yoga in explicit ways with psychedelic journeying, servicing a

cosmopolitan spectrum of upwardly mobile and globe-trotting yoga practitioners. Being adjacent to the larger sphere of psychedelic tourism, such communities of practice have been the object of considerable attention by scholars with respect to issues from the rise of “neoshamanism” to those of cultural appropriation, commodification, and sustainability—issues paralleled in transnational yoga tourism and festival culture.¹² Likewise, popular practice may operate outside of realm of common awareness regarding the risks of psychedelic use, whether they be social, psychological, or biological. Attention sensibly has been increasingly brought to this domain—with informed consent of such risks being increasingly a rubric central to psychedelic facilitation in the legal sphere.¹³

In the following, I hope to contextualize such contemporary appeals to yoga in contemporary psychedelic therapy and self-exploration by (1) providing a bird’s-eye perspective of the broader historical role of psychoactive substances in relationship to Indian yoga, focusing on establishing a conceptual framework of psychoactive substances and mixtures drawn from Sanskrit language and literature, especially texts focused on yoga, Āyurveda, and tantra. I will be emphasizing clear and explicit references to psychoactive plants and substances, however limited they may be—versus “reading into” or “interpreting” such texts in order to find “implicit” or hidden cases. I will outline a series of categories and terms explicitly linking psychoactive substances and yoga, including the important Sanskrit terms *soma* (extract), *amṛta* (ambrosia), *viṣa* (agent or poison), *auṣadhi* (herbal), *rasāyana* (elixir), *mūla* (root), *dravya* (substance), *bhaṅgā* (cannabis), *dhattūra* (datura), and *ahiphenā* (opium), noting their place relative to endogenous (drawing upon internal resources) and exogenous (utilizing external substances) techniques of mind-body discipline. This will include some discussion of the analogs between the two techniques, although the focus will be principally on the clear textual witnesses to appeals to the use of psychoactives within the larger sphere of yoga. I will then (2) provide examples of the connections and disconnections between these concepts and categories and their application in modern and cosmopolitan contexts, especially with respect to the establishment of modern postural and meditative yoga traditions.¹⁴ I will then bring us full circle by (3) highlighting the deep connections between contemporary psychedelic culture, transnational Hindu and Buddhist spirituality, and the reemergence of the psychedelic-therapeutic paradigm. Ultimately, I will demonstrate (4) that over the course of its history, a range of psychoactive substances—having a varied range of effects—have been intimately associated with, or in the orbit of, yoga practice, problematizing the popular reification of the rubric of “psychedelic” at the expense of other possible substances and admixtures. Instead, I will argue that it is far more useful to understand appeals to psychoactive substances as having hallucinogenic, stimulant, hypnotic, or depressant effects, and so forth, as reflecting a dynamic between the pragmatic goals of particular types of yoga and the social and cultural norms of the communities in which practice is situated.

SOMA, AMṚTA, AND VIṢA: PROTO-YOGA AND PSYCHOACTIVE ELIXIRS IN THE VEDIC TRADITION

The role and nature of the beverage or elixir referred to as *soma* in the Vedic tradition of fire sacrifice (*yajña*, *homa*) and its purported psychoactivity has been thoroughly investigated as a subject of inquiry within and outside of Indology. The word *soma* is etymologically derived from the Sanskrit root $\sqrt{su}$, meaning “to press,” referring to the action of pounding the stalks of the soma plant to produce an “extract.”¹⁵ The term is theorized as cognate with the Avestan *haoma* as part of the cultural and linguistic traditions of the Indo-Europeans and Indo-Iranians. The import of soma is indicated in the *Rgveda* by the large number of verses to soma, especially in its ninth

section (*maṇḍala*). Soma is revered as a sacred beverage and as a deity, said to confer visionary experience and immortality upon the brahmin (*brāhmaṇa*) who ritually consumes it. Soma is identified as ambrosia, literally the elixir of “nondeath,” of immortality, a name resonating through the millennia of later Hindu narrative and discourse. There are various hypotheses as to the botanical identity of soma, some of the leading candidates being ephedra, Syrian rue, cannabis, poppy, ergot, fly agaric mushroom, and magic mushroom, or such drinks as wine, mead, or an ayahuasca analog.¹⁶ Ephedra is perhaps the closest to a consensus candidate, given its morphology, its geographical distribution, its connection with Iranian haoma, and its stimulating if not exhilarating effect, among other considerations that appear to link it to cultural, geographic, and textual factors.¹⁷ However, it is clear that the Vedic tradition eventually substituted other plants for the “original” soma, as it is a fact noted in priestly or “brahmin” commentaries and acknowledged by contemporary Vedic priestly traditions.¹⁸

The import of soma with respect to yoga springs from at least two associations. The first is the purported ecstatic and visionary—what some might term “entheogenic” or “spirit-inducing”—nature of soma experiences described in the *Rgveda*. To the degree to which later yoga traditions seek out vision, divinization, and immortality, the use of soma would seem to serve as a historical precursor. Mircea Eliade, for example, argues that the divisions of action (*karmakaṇḍa*) and knowledge (*jñānakaṇḍa*) in the Vedic context represent a shift from the performance of external ritual and sacrifice to a process of “ritual interiorization,” where interior elements, such as the breath (*prāṇa*), become the sacrificial substances yielding vision and transformation.¹⁹ The second association is the hypothesis that yoga developed as a substitute for soma in an era when the connection to the original botanical source was severed, perhaps due to migration. This view was articulated by Wendy Doniger in a passage she contributed to Wasson’s *Soma* and more recently in her *The Hindus: An Alternative History*.²⁰ In his review of Wasson (and thus of Doniger), Smith similarly suggests that the Upaniṣads, and by extension the philosophy of Vedānta, represent the consummation of the arc of priestly visionary experiences of soma consumption *outside* the context of formal ritual, setting the stage for the development of yogic-ascetic technique.²¹

On the other hand, Frits Staal has noted the dynamic relationship between ritual, mantra recitation, and the use of psychoactive substances, emphasizing their synergistic effects and suggesting more of one might lead to less of the other.²² On those grounds, one might explain the evocation of ecstatic and visionary experiences through the complementary use of early Vedic ritual and ephedra, for example. In other words, it is possible that soma was psychoactive, yet not a psychedelic per se. One only has to listen to the hypnotic resonances of communal mantra performances of contemporary Nambudiri Brahmins to capture a sense of how, even absent of a psychedelic or hallucinogenic substance, one might achieve states of ecstasy while performing such rituals. In any case, it is clear that visionary experiences associated with soma are one piece in a much larger range of proto-yogic practices of the Vedic tradition that inform later, and more systematic, frameworks of yoga, including incantation (*mantra*), austerity (*tapas*), and breath control, among many others.²³ One might consider, for example, following Laurie Patton, how mantra performance is a profound training in “bringing the gods to mind,” a disciplining of mind and a process ubiquitous within later traditions of yoga and tantra, such as mantra yoga, laya yoga (yoga of dissolution), and haṭha yoga (yoga of force), as well as Kaula Śaiva and Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions.²⁴

The Upaniṣad literature is replete with language evocative of psychedelic experience, including of bliss, unification, and a sense of deep correspondences beneath the visible world, but there are few discussions of soma beyond as a means of achieving worldly goods.²⁵ Where it does

appear, for example in *The Upaniṣad of the [Learned Sage] White-Mule (Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad)* 2.6, it suggests a connection between the use of soma in the context of fire ritual and the budding formal discipline of yoga.²⁶ With respect to the argument of yoga being a substitute for the loss of the “true” soma, it is perhaps more intuitive to follow I. M. Lewis’s argument that as cults driven by ecstasy and charisma become institutionalized, these elements tend to give way to a sober and formal ritualism, an interpretation perhaps quite fitting of the late Vedic era and aligned with Staal’s “formula.”²⁷ In other words, the disappearance of a psychoactive soma from Vedic performance may have had less to do with geographic availability and more to do with the formalization of ritual, a point that seems aligned with Staal’s suggestion that ecstasy and ritual formality stand in inverse proportion to one another—the more you have of one, the less that you need of the other.²⁸

More pointedly, however, the presence of a “poison” or “agent” in the Keśin hymn of the *R̥gveda* (10.136), suggests that psychoactive substances may have already been part of ascetic traditions in the Vedic period. Karel Werner, in his study of 10.136, saw in the Keśin a long-haired proto-yogic figure that bridged the worlds of asceticism, ecstasy, and power.²⁹ The Keśin, identified explicitly as a silent sage (*muni*) and perhaps implicitly as an “avowed one” (*vrātya*) is clad in yellow tatters and enters into states of ecstasy and possession, flying through the air and reading the minds of others, which exemplifies later yogic powers (*siddhi*). Verse 10.136.7 references “churning” and “crushing”—perhaps in the preparation of some sort of soma-like beverage, if not soma itself—before indicating that the Keśin drinks poison with Rudra. The connection of the Keśin with Rudra, the precursor of the Hindu deity Śiva, and the possible drinking of a poison or agent links this passage thematically to much later Hindu narratives of Śiva as Nīlakaṇṭha, the “blue-throated one,” who drinks a poison emerging from the churning of the cosmic ocean (*samudramanthanam*). Śiva is also later identified as the Ādiyogi, the primordial yogi from whom the discipline of yoga is descended.³⁰ As such, the role of poison in the Keśin hymn anticipates the association between asceticism, psychoactive substances, and yoga in the millennia to come—and especially the notion of the yogi transforming poison into the nectar of immortality. Though it is unclear what such poison might refer to, one verse describes a “stirring” and a “crushing” process that perhaps alludes to a process similar to the pressing of the presumably ephedra-derived soma, or perhaps another psychoactive botanical utilized during that era, perhaps even datura or aconite (the latter referred to frequently by the word *viṣa* in later textual traditions). The profound nature of the states of ecstasy described, especially flight and possession, might suggest something more akin to the latter two.

HERBALS, ELIXIRS, AND THE CONSTRUCTED MIND IN CLASSICAL YOGA AND BUDDHIST ABHIDHARMA

The clearest referencing of psychoactive substances within a dedicated yogic context is found in *The Yoga Discourse of Patañjali (Pātañjalayogaśāstra)* 4.1, paralleled by *The Explanation of the Treasury of Abhidharma (Abhidharmakośabhāṣya)* 7.53. The verse “*janma-auṣadhi-mantra-tapaḥ-samādhi-jāḥ siddhayaḥ*” (“siddhi arise via birth, herbals, incantation, austerity, and contemplation”) explicitly connects herbal preparations or “herbals” (*auṣadhi/auṣadha*) of herbs (*oṣadhi*) with extraordinary modes of knowledge and action.³¹ The commentary to 4.1 and following notes that these powers mirror yogic powers described in the third section of *The Yoga Discourse of Patañjali*, the *Vibhūtipāda*. The herbs catalyzing these powers are said to be in the form of “elixirs,” connecting them to Āyurveda, in which elixirs, as per Dagmar Wujastyk, provide protection from danger, enhance worldly success, and act to remove illness and enhance human

performance.³² The term *auṣadhi* is connected in the commentary to the realms of the demigods (the asuras), and, in the commentary attributed to Śaṅkara, specifically to the use of the herbs such as soma and *amalaka* (gooseberry or myrobalan).³³ In this context, Philipp Maas has noted how the Āyurvedic scholar Suśruta praises soma as a source of supreme knowledge and agency, connecting elixirs with a variety of yoga-paralleling powers.³⁴ In the larger literature, soma is referred to as the “Lord of the Herbs” (*oṣadhipati*) and as “King of the Herbs” (*oṣadhirāja*), though its botanical identification, and thus its distinct manner of psychoactivity, is unclear.³⁵ The Pātañjala Yoga system—and its analog in Buddhist Abhidharma—was thus undoubtedly situated within a context where soma and other highly reputed formulas were known, if not embraced, as means of obtaining spiritual accomplishments or perfections (powers or *ṛddhi*) of action and perception.³⁶

The content of *The Yoga Discourse of Patañjali* 4.1–7 discussed above bears an intimate relationship to the Buddhist *Explanation of the Treasury of Abhidharma* 7.47–56 with respect to the five sources of powers and the related concept of the constructed mind (*nirmāṇacitta*). In discussing extraordinary accomplishments, which parallels the semantic field of the term *siddhi* in *The Yoga Discourse of Patañjali*, Vasubandhu indicates five principal sources: those obtained through birth (*upapattilābha*), born of herbals (*auṣadhaja*), born from action (*karmaja*), and as the fruit of meditation (*bhāvanāphala*).³⁷ Additionally, both the Pātañjala Yoga (see *The Yoga Discourse of Patañjali* 4.6, for example) and Abhidharma (see *The Explanation of the Treasury of Abhidharma* 7.53–56) frameworks link such perfections or accomplishments to conceptions of a constructed, created, or manifested mind, which functions as a type of cognitive “signature” with unique characteristics, capacities, and duration as well as karmic implications. These connect in important ways to the endogenous-exogenous distinction and to the attainments that are arisen from karma, from external resources, or through spiritual discipline. The term *nirmāṇacitta* provides an intriguing connection to the term *psychedelic*, which literally means “mind-manifesting.”³⁸ But it is, arguably, in some respects more akin to the term *psychoactive*, in that it represents a variety of different possible state characteristics evoked through various ascetic and yogic means, including herbs and their preparations.

Ultimately, the philosophical framework established by the concept of the constructed mind implies that there are a range of means for achieving powers or accomplishments and that ostensibly, within the realm of herbals, it can accommodate the possibility of a range of different formulations and effects—whether psychoactive or simply bioactive—of such substances. The term *auṣadhi* appears, significantly, in late and postclassical Āyurveda and in medieval tantra and proto-haṭha yoga in connection with achieving health and longevity (*dīghayus*) as a support for yogic discipline. In the twelfth-century *Knowledge of Sky-Going* (*Khecarīvidyā*), this takes the form of perfection-granting herbs (*siddhausadhi*) that appear in various formulas for the purpose of restoring health and assuring long life, as documented by James Mallinson.³⁹ Such powers and effects are alluded to in the works of a number of modern yoga progenitors discussed below, including Swami Sivananda.

FROM CLASSICAL TO TANTRIC CONTEXTS: CANNABIS, DATURA, SUBSTANCE, AND ALCOHOL—AND SOMA AS AMṚTA, REVISITED

The use of cannabis—which is alternately classed scientifically as a depressant, as a stimulant, or as a hallucinogen, depending on dosage and administration—is an established part of mainstream Hindu practice. Its role in augmenting religious fervor and devotion is prevalent during Mahāśivarātri, Durgā Pūjā, and other Hindu festivals in the form of the consumption of bhaṅgā

(Hin. *bhāṅg*), a mixture of cannabis, milk, and spices. Routine cannabis use is extensive among renouncer (*sādhū* and *sādhvī*) communities in India as a sacramental substance and a social glue. A visitor to yoga ashrams in Rishikesh, characterized by a clean, hotel-like atmosphere, vegetarian meals, and early bedtimes, might be taken off guard when venturing off the beaten path and encountering cannabis-smoking *sādhū*s living on the banks of the Ganges. Some *sādhū*s and *sādhvī*s are said to follow, per Daniela Bevilacqua, the chillum-chai diet—combining the mildly psychedelic effect of Indian cannabis with the stimulation of tea with sugar and spices.⁴⁰ According to Patricia Morningstar, cannabis is believed by some *sādhū*s to calm the vacillations of the mind and support chastity and seminal drop (*bindu*) retention among haṭha yoga practitioners—effects that may be connected or corresponding to mode of ingestion, dosage, and frequency of use.⁴¹ One late twentieth-century study found that among a subset of *sādhū*s present at the Paśupatināth temple in Nepal, virtually all used cannabis regularly, with a high percentage reporting its use as a support for meditation.⁴² Nonetheless, there is debate within and among *sādhū* communities in South Asia as to the value of cannabis in ascetic and yogic practice, with some communities prohibiting its use, either in general or in the context of a formal yoga practice (*sādhana*), and others incorporating it as a personal or social sacrament or as a complement to yogic practices, such as meditation.⁴³

Cannabis may be smoked via a pipe (*chilam*) or hookah (*huqqā*), drunk as *bhāṅg* and other concoctions, or eaten in the form of a jam or paste (*majun*), sweet confection (*halvā*), or as a powder (*cūrū*).⁴⁴ The primary distinction between preparations of the plant include the Hindi categories of *bhāṅg* (mature leaves), *gañjā* (unfertilized female flowers), and *caras* (processed cannabis resin).⁴⁵ Presumably, and significantly, each product evokes different effects, based upon the admixture, dosage, and the mode of consumption. With regard to its historical psychoactive profile, Patricia Sauthoff makes the important point that premodern strains of cannabis likely had significantly lower levels of THC, and perhaps higher levels of CBD, than modern strains, especially those sold legally in Europe and the United States.⁴⁶

The twelfth-century *Bulb of Bliss* (*Ānandakanda*), as discussed by Dominik Wujastyk and Sauthoff, connects the use of cannabis directly to the spheres of yoga and renunciation, especially those of Śaiva provenance.⁴⁷ Sauthoff notes that the terminology of cannabis is exclusively feminine in gender and includes a scope of conceptualizations, including as “the root of Śiva” (*śivamūlī*), “conquerer” (*vijayā*), “breaker [of disease]” (*bhaṅginī*), “intoxicator” (*gañjā*), “perfected” (*siddhā*), and “root of perfection” (*siddhamūlikā*), as well as the soma-like appellation of “sweet nectar” (*madhudravā*).⁴⁸ The alignment of the Āyurveda tradition with the classical framework is evident in its status as a divine herb (*divyauṣadhi*), its connection with extraordinary capacities, an association with Śiva and the churning of the primordial ocean, and its use by perfected ones (*siddha*), sages, and yogis.⁴⁹

The ritual use of cannabis is found in a variety of tantric contexts. It serves as a component of tantric worship (*pūjā*) in the Hindu *Great Extinction Tantra* (*Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*) and as a longevity aid in the Buddhist *Tantra of the Wheel-Binder* (*Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*), and is perhaps most often referenced under the rubric of the term *vijayā*.⁵⁰ Bharati argued that the functional use of cannabis in Hindu tantra psychologically prepares male and female tantric practitioners (*sādhaka*, *sādhakā*) for the transgressive elements of tantric ritual, such as alcohol and meat consumption, and acts as an aphrodisiac.⁵¹ James McHugh states that the similarly transgressive and intoxicating nature of the tantric use of alcohol (*surā* or *madya*) led to the term *surā* becoming a broad umbrella term for intoxicating substances, including betel, tobacco, and cannabis, with the latter three appearing as ritual offerings in tantric worship and fire sacrifice.⁵² Another known

application is the ritual use of cannabis smoke to afflict enemies, a practice evident in the *Garland of Jewels of Yoga (Yogaratnamālā)* of Nāgārjuna, paralleling a common use of datura.⁵³ Haṭha yoga texts demonstrate ambivalence about cannabis, offering in some cases high praise, such as in the *Compendium of Matsyendra (Matsyendrasaṃhitā)* and the *Knowledge of Sky-Going*, and in others cautionary suggestions or prohibitions.⁵⁴ David White notes that cannabis is called, in some contexts, “Gorak’s Root” (*korakkarmūla*), after the Nāth guru Gorakṣanātha.⁵⁵ Similarly, research by Lubomír Ondračka highlights a pervasive historical and textual association between yogic-ascetic practitioners and the use of cannabis, despite the ambivalent attitudes represented in many medieval haṭha yoga texts.⁵⁶

The case of datura, often referred to in contemporary pharmacology as a hypnotic or as a deliriant, intersects in many ways with cannabis. Śiva is often depicted with a datura flower in his hair or sprouting from his chest, and datura flowers are offered to him in worship, intimately linking him to the symbolic, if not psychoactive, power of the substance. Śiva is, in some contexts, portrayed as consumer of datura, and, in others, a consumer of both datura and cannabis.⁵⁷ His consumption of datura evokes his role as a consumer of poison (*hālahala*), given the toxicity of the datura plant—Śiva’s ability to consume these substances demonstrates his divine capacity for mastering what would be maddening for others, a consummate yoga power.⁵⁸ Buddhist sources, including the *Verses on the Heart of the Middle Way (Madhyamakahrdayakārikā)* of Bhāvaviveka, place the consumption of datura and other intoxicating herbs alongside alcohol, alluding to contextual use within his cultural sphere, perhaps by Śaiva yogis.⁵⁹ Olle Qvarnström states that the *Yoga Discourse (Yogaśāstra)* of Hemacandra (1.5) rejects the use of the root, mantra, and tantra by Jain yogis, perhaps alluding to Śaiva cannabis or datura use, and Gorakṣanātha is framed in some sources as critiquing the use of datura—even by Śiva himself—and proclaiming the futility of its use in the absence of the liberating grace of the guru.⁶⁰

Though datura appears to be principally used in Śaiva-Śākta and Vajrayāna ritual as an aromatic with a magical potency similar to cannabis, a limited number of tantric texts refer to its use in yogic practice.⁶¹ Ron Davidson has suggested the possibility that datura use may have featured in Vajrayāna ritual contexts, as ointments, aromatics, and narcotics, evoking experiences of flight and of experiences of transformation into theriomorphic states.⁶² He notes how chapter 5 of the *Skull of the Buddha Tantra (Buddhakapāla Tantra)* of the Yoginī class discusses a purificatory sequence of consumption of various substances, using the language of elixirs and of longevity.⁶³ With respect to the Buddhist mahāsiddha tradition, Benoytosh Bhattacharyya relates a story regarding the siddha Hāḍipā, in which he consumes a copious amount of cannabis, datura, and nux vomica (*kucila*), perhaps paralleling modern cannabis-datura concoctions and connecting to a broader theme linking siddha traditions to psychoactive intoxicants such as wine and beer.⁶⁴ In these cases, it may be that parts of the datura plant were added to cannabis or that datura seeds were added to cannabis-tobacco or cannabis-opium mixtures to intensify intoxication.⁶⁵ It is interesting to note that a late nineteenth-century survey of the use of cannabis in India documented a concoction used in Baluchistan and Punjab that was referred to as a beverage of parched grain (*mudrā*) and said to contain a mixture of cannabis, alcohol, opium, and datura.⁶⁶

This intersects in intriguing ways with the recent work of Ian Baker, in which he discusses a datura-containing complex plant formula named soma utilized by contemporary Kaula tantric practitioners (*tāntrika*) at the Tārāpīṭh temple in West Bengal. In this tradition, which is focused on the blue-throated form of Tārā, Śiva’s consort, a ritual soma beverage is prepared from a range of herbs and spices, including the dried and powdered seeds of datura.⁶⁷ Tārā, in this aspect, appears to embody the power of yogis to transform poison into life-giving nectar, linking us once

again to the role of Śiva in connection with yogic mind-body discipline via the churning of the primordial ocean. Such formulations resonate with Matthew Clark's arguments regarding the importance of multi-plant formulas, such as the fact that the "clan substance" (*kuladravya*) of the *Ocean of the Clan* (*Kulārṇava Tantra*) had psychoactive features and components, which served to evoke particular types of visionary experience through chemical synergies and the entourage effect.⁶⁸

The *Ocean of the Clan* indeed presents the use of such substances, including the tantric "five *m*'s" (see below), especially alcohol, various herbs including cannabis, and transgressive substances such as fish and meat as being an important element with respect to belonging to the clan (*kula*).⁶⁹ Along these lines, in chapter 9 of the *Kālī Section* (*Kālīkhaṇḍa*) of the *Confluence of Śakti Tantra* (*Śaktisaṃgama Tantra*), an offering formula includes cannabis, datura flowers (*dhūrtapuṣpa*) but not seeds (*dūrttabīja*), and opium, though it is not entirely clear if this substance was to be ritually consumed as is the case with alcohol or simply offered in worship (*pūjā* or *homa*).⁷⁰ In the *Tantra of Samaya Conduct* (*Samayācāra Tantra*), however, there seems to be a clear referencing of the consumption of cannabis (*siddhimūlikā*), datura, poison, and opium (*āphūka*), among other substances included in the *samayācāra*, which is an apparent initiatory clan substance.⁷¹ It may be that such practices, in turn, can be connected to discussions of the broader role of *samaya*, *samayā*, and *samayācāra* as terms for a transgressive initiatory substance in the wider tantric milieu, including that of the Buddhist Vajrayāna tradition.⁷²

Ultimately, the terms *soma* and *amṛta* appear repeatedly in the context of tantric ritual and in related traditions of haṭha yoga, bringing us full circle with regard to the iconic nature of soma in the Hindu tradition, its identity as ambrosia, and its role in the language of both endogenous and exogenous aspects of mind-body discipline.⁷³ For tantric Buddhist traditions, the concept of ambrosia at times encodes the transformative power of the initiatory substance (such as a *samayadravya*) consumed in initiation (*abhiṣeka*), where it is viewed as representing the presence of a deity, whether that be in the form of clear water or in the form of the esoteric and transgressive substances like the five nectars (*pañcāmṛta*), including menstrual blood, semen, urine, feces, and meat or even human flesh.⁷⁴ These five are, in turn, proximate to the five *m*'s (*pañcamakāra*)—literally the "five [components] beginning with [the letter] *ma*"—of both Hindu and Buddhist tantric ritual, including wine (*madya*), meat (*māṃsa*), fish (*matsya*), parched grain (*mudrā*), and (the act or products of) sexual contact (*maithuna*). The consumption of such transgressive substances can be understood as a vehicle for evoking powerful psychological-emotive states in themselves, given their deep encoding within the purity-pollution dynamics characteristic of Indic, and especially priestly, culture. The consumption of alcohol, without doubt, indicates the use of psychoactive substance (a depressant, alcohol), perhaps buffered by the consumption of meat, fish, and grain—the latter likely functioning as a means to modulate and prolong the effect.

Last, it is worth mentioning that in the context of elixirs, mercury (*rasa*, *pārada*, *sūta*) is often identified as both soma and ambrosia. This connection, in part, links the conception that Āyurveda and elixirs are rooted in the extension of life, or longevity (*dīrghāyus*), but culminate in the context of mercury-based alchemy in the goal of bodily immortality (*amaratva*, *ajaratva*) and the perfection of the body (*dehasiddhi*, *kāyasiddhi*). The focus on the body here, however, can obscure the fact that mercury has powerful psychoactive effects, with its more extreme effects referred to in contemporary biomedicine as a specific neurological disorder, erethism, informally known as "Mad Hatter's disease." Dagmar Wujastyk, citing the work of Baker and of Brigitte Sébastia, notes how mercury is connected to the pursuit of spiritual perfections or accomplishments by contemporary Buddhists in Myanmar and to practitioners of Tamil siddha

medicine traditions rooted in the work of Tamil cultural and literary figures associated with Śākta-Śaiva tantric and yogic practices.⁷⁵ The association between mercury and powers might be viewed in alignment with a statement by Bhojadeva, in his eleventh-century commentary to the *The Yoga Discourse of Patañjali*, the *Royal Sun (Rājamārtanḍa)* or *Gloss of Bhoja (Bhojavṛtti)*, in which he states that mercury was a component of the powers-producing herbals discussed by Patañjali.⁷⁶

YOGA, PSYCHOACTIVES, AND PSYCHEDELICS IN TRANSNATIONAL POSTURAL AND MEDITATIVE YOGA TRADITIONS

The emergence of modern yoga represented a realignment with yogic practice and its relationship to psychoactive substances, building upon but significantly shifting the focus of the theory and practice away from medieval traditions of tantra and haṭha yoga. Swami Vivekananda, one of the most important figures in the emergence of modern yoga, consciously blended Indian philosophy with occultism and modern science, ultimately drawing in a vast transnational audience to the discourse of yoga. In his *Raja Yoga*, Vivekananda is veritably hostile to what he calls the “gymnastic” practices of haṭha yoga, yet at the same time, he explicitly validates the use of herbals as found in *The Yoga Discourse of Patañjali* 4.1, linking elixirs to promoting health for the sake of practicing yoga indefinitely—and only mentions the powers in passing.⁷⁷ However, despite his hesitancy to link herbals to powers or yogic knowledge, Vivekananda nonetheless references his near contemporary Humphry Davy’s experiments with nitrous oxide, stating that it has the “power to take us, as it were, through our senses” to profound states that confirm Vedāntic principles.⁷⁸

In contrast to Vivekananda, who was predominantly focused on the philosophical dimension of yoga, the pioneering yoga researcher Swami Kuvalayananda and others in his orbit, such as Bhavanrao Pant, K. V. Iyer, and T. Krishnamacharya, sought to build a physical culture parallel to European models, drawing upon haṭha yoga and an eclectic body of Indian disciplines, such as the Sun Salutation (*sūryanamaskāra*).⁷⁹ Like Vivekananda, a central part of Kuvalayananda’s work sought to bridge Indian metaphysics and European medical science, the former receding into the background and the latter shifting into the foreground.⁸⁰ This further distanced yoga from its increasingly marginalized medieval tantra and haṭha yoga ecstatic aspects—including cannabis use—a move characteristic of the reconstructionism, if not puritanism, of the larger Hindu Renaissance and the emerging role of yoga in the global physical culture revolution of the early twentieth century.

In the place of cannabis arrived the paradigmatic psychoactive beverages of modernity: tea and coffee. Readers may be surprised to read in *Light on Yoga* that T. Krishnamacharya’s disciple B. K. S. Iyengar suggests practicing yoga on an empty stomach, with exceptions for tea and coffee, perhaps aligned with an earlier suggestion that one should attempt postures other than headstand (*śīrṣāsana*) and shoulderstand (*sarvāṅgāsana*) only after evacuating the bowels.⁸¹ Similarly, Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga guru Pattabhi Jois, a fellow T. Krishnamacharya disciple, is said to have established a yogic slogan of “no coffee, no *prāṇa* [breath].”⁸² Both gurus were highly entrepreneurial in propagating yoga, with Iyengar’s coffee-infused globe-trotting likely being the single most important force in its global success in the twentieth century. Perhaps the most purist perspective of all on the use of psychoactive substances in modern yoga was that of Swami Sivananda, who advocated for entirely giving up tea and coffee as well as smoking, betel nut, meat, and wine.⁸³ Such referencing of the prohibition of alcohol is at odds with regard to contemporary anglophone yoga classes that take place at breweries, wineries, and cider houses, where classes on postural yoga are often joined with a flight of beverages.⁸⁴

Commenting on *The Yoga Discourse of Patañjali* 4.1, Iyengar cheekily reflects on how mescaline, LSD, hashish, and heroin are used in the modern context for “so-called spiritual visions” as investigated by “Aldous Huxley and others.”⁸⁵ Swami Satchidananda more cautiously states that Patañjali “gives some clues about the people who get some experiences through their LSD and marijuana . . . so-called ‘grass’ is an herb, is it not? [M]ushrooms could be considered herbs.”⁸⁶ Swami Sivananda, however, appeals to traditional understandings of herbals, specifically as elixirs, and his disciple Satyananda frames LSD and cannabis as “lower” types of herbals in comparison to elixirs.⁸⁷ More recently, contemporary figures such as Swami Ramdev, Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, and the Dalai Lama have articulated clear conservative viewpoints on a wide range of substances, with Ramdev offering a broad-based platform critiquing both Bollywood figures and remonstrating sādhus attending the Kumbh Mela for their drug use.⁸⁸

One of the great ironies, then, of the countercultural movement and allied Psychedelic Revolution of the 1960s was the forging of connections—or, more accurately, reconnections—between cultures of cannabis, psychedelics, and yoga, drawing upon earlier threads of exploration from turn-of-the-century European occult traditions and the crucial mid-century work of Huxley, such as his highly influential *Doors of Perception*, and others.⁸⁹ Huxley’s work brought a Hindu- and Buddhist-inflected “psychedelic perennialism” into the mainstream that would have profound impacts on psychedelic science and culture for decades to come—notably on the work of Leary, Alpert, and Ralph Metzner, among others.⁹⁰ The high-profile Beatles-Maharishi conjunction launched Transcendental Meditation into global orbit, and Swami Satchidananda inaugurated Woodstock by chanting OM with thousands of attendees in various states of psychedelic reverie. Yogic disciplines of body and mind augmented and served as an adjunct and alternative to cannabis and psychedelics. Hindu and Buddhist practices built upon and, arguably, integrated psychedelic experiences and promoted endogenous methodologies of self-transformation upon the diminishing returns and legal risks of psychedelic use.⁹¹ This became increasingly significant in the wake of the US Controlled Substances Act of 1970, under which many psychedelic substances were federally prohibited and criminalized. Undoubtedly, this process established the undercurrent of Indian philosophy and religion beneath the predominantly scientific and therapeutic framing of the contemporary Psychedelic Renaissance.

One clear example of these transformations and intersections is the formation of the Holotropic Breathwork system of Christina and Stanislav Grof.⁹² In the wake of the criminalization of psychedelics, especially LSD, the Esalen-linked therapists sought out a new approach to evoking psychedelic experiences for their clients. The Grofs developed a mode of breathing-induced psychedelic consciousness, utilizing hyperventilation and a curated musical program, that was drawn in part from Christina’s experience with Muktananda’s siddha yoga.⁹³ Along with advocating for the allied system of transpersonal psychology, forwarded as an evolutionary development from humanistic psychology, the Grofs exerted a profound influence through the Holotropic community and large network of underground psychedelic facilitators. Siddha yoga, which intersected with the global counterculture, provided a framework of ecstatic breathwork and spiritual charisma that fit the needs of the Grofs’ postpsychedelic community.⁹⁴ As such, they helped establish a practical psychological and ethical framework for psychedelic journeying—especially in its group-journeying formulations—that is now the bedrock of contemporary psychedelic facilitator training. That influence has only expanded though the impact of Holotropic-inspired works written by the Grofs’ disciples, such as Kylea Taylor’s *The Ethics of Caring*, which has been utilized in Oregon’s InnerTrek training system.⁹⁵

Siddha yoga's influence did not end with the Grofs. In the 1990s Roland Griffiths, a Johns Hopkins University researcher on drug addiction, began attending siddha yoga sessions at the encouragement of his then-girlfriend. Though initially skeptical of the guru-disciple relationship in the tradition, he nonetheless had a series of profound meditative experiences that dramatically changed his personal and professional trajectory.⁹⁶ Griffiths's subsequent conversations with prominent psychedelic research advocates found resonance with his newfound meditative experiences. Out of this alignment, he ultimately drew up a research program for studying the effects of psilocybin within the frameworks he used to study the effects of caffeine, nicotine, and sedatives, and successfully obtained FDA approval. He would ultimately argue that "mystical experiences" evoked by psychedelics yielded benefits for participants in dealing with anxiety, depression, and trauma, and in the development of prosocial attitudes and sentiments.⁹⁷ The mainstreaming of his research and the emergence of the Psychedelic Renaissance brought psychedelic-based therapy into a newfound realm of public curiosity and respectability.⁹⁸ In the larger context, and in the wake of these regulatory shifts, both postural and meditative yoga practice were consciously adapted by emerging legal facilitation programs as part of a larger set of "complementary practices" or "core competencies" viewed of as benefit to facilitators and clients.⁹⁹

Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, much of mainstream yoga had merged with fast-moving corporate "espresso culture" and was increasingly athleticism-focused in many quarters, setting the benchmark for several decades of focus on vigorous, movement-oriented styles, such as vinyasa yoga. But in the late 2010s and early 2020s, mainstream publications such as *Yoga Journal* and *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* began posting essays on the role that cannabis and psychedelics might play in contemporary yoga communities, accelerated by the success of the therapeutic models associated with both drugs.¹⁰⁰ Not long after, as cannabis legalization moved forward, explicit classes on "cannabis yoga," at venues such as "High Yoga NYC" and "Bend & Blaze" began to offer cannabis users the opportunity to combine the two together in practice sequences, often beginning with a "blaze" (i.e., a cannabis smoking session).¹⁰¹ Perhaps most profoundly, yoga began being integrated with psychedelic use in international yoga retreats where yoga and meditation are combined with the use of ayahuasca, psilocybin mushrooms, and a variety of other psychedelic concoctions. One example that stands out as exemplifying this transformation is Lotus Vine Retreats, run by a well-known contemporary Buddhist teacher, Spring Washam, which explicitly links the consumption of ayahuasca, Buddhist meditation, and physical yoga discipline, aiming to provide clients with a uniquely powerful "accelerated spiritual, emotional, mental and physical cleanse of their entire system."¹⁰² Likewise, postural yoga, Āyurvedic herbs and nootropics, microdosing, fasting, and Buddhist-inspired meditation practices have all found their way into the performance-enhancing, if not transhumanist and biohacking, cultures of Silicon Valley.¹⁰³ This type of framing dovetails with the use of psychedelics among some communities in American Buddhism, where they are framed as a value-neutral "contemplative technology" that has the potential to augment meditative practice and serve as a therapeutic medicinal intervention that supports dharma practice and provides grounds for finding common phenomenological interpretation of the experiences offered.¹⁰⁴ Lastly, the emergence of psychedelic communities and churches—also known as "novel psychedelic spiritual communities" (NPSCs)—throughout North America in the wake of softening legal intervention and shifts in public opinions around psychedelics has created fertile ground for emergent forms of spirituality that embrace elements of yoga philosophy and practice.¹⁰⁵

CONCLUSION

In the previous sections, I have provided a conceptual framework for understanding the role of psychoactives and psychedelics within the theory and practice of yoga, providing a foundation for further research and investigation into the significance of this intersection in premodern, modern, and contemporary contexts. This consisted of (1) establishing a sense of the semantic field of terminology that links yoga and psychoactive substances. Among these, the concepts of soma (extract or elixir), of poison or agent, and of ambrosia or immortal nectar, and the larger framing of these under the category of herb or root stand out as foundational. With respect to *oṣadhi*, this term becomes explicitly connected with the attainment of powers and accomplishments via herbal formulas, in Pātañjala Yoga and in Buddhist Abhidharma traditions, within the philosophical locus of yogic and ascetic practices and of elixirs, including the performance of mantra and the application of austerities. Source materials, stretching the medieval to modern era, suggest specific substances or mixtures, and their effects were well known, such as soma (perhaps as ephedra or a multi-plant elixir) and gooseberry or myrobalan, as well as datura, cannabis, and opium, the latter three appearing in Āyurveda and tantra textual and practical contexts linked to yogic discipline. Wine and alcohol—and their combination with a range of other substances—figure significantly here as well, especially in the context of traditions of tantra. The role of mercury in its role as a psychoactive agent is also a potentially important element of this larger culture in which yogic and tantric aspirations are augmented by the techniques and elixirs, well beyond its larger alchemical role in practices focused on longevity and bodily perfection. This conceptual and terminological analysis, as such, is ultimately a preliminary one, inasmuch as there are considerably more terms, concepts, and substances to be identified and explored.

These premodern traditions have (2) been transformed in the modern context through the adaptation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to fit in with a global physical culture movement that critiqued or ignored the historical linkages between modern yoga and tantra, or more specifically, haṭha yoga, including and especially the use of psychoactive substances, most notably cannabis, among renouncer traditions. This approach was coextensive with cultures of yoga in India and in the transnational context that embraced the modern use of stimulants such as tea and coffee as “drugs of choice” within the spectrum of practice, particularly that of modern postural yoga—though prominent yoga teachers, such as Iyengar, did acknowledge analogs between other psychoactive substances and traditional accounts in yoga philosophy and Āyurveda. Some irony, then, can be noted in how figures in European and American occult, literary, scientific, spiritual, and countercultural circles reconnected Indian mind-body discipline—including both postural and meditative forms of yoga—to the use of psychoactives and psychedelics, from cannabis to mescaline, LSD, DMT, and psilocybin. This included explicitly connecting the use of such substances to philosophical frameworks, techniques, and experiences historically associated with yoga and tantra. These various influences (3) have deeply informed contemporary neuroscientific and psychological models of psychedelic therapy, in part by providing interpretive frames for analyzing psychedelic experiences and by providing a range of complementary practices that are now utilized in all stages of psychedelic facilitation, including preparation, journeying, and integration.

Lastly, drawing from this larger range of data connecting the use of psychoactive substances, I would like (4) to argue for a shift toward a more nuanced and contextually focused examination of the role of psychoactives and psychedelics in the Indic religion and philosophy, including and especially within the sphere of mind-body discipline (yoga). The cultural cache of the term psychedelic, has, perhaps going back to the efforts of Wasson, led to an overemphasis on finding

hallucinogenic agents to the detriment of a wider range of ethnopharmacological and ethnobotanical possibilities. In other words, I would argue that this area of study is particularly at risk of using Maslow's Hammer, or applying confirmation bias, in looking for psychedelics, thus privileging psychedelics as a category and applying an interpretive "psychedelic exceptionalism." Instead, we should be aware of the wider range of possibilities at stake here—including the nootropic or stimulant effects of ephedra (soma), nux vomica, coffee, and tea; hallucinogenic dissociative, hypnotic, and deliriant effects such as might be associated with cannabis and datura and contemporary "classic psychedelics"; narcotic analgesic substances such as opium and depressants such as alcohol; and, lastly, potential multi-plant formulas lending to an admixture or amplification of various effects and their combination characteristic of elixirs and clan substances in premodern Āyurveda and tantra.

Ultimately, I would argue for a balanced perspective, recognizing the frequent parity of endogenous (using internal resources) and exogenous (using external substances) methods of self-transformation and the diverse range of associations between yoga and psychoactive substances of various types, admixtures, and degrees of potency. In doing so, we open ourselves up to more deep and complete understandings of the role of such substances within the complex and fascinating history and contemporary global sphere of Indian mind-body discipline (yoga). Having sketched out at least a preliminary survey of this topic, additional work in this sphere would bring greater depth and clarity on a variety of fronts—including those of the nuances of particular psychoactive formulations and the dynamics between actual and symbolic use of psychoactive substance in yogic discipline and tantric ritual contexts. This would undoubtedly deepen our understanding of premodern and contemporary yoga traditions and their relationship to psychoactives and psychedelics, whether that be in the context of the retreat center, yoga studio, tourism, and festivals, or in psychedelic therapy. Given the rapidly accelerating impact of psychedelics in a variety of spheres—religious and spiritual, legal, ethical, therapeutic, economic, political, and so forth—and the significant risks and benefits involved, this area of study deserves ongoing and sustained attention by scholars working in Contemplative Studies and at the intersection of the Humanities and Sciences.

NOTES

* I want to thank Dr. Matthew Clark, research associate at SOAS University of London, for greatly inspiring my work on this topic. His pioneering work in this sphere has been of critical importance in the development of my research and analysis throughout the project, and I have benefited greatly from his publications and presentations, and from our conversations and correspondence over the past several years.

¹ Wasson, *Soma*.

² See, for example, Winkelman, "Introduction," 43–62.

³ Muraresku, *Immortality Key*.

⁴ Osto, *Altered States*, 175–202.

⁵ Scharper, "Crash Course."

⁶ Griffiths et al., "Psilocybin-Occasioned Mystical-Type Experience," 49–69.

⁷ Griffiths et al., "Psilocybin-Occasioned Mystical-Type Experience."

⁸ Carhart-Harris et al., "Neural Correlates of the Psychedelic," 2138–2143; Carhart-Harris et al., "Entropic Brain," 1–22; Carhart-Harris and Goodwin, "Therapeutic Potential of Psychedelic Drugs," 2105–2113; Millière et al., "Psychedelics, Meditation, and Self-Consciousness," 1–29.

⁹ See, in JCS Special Issue 1, Jahred Rosa-Sullivan et al., "A Narrative Review of Meditation and Psychedelics: Pairing Practices, Synergistic Effects, and a Mutual Framework for Standardizing Clinical Research" (forthcoming).

¹⁰ Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*; Sarbacker, "Reclaiming the Spirit," 95–114; Sarbacker, *Tracing the Path of Yoga*, 183–195.

¹¹ <https://www.innertrek.org/>.

¹² Labate and Cavnar, *Expanding World Ayahuasca Diaspora*; Tupper, "Ayahuasca Healing Beyond the Amazon," 117–136; Harris and Gurel, "Study of Ayahuasca Use," 209–215; Simonds, "Psychedelic Buddhism"; Lucia, *White Utopias*.

¹³ Nichols, "Psychedelics," 264–355; Evans et al., "On Minimizing Risk and Harm," 4–8; Azevedo et al., "Ethics of Psychedelic Use in Psychiatry," 76.

¹⁴ Rubrics derived from De Michelis, *History of Modern Yoga*.

¹⁵ Clark, "*Soma* and *Haoma*," 104.

¹⁶ Clark, "*Soma* and *Haoma*," 106–107; Sarbacker, *Tracing the Path of Yoga*, 54–55.

¹⁷ Falk, "*Soma* I and II," 77–90.

¹⁸ Clark, "*Soma* and *Haoma*," 106. Clark notes how, in fact, the *materia medica* of later eras recognizes a wide range of soma formulations, suggesting a range of "recipes" and suggests the possibility that soma might have been, from the very beginning, a multi-plant formula. Clark, "*Soma* and *Haoma*," 109–110.

¹⁹ Eliade, *Yoga*, 111–114.

²⁰ Wasson, *Soma*, 65, 95; Doniger, *Hindus*, 161.

²¹ Smith, "Wasson's 'Soma,'" 480–499. Thanks to James McHugh for bringing this article to my attention. I find the argument that soma was psychoactive to be compelling, but I think we risk a certain "psychedelic exceptionalism" in identifying it as psychedelic or hallucinogenic.

²² Staal, "How a Psychoactive Substance," 745–778.

²³ Sarbacker, *Tracing the Path of Yoga*, 39–58.

²⁴ Patton, *Bringing the Gods to Mind*.

²⁵ Wadhvani-Shah, "Sacrificial Ritual and the Upaniṣads," 50.

²⁶ Olivelle, *Early Upaniṣads*, 417–421.

²⁷ Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*.

²⁸ Staal, "How a Psychoactive Substance."

²⁹ Werner, "Yoga and the *Ṛg Veda*," 289–302; Sarbacker, *Tracing the Path of Yoga*, 18–21.

³⁰ Werner, "Yoga and the *Ṛg Veda*," 298–299, 301–302. Where I disagree with Werner, however, is with respect to his dismissal of the "poison" or "agent" (*viṣa*) mentioned in this passage as a psychoactive substance, and his preference for interpreting it as a symbolic encoding of the virtue of the Keśin as participating in *saṃsāra* bodily for "special purposes." The latter he links—building on Ludwig—to the drinking of *viṣa* with Rudra within the Keśin hymn to the Purāṇic narrative of Śiva drinking the poison emerging from the churning of the cosmic ocean by the devas and asuras. I am more inclined to follow scholars such as Hermann Oldenberg, Jakob Hauer, Arthur

Keith, and Mircea Eliade, who assert that the description of the Keśin suggests the use of *viṣa* a psychoactive or intoxicating—and perhaps literally toxic—beverage.

³¹ Translations are mine unless otherwise noted. Jason Birch notes the appearance of this same framework in *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* 11.15.34: “*janmauśadhitapomantrair yāvatīr iha siddhayaḥ*.” The larger passage focuses on how through yoga, and especially through fixation (*dhāraṇā*), a yogi is able to accomplish the attainments secured through these other means. Birch also indicates that at least one case, in the *Amaraughaprabodha* (twelfth century CE), a form of *samādhi* is framed as achievable through consuming herbs. Birch, “Premodern Yoga Traditions and Ayurveda,” 35–44. Another text that invokes the fivefold structure is the *Haṭhayogasamhitā*; see Hoth, “*Haṭhayogasamhitā*.” See also *Yogavāsiṣṭha Nirvāṇaprakaraṇa* 99.1, 102.32, 148.3 (which includes *maṇi*, *oṣadhi*, and *dravya*), and 208.24. Laxmana and Pansikar, eds., *Yogavāsiṣṭha of Vālmiki*. The compound *mantrauśadhi* figures quite prominently in these contexts, in some cases represented as inferior methods to contemplation. The connection of mantra, *oṣadhi*, and *dravya* appears to be broadly significant in the sense of the consecration of ritual substances, as discussed below. For variants on the formula of the *Pātañjalayogasāstra*, see also *Mahābhārata* 12.155; *Yogaśikhopaniṣat* 152. Tokunaga and Smith, *Mahābhārata: Śāntiparvan*; Mahādeva, *Yogaśikhopaniṣat*.

³² Wujastyk, “On Attaining Special Powers.”

³³ Maas, “*Rasāyana* in Classical Yoga,” 71–72.

³⁴ Maas, “*Rasāyana* in Classical Yoga,” 72–73.

³⁵ Though *āmalaka* (*phyllanthus emblica*) does not appear to be psychoactive, it is often combined with other plants in the mildly psychoactive Āyurvedic compound *triphalā*, which includes *vibhītaka*, the fruit of a tree that is said to be an “abode of demons.” Dymock et al., *Pharmacographia Indica*, 5–6.

³⁶ The referencing of *oṣadhi*, *rasāyana*, and *soma* refers to, at least potentially, a wide spectrum of psychoactive plants and, following Clark, multi-plant formulas inducing a range of effects.

³⁷ Sarbacker, “Pātañjala Yoga and Buddhist Abhidharma,” 220–239.

³⁸ Sarbacker, “Pātañjala Yoga and Buddhist Abhidharma,” 220–239.

³⁹ Mallinson, *Khecarīvidyā of Ādinātha*, 110–113, 135–136.

⁴⁰ Bevilacqua, “Ethnographic Side.”

⁴¹ Morningstar, “*Thandai* and *Chilam*,” 141–165.

⁴² Acharya et al., “Cannabis, Lord Shiva,” 9–14.

⁴³ Bevilacqua, *From Tapas to Modern Yoga*, 243–247.

⁴⁴ Chopra and Chopra, *Use of the Cannabis Drugs*, 6–9; Morningstar, “*Thandai* and *Chilam*,” 151–155; Bevilacqua, *From Tapas to Modern Yoga*, 244–245.

⁴⁵ Russo, “Cannabis in India,” 6.

⁴⁶ Sauthoff, “Cannabis in Traditional Indian Alchemy,” 160.

⁴⁷ Wujastyk, “Cannabis in Traditional Indian Herbal,” 45–73; Sauthoff, “Cannabis in Traditional Indian Alchemy.”

⁴⁸ Sauthoff, “Cannabis in Traditional Indian Alchemy,” 166; Russo, “Cannabis in India,” 4.

⁴⁹ Sauthoff, “Cannabis in Traditional Indian Alchemy,” 161; Wujastyk, “Cannabis in Traditional Indian Herbal,” 63–64. One version of this story is of Śiva using cannabis to “cool himself down.”

⁵⁰ Aldrich, “Tantric Cannabis Use in India,” 230; Gray, *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 373–374.

⁵¹ Bharati, *Tantric Tradition*, 251–252.

⁵² McHugh, *Unholy Brew*, 185–186. The use of betel in *pūjā* formulas is discussed in Lidova, “Measuring Innovation.”

⁵³ Wujastyk, “Cannabis in Traditional Indian Herbal,” 59; Torri, “Soma and Drug History.”

⁵⁴ Mallinson, *Khecarīvidyā of Ādinātha*, 6. Note that the referencing here is of an *āyurveda/rasāyana* text distinct from the similarly named tantric Buddhist *Yogaratanmālā*, also known as the *Hevajrapañjika*, of Kṛṣṇācārya.

⁵⁵ White, *Alchemical Body*, 412n220. See also Shyamala et al., “Plant Nomenclature,” 57–66.

⁵⁶ Ondračka, “What Should Mīnanāth Do,” 177.

⁵⁷ Ondračka, “What Should Mīnanāth Do,” 178.

⁵⁸ Grimes, “Portrait of a Poison”; Werner, “Yoga and the *Ṛg Veda*,” 299.

⁵⁹ Referencing *Madhyamakahrdayakārikā* 9.41, obliquely referenced in Bouthillette, *Dialogue and Doxography*, 57.

⁶⁰ Hemacandra and Qvarnström, *Yogaśāstra of Hemacandra*, 20; Ondračka, “What Should Mīnanāth Do”; Horstmann, “Nāthyoga in the Dādūpanth.” Qvarnström’s translation here refers to the compound *amūlamantratantra*.

⁶¹ Gray, *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 351–352; Grimes, “Portrait of a Poison”; Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 201. Its ritual use in Vajrayāna may be paralleled by its appearance in the *Jayadrathayāmala* section on aromatics (4.67.41–43), where *datura* appears to have a principally magical, versus visionary, function. Personal communication with Somadeva Vasudeva, April 25, 2021.

⁶² Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 221. This view is critiqued in Grimes, “Portrait of a Poison,” 4–5. One key disagreement is whether the modes of use in tantric ritual would be consistent with psychoactive activity, such as the potency and effect of inhalation or use as an ointment, and the (lack of) evidence of exposure or consumption otherwise.

⁶³ Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 266–267.

⁶⁴ Parker, “Psychoactive Plants in Tantric Buddhism,” 6–11; Bhattacharyya, *Introduction to Buddhist Esotericism*, 73. On the mahāsiddhas and narratives and iconography around alcohol, see Lopez, *Seeing the Sacred in Samsara*. See also Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 191.

⁶⁵ Kalant, “Report of the Indian Hemp,” 80–81; Touw, “Religious and Medicinal Uses,” 26. Allen Ginsberg claimed to have drunk—and was bewildered by—such a concoction while travelling in India. Ginsberg, *Indian Journals*, March 1962–May 1963, 59.

⁶⁶ Kalant, “Report of the Indian Hemp,” 80; Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 201. Inviting a reflection on the nature of *mudrā* within the five *m*’s (*pañcamakāra*) of Kaula tantra, especially given the role of *datura* seeds.

⁶⁷ Baker, “Nectar of the Blue Goddess,” 23–50.

⁶⁸ Clark, *Botanical Ecstasies*, 40–41.

⁶⁹ Discussed in *Kulārṇava Tantra*, chap. 5 passim; *vijayā* appears in 5.42. The *Kulārṇava Tantra* explicitly compares the drinking of such *madya* to the drinking of soma by a hymn reciter (*vipra/brāhmaṇa*). Malaviya, *Kulārṇava Tantra*.

⁷⁰ *Śaktisaṃgama Tantra*, Kālīkhaṇḍa 9.44. It is perhaps possible that this *dravya* is a symbolic representation of earlier, and more literal, Kaula formulation, mirroring the formula mentioned earlier in which ecstatic agent and formulaic ritual operate in some degree of inverse proportion to one another. Bhattacharyya, *Śaktisaṃgama Tantra*. The instructions to not utilize *datura* seeds is intriguing here, as the seeds contain much higher, and dangerous, concentrations of active psychoactive agents.

⁷¹ *Samayācāra Tantra* 30–31, 48. Similar formulas, containing *vijayā*, in the form of *trilokyavijayā* but not *dhattūra* are found in the *Ācārasāra Tantra* ff. 75–76. A cannabis-infused multi-plant formula is described in the *Rudrayamala Tantra*, Uttarakāṇḍa 34.1–57, including *dhūrvā*, *vijayā*, *bilva*, *nirguṇḍī*, and *tulasī*, and at one point later in the text is referred to as *mahauśadhi* and as the *pañcāmāra*, something akin to five sources of *amṛta*, referring both to an elixir and to a set of haṭha yoga practices (a subset of the *ṣaṭkarma*). A number of other tantric texts utilize *dhattūra* in relationship to the *ṣaṭkarma*, or “six actions” of destructive magic, but not clearly for consumption, even if inhalation cannot be completely ruled out. Likewise, the boundary between actual and visualized—or “virtual”—use of substances is another important distinction that deserves further exploration. *Ācārasāra Tantra*; Malaviya, *Rudrayamala Tantra Uttarakāṇḍa*.

⁷² Dalton, “Bridging Yoga and Mahāyoga,” 260–287.

⁷³ Clark, *Botanical Ecstasies*, 43n111. This is included as an element of worship (*pūjā*) in the *Śāradātilaka Tantra* and *Kaulajñānanirṇaya*, among other places. Beyond this, as Clark notes, the connection between Haṭha Yoga and both endogenous *soma/amṛta/bindu* and exogenous *soma/amṛta*, in the form of mercury as well as in plant formulations, is ripe for further exploration.

⁷⁴ Orzech, “On the Subject of Abhiṣeka,” 113–128; Sanderson, “Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions,” 680–682; Isaacson, “Hindu and Buddhist Initiations,” 261–279. With respect to the use of a “neutral” *dravya* or *amṛta* in *abhiṣeka*, it is not difficult to imagine how that medium could be utilized surreptitiously to evoke extraordinary experiences through the addition of particular substances, though no known textual witness exists to this, as far as I am aware.

⁷⁵ Wujastyk, “Histories of Mercury in Medicine,” 819–830; Sébastia, “Preserving Identity or Promoting Safety?,” 933–969.

⁷⁶ Birch, “Premodern Yoga Traditions and Ayurveda,” 36. This is a statement echoed by key figures in the emergence of modern yoga traditions, as discussed below.

- ⁷⁷ Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga*, 17–18, 175–176.
- ⁷⁸ Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga*, 31.
- ⁷⁹ Sarbacker, *Tracing the Path of Yoga*, 183–233.
- ⁸⁰ Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*; Sarbacker, “Reclaiming the Spirit,” 95–114.
- ⁸¹ Iyengar, *Light on Yoga: Yoga Dipika*, 58.
- ⁸² MacGregor, “Sharath in Copenhagen.”
- ⁸³ “Sadhana Tattva,” Divine Life Society.
- ⁸⁴ Yoga + Beer, “Yoga + Cider at 2 Towns Ciderhouse—Yoga + Beer®.”
- ⁸⁵ Iyengar, *Light on the Yoga Sutras*, 197.
- ⁸⁶ Satchidananda, *Yoga Sutras of Patañjali*, 197. Ultimately, he argues these are not equal to an “organic” *siddhi* and that *samādhi* is a superior source.
- ⁸⁷ Sivananda, *Raja Yoga*, 164–165; Saraswati, *Four Chapters on Freedom*, 307–308.
- ⁸⁸ Alok, “‘Salman Khan Takes Drugs, Aamir’”; Dabas, “On Yoga Guru Ramdev’s Call,” *IndiaTimes*, 2019.
- ⁸⁹ Partridge, “Aleister Crowley on Drugs,” 125–151.
- ⁹⁰ Breau and Gillis-Smith, “Psychometric *Brahman*, Psychedelic Science,” 788–806.
- ⁹¹ Osto, *Altered States*; Badiner, *Zig Zag Zen*; Redmond, “Are Psychedelics the True Dharma?,” 78–97. Colin Simonds sums up the dynamics between psychedelics and American Buddhism by stating: “To some, psychedelics provided a pharmacological mechanism for accessing states typically reserved for adept meditators and can disclose direct insight into Buddhist teachings. For others, Buddhist frameworks provided a structure and support for psychedelic practice. Historically speaking, we can therefore conceive of a psychedelic Buddhist practice which takes Buddhism as its primary practice and psychedelic use as its adjunct and a Psychedelic Buddhism which takes psychedelic use as its primary practice and Buddhism as its adjunct. These were the dominant ways that these two threads of American occulture, psychedelics, and Buddhism came together until a kind of cohesive Psychedelic Buddhism was thoroughly woven in the last decade” (Simonds, “Psychedelic Buddhism,” 318–319). Simonds provides a salient analysis of various intersections between Buddhism and psychedelics, noting their frequent rootedness in individual teachers’ efforts to adapt, integrate, or reconcile psychedelic and meditative experiences. See also Richert and DeCloedt, “Supple Bodies, Healthy Minds,” 193–200.
- ⁹² Grof and Grof, *Holotropic Breathwork*.
- ⁹³ Sparks, *Power Within*.
- ⁹⁴ This led, perhaps, to spin-offs such as the Wim Hof Method. Hof, *Wim Hof Method*.
- ⁹⁵ Taylor, *Ethics of Caring*.
- ⁹⁶ From *The Tim Ferriss Show* podcast: “I ended up having experiences in Siddha Yoga, having experiences with the teacher of Siddha Yoga. And this is a tradition that puts high value on this relationship, even on a subtle level between the guru and the disciple. And that part really threw me and was repugnant to me from the beginning until I had, actually, what I considered an astonishing initiation experience in which I at one point sat before meditation session. This was just in Baltimore. And the way Siddha Yoga works, again, the guru is revered. There’s a seat at the front of the center. And if the guru is not present, which the guru I don’t think ever visited the Baltimore center, then a picture of the guru sat there. And I was looking at this picture, and all of a sudden, the eyes became alive. And I was looking into the picture, and I was looking into these eyes that were looking right back at me. And I thought, ‘This is fascinating.’ And as I looked more closely, I realized I was looking in my own eyes. And with that understanding, and this wouldn’t be commonly held within the tradition, I recognized that I was the guru, that I was no different than the guru, that the guru was just a mirror of who you are. And with that kind of understanding, I was able to join the community in reverence to the guru because it was in reverence to this deeper interconnectedness that the guru was reflecting back. And I was able to pranam, bow, in front of the guru because I was bowing to myself. And so that shifted a frame of reference that allowed me to engage in that community. And then I started more serious daily meditation practices that I have continued ever since. But I became just deeply intrigued with that whole area, and then had a period of time in which that was the most interesting and important thing, it really became a primary focus of interest to me.” Tim Ferriss, “The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts: Roland Griffiths, PhD—Life’s Ultimate Glide Path, An Unexpected Stage IV Diagnosis, Facing Death, How Meditation and Psychedelics Can Help, and The Art of Living a Life of Gratitude (#641),” *The Blog of Author Tim Ferriss*, December 10, 2022, <https://tim.blog/2022/12/10/roland-griffiths-transcript/>.

⁹⁷ Griffiths et al., “Psilocybin-Occasioned Mystical-Type Experience.”

⁹⁸ There is perhaps some irony that Griffiths’s colleague has, after Griffiths’s passing, questioned the tone of Griffiths’s work and the environment created under his leadership, saying that he ran “his psychedelic studies like a ‘new-age’ retreat center.” Borrell, “Psychedelic Evangelist.”

⁹⁹ See, for example, the discussion of “core competencies” in Phelps, “Developing Guidelines and Competencies,” 450–487.

¹⁰⁰ Tust, “Yoga, Meditation and Psychedelics”; Lefferts, “Psychedelics’ Buddhist Revival.”

¹⁰¹ HighYogaNYC, “High Yoga NYC”; Bend & Blaze, “Bend & Blaze.”

¹⁰² Lotus Vine Journeys, “Lotus Vine Journeys.” Additionally, they state that they have “found that the best tools that we can offer our guests are mindfulness-based meditation practices, yoga, and teachings on Buddhist wisdom and compassion.” This community, however, has not been without its own share of controversy. See, for example, the discussion of Lotus Vine Journeys in Simonds, “Psychedelic Buddhism,” 336n81.

¹⁰³ I have discussed these phenomenological connections, especially the ways in which the philosophical frames of Buddhist meditation provide interpretive angles for understanding psychedelic experiences in Sarbacker, “Buddhist Meditation and the Ethics,” 61–83; Sarbacker, “Pātañjala Yoga and Buddhist Abhidharma”; Sarbacker, “On the Borderlands of Religion,” 286–301.

¹⁰⁴ Simonds, “Psychedelic Buddhism,” 327–333, 335.

¹⁰⁵ Center for the Study of World Religions, “Charting Novel Psychedelic Spiritual Communities.” See, for example, the adaptation of yoga into the integration of ayahuasca experiences in Cowley-Court et al., “Life After Ayahuasca.” As of 2026, The Living Church in California offers a range of yoga programs that are complementary to their entheogenic mission (“Events,” Living Church). See, for example, “Yoga and Sound Bath” and “Restorative Yoga & Breathwork.”

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