

Psychoactives and Psychedelics in Yoga: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Culture

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In this paper, I examine the intimate relationship between the mind-body disciplines of Hindu systems of yoga and the use of psychoactive substances in the Indic religious context, with an eye to the ways in which modern cosmopolitan forms of yoga have been impacted by, and intersected with, the use of psychedelic substances, such as Mescaline, LSD, Psilocybin, and Ayahuasca. 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 (elixir), viṣa (agent/poison), oṣadhi (herb), amṛta (ambrosia), rasa (essence), and dravya (substance), as well as the utilization of specific plant agents such as dhattūra (datura) and bhaṅga (cannabis). These concepts are, in turn, connected to relevant strata of Indic religion and philosophy, from the Vedic, classical, and medieval contexts, with special attention to discussions in the Pātañjalayogaśāstra and Buddhist Abhidharma literature of siddhi and ṛddhi (accomplishments) and nirmāṇacitta (constructed minds) arising from the use of oṣadhi. Building upon this, 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 21st century, whether through the intersection of global countercultural trends, retreat and festival culture, or through the emerging paradigms of the psychedelic “facilitator” and “psychedelic chaplain” that parallel modular yoga teacher training. I further demonstrate how linkages between yoga and psychedelics in contemporary contexts are an extension of the spirit of psycho-experimentation characteristic of the Indic context but also thoroughly modernist, illustrating the cosmopolitan nature of transnational yoga traditions. Lastly, I offer a provocative analysis of how the “Second Wave” movement or “psychedelic “Renaissance” as exemplified by the work of neuropharmacologist Roland Griffiths, is, in fact, deeply indebted to Hindu yogic and tantric traditions genealogically linked to the psychedelic counterculture of the “First Wave” psychedelic movement in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s.

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