

# Is the Sacred Medicine Path a Legitimate Spiritual Path?

Chris M. Bache, PhD, Youngstown, USA

I want to thank Kate Thomas for her thoughtful observations on my book, *Dark Night, Early Dawn*. She would be surprised, perhaps, to learn that I share many of the concerns she raises — the need for careful preparation before entering deep states of consciousness, the potential risks of rushing into these states unprepared, and the shallowness of much “new age” spirituality. In pressing her case, however, Thomas makes a number of assumptions that strike me as unfounded, assumptions about the inner dynamics of psychedelic therapy, about how I have conducted myself in this work, and about what constitutes “authentic” spirituality. I would like to address these assumptions here.

Anyone who publicly addresses psychedelic states of consciousness today walks a thin line. On their right is mainstream culture who says that these experiences are not real, simply hallucinations. On their left are some in the spiritual community who say that they are not useful, or worse, that they are counterproductive to genuine spiritual development. Thomas places herself in the latter camp. Her complaint is that the experiences presented in my book are less than genuine spiritual experiences because they are artificially induced, too easily come by, potentially misleading, and unnecessarily severe.

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## Spontaneous vs. Cultivated Experiences

Let me say at the outset that I have not read Thomas' books in which she reports her own spiritual experiences, but I have no doubt that when I do, I will be moved by what I find there. She clearly writes from deep inner experience, and the genuineness of her concern for other spiritual practitioners is obvious. In contrasting her and my transpersonal experiences, she emphasises that her experiences surfaced spontaneously and were unsought. She feels this is a significant point, as is the fact that they did not leave harmful aftereffects and that they developed sequentially, preparing her system step by step for the spiritual breakthrough that occurred in 1977.

Because I approach life within a reincarnationist perspective, I assume that when we see signs of early spiritual opening like this, we are seeing the carryover effect of spiritual practices undertaken in previous lifetimes. While I have deep respect for persons whose spiritual lives unfold in this way, I do not think that the states of consciousness that arise “spontaneously” are inherently superior to those which arise after years of spiritual practice in this lifetime. Awakening is awakening, whenever it occurs. Furthermore, awakening is a natural, organic process. We should therefore expect it to take in many forms. Given what we have learned about life's passion for variety, it would be surprising if it were otherwise.

## The Problem of Easy Access

Turning to psychedelics, Thomas assumes, as do many who have little experience with these agents, that these substances give persons instant access to the deepest secrets of the universe. She says, for example, that the view of evolution that I put forward in *Dark Night, Early Dawn* is “seemingly readily attainable by any enquiring individual, either fully or partially, using the psychedelic and holotropic methods promoted by Stanislav Grof — regardless of their

lifestyle, level of aspiration, egoic development, or integrity.” Her gut instinct tells her that what can be purchased so cheaply cannot be the real thing.

I agree. This would be far too simple. To the scholar of religion, however, this critique of psychedelics feels somewhat dated. It harkens back to a debate that took place in the '50s and '60s between R.C. Zaehner, Huston Smith, and other scholars of religion on whether psychedelic mystical experiences were “real mystical experiences.” Somewhat like this earlier debate, Taylor's critique reflects a naïve understanding of how psychedelics impact consciousness. More importantly, it underestimates the true cost exacted by a sustained regimen of psychedelic therapy, or as I prefer to call it, of sacred medicine work.

The psychedelic state is a highly interactive state of consciousness. Thus, it is simply not true that the insights acquired on this path are independent of the subject's maturity, integrity, and aspiration. Nor is it true that these revelations, if we may call them that, are given out freely, without cost or without responsibilities attached. Here we need to distinguish between dabblers who experiment with psychedelics a few times and may be rewarded with a gem to take home, and practitioners who go back to the well 40, 50, or 100 times, pushing deeper and deeper into the universal matrix; or between those who simply play the edges of expanded awareness and those who challenge the fundamental structures that imprison their consciousness. Thomas is simply not sufficiently familiar with the inner workings of the method she is criticising.

## Acclimatising to Progressive Disclosure

Thomas says that the experiences I discuss in *Dark Night, Early Dawn*, arose “haphazardly and non-sequentially.” In contrast to the stable clarity of her own mystical experiences, she characterises psychedelic states as “excessive” and

“uncontrolled.” Furthermore, she takes me to task for failing to appreciate that being able to comprehend the revelations contained in deep states of consciousness “requires the operation of a non-physical faculty that must first be developed.” Because psychedelic work does not nurture this cognitive faculty, or so she thinks, she laments the inferior quality of the insights generated there.

Here again, I think Thomas begins with a correct instinct that goes awry because she doesn’t adequately understand the spiritual method she is addressing. I think it is a correct observation that one’s ability to see and experience clearly in psychedelic states of consciousness (or any nonordinary state for that manner) *does* involve a non-physical faculty that needs training and grounding. Thomas’ mistake lies in thinking that this training does not take place *inside* a course of serious psychedelic work.

It is easy for non-practitioners to miss the rigorous training that takes place inside extended medicine work, and yet this training is essential if one’s transpersonal experiences are going to deepen across many sessions. Though there is always an unpredictable quality to any one psychedelic session, there is a pattern of *progressive disclosure* that takes place across many sessions when those sessions are therapeutically structured. For this progressive disclosure to take place, one must undergo a series of trails and initiations, and there is little haphazard about this process.

This point is easily missed if one only reads individual session accounts and does not study the method itself. In Chapter 9 I explained that I had to “learn how to learn” in these states of consciousness. That is, I had to learn how to maintain or recover coherent cognitive functioning within experiential frameworks that were radically novel and devoid of any familiar frame of reference. This took great effort and much practice.

Because the spiritual universe is vast with many operational “levels,” this epistemic challenge repeated itself many times as deeper levels of transpersonal experience opened through the years.

What I did not discuss in this chapter, but affirm with Thomas, is that this “learning” required not just expanding my cognitive capacities but also a deep, systematic transformation of my body and its various energy systems. In order to enter *even temporarily* into deep alignment with the Divine, one’s entire being – including its physical, emotional,

mental, and subtle energy systems – must be adapted to the encounter.

On many spiritual paths, this energetic realignment takes place before deep transpersonal experiences open, but that is not the way it typically happens in sacred medicine work. On this path one is sometimes thrown ahead of oneself, so to speak. That is, one is thrown into a radically new, “higher” dimensional reality whose embrace you must survive even as you surrender to it. When this happens, the necessary purifications and realignments take place *inside* the experience itself and may continue even weeks *after* a session is concluded. This “delayed purification” is part of the rhythm of this work. One “does a sweat” both before *and after* communing with Spirit, and some “life-sweats” can last weeks or months after a particularly deep session. If someone is not comfortable with this rhythm, or if they find that they “get in over their head” in a way that is not productive for them, then it’s probably an indicator that this path is not a good one for them.

Every spiritual tradition emphasises that there are certain “preliminary practices” that can help this transition and that are critical to successful spiritual practice. These practices include moral integrity, compassion for all beings, critical self-reflection, elevated intention, and purification of one’s body and subtle energy systems? Thomas assumes that I have ignored or neglected the preliminary practices in my work with sacred medicines. But why should she assume this?

For the record, then, let me state clearly that I believe that if one chooses to cultivate deep nonordinary states of consciousness as part of one’s spiritual path, one should ground this work in a daily spiritual practice. I would go even further and say that *the deeper the states one intends to engage, the stronger and more mature should be one’s daily practice*. In fairness to Thomas, I should say that I recognise the importance of purification and grounding better now than I did when I started this path twenty-three years ago. I was fortunate not to have begun

my sacred medicine work until I was 30, for by then my life was reasonably well grounded in the habit of prayer and meditation, the discipline of study, and the commitments of marriage and family life. Even so, it was only gradually that I learned the importance of cultivating a lifestyle of continuous practice. My present daily practice is rooted in Vajrayana Buddhism.

### Too Much Suffering

Thomas’ deepest reservations about *Dark Night, Early Dawn* seem to centre on the extreme suffering unleashed by psychedelic and holotropic therapy. Here I recognise her compassion for other practitioners and her protest that spiritual opening need not, and perhaps ought not, involve suffering of this scope. Such suffering is foreign to her experience, and her conclusion is that if spiritual opening does involve this much suffering, something has gone seriously wrong. The method must be flawed, or one has foolishly jumped into experiential waters over one’s head.

I agree with Thomas that spiritual opening *need not* involve suffering of the kind or intensity that I describe in *Dark Night, Early Dawn*. I can’t emphasise this strongly enough. I would never want to suggest that this kind of suffering is a prerequisite for genuine spiritual opening. However, spiritual opening sometimes does precipitate great suffering, and we should not pull back from this fact. It was John Tauler, the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic, who said in one of his sermons, “Believe me, children, one who would know much about these matters would often have to keep to his bed for his bodily frame could not support it.”

From my perspective, suffering in these contexts is always about purification. Intimacy with the Divine is purchased through surrender, and surrender triggers purification. If we peel away the layers that keep our awareness trapped within the narrow confines of our earth-bound mind slowly and gently, we may hardly

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notice them falling away. If we tear them away quickly, it will hurt more, but we may be free of them sooner. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches, but is there a right or wrong here? Is there "legitimate" and "illegitimate" spirituality? I don't think so.

Furthermore, in rejecting the scale of suffering described in *Dark Night, Early Dawn*, it is almost as though Thomas has lost sight of the book's primary theme, namely, the interpenetration of collective and individual transformation. If we try to assess the suffering that sometimes surfaces in psychedelic states exclusively within a psychology of individual transformation, we will miss the mark. That's the point. My proposal is that we need to recognise the emergence of the *collective unconscious* in the experiences that sometimes open using this particular spiritual method. In these episodes of collective purification, the patient has shifted from being just the individual person to being some piece of the collective mind of the species.

So the question is not, "Must everyone undergo this extreme ordeal?" — for that answer is clearly "No" — but rather, "Does consciously engaging this ordeal promote a form of spiritual opening that is both authentic and safe?" Clearly this work is not for everyone, but I think it is honorable work.

### **Sage and Shamanic Traditions**

It is good to remind ourselves that there are many spiritual paths on this planet. Thomas clearly prefers a path that falls within what scholars of religion have sometimes called the "sage tradition," namely, paths that use primarily contemplation and meditation to unlock one's everyday consciousness to the ever-present Pristine Awareness. The sacred medicine path belongs to a different spiritual lineage, the "shamanic tradition." Here belong those paths in which one enters intense, nonordinary states of consciousness for short periods of time. This path is what I call the "gate of temporary immersion." Here, there is no pretense that one could or should try to sustain these temporary states as one's permanent, baseline consciousness, or that they can be converted into a new baseline consciousness in any direct way. Rather, the intent is to use this temporary immersion in a highly sensitised state of consciousness to challenge the boundaries of one's consciousness, to quicken the movement of Spirit in one's life, to

encourage one's individual spiritual opening, and, most importantly, to support humanity's collective opening.

In seeing the transformational method that Stan Grof, Ralph Metzner, and others have pioneered as an extension of the shamanic tradition, we must be careful with our categories. Clearly there is much about traditional shamanism that does not transfer to persons working with sacred medicines today. The traditional shaman is primarily a healer serving a local community, while this is not true for many persons working with sacred medicines. As Terrence McKenna has pointed out, the modern student of sacred medicines is often better described as a "visionary shaman," with the emphasis placed on exploring the universe rather than healing individual souls.

Thomas attempts to make (a subset of) the sage tradition normative and use it to de-legitimize the shamanic tradition, describing it as "inauthentic," "appalling," and "dangerous." Her good motives notwithstanding, this move strikes me as deeply misguided and culturally chauvinistic. It fails to honor the wide diversity of spiritual practices that have been cultivated around the globe, in the high mountains of Tibet, the desert plateaus of the American southwest, or the thick jungles of the Brazilian Amazon. Many of these practices have only recently come into Western awareness, and our early appropriation of them may still be somewhat immature and sometimes painfully superficial. Granted. But superficiality is a universal and chronic problem that does not invalidate the methods themselves. Furthermore, many practitioners of these paths are not immature but quite conscientious and spiritually well-informed.

### **The Collective Dynamics of Teaching**

Having de-legitimized psychedelics as a spiritual path, Thomas portrays my experiences with my students in similarly pejorative terms. In her mind, these experiences confirm her diagnosis of psychedelics as triggering premature, excessive, and uncontrolled activation of psychic energies. She judges my conduct as a professor "highly unprofessional" and even "tragic" because my students "did not knowingly submit themselves to this activation." These are strong words.

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gravitational field around him or her. Persons are drawn into this field of influence often without consciously choosing it. Why this happens is difficult to understand from a materialist perspective but not difficult to understand from an integral perspective. In the latter vision, life is deeply and inherently integrated. Though we may value our boundaries and exalt our differences, the deeper currents of life nourish the connective tissue of our collective existence. When one person sinks into deeper intimacy with the universe, it generates an energy that naturally radiates out through the subtle fabric of life in which we are suspended. This is an utterly natural phenomenon, an unstoppable effect. Our spiritual ecology simply does not allow private awakening.

This radiating effect is particularly noticeable when one is standing in the centre of one's work in the world. Performing artists, musicians, and ministers have all reported experiencing the collective waves that sometimes pulse through them when they work. As a teacher, I have learned to trust this mysterious process, to not be afraid of it, and at the same time to respect its power. It demands impeccable conduct and complete surrender to the good of the other. Fortunately, this dynamic surfaced slowly over many years, giving me time to learn what was happening and to adjust to the changes taking place around me.

As my students began to be drawn toward a deeper experience of their own life process, some of them began to "wake up" to new possibilities for their lives. Most of them experienced this as a pleasant, even ecstatic experience, an "Aha!" moment. For a smaller number, the waking up process presented them with personal challenges. They began to confront

the ideas, habits, convictions, and choices that were holding their lives in their present fixed positions.

This awakening did not happen to all my students, of course, only a relative few. Most students passed through my courses having a conventional and hopefully, satisfying educational experience. Some students, however, felt something more happening and signed up for another course. As I stated in my book, these effects showed up primarily in my upper division courses, where the large majority of students were "repeat business." Contrary to Thomas' claim, these students *did choose* to expose themselves to this activation, because they voluntarily chose to sign up for more courses with me. They wanted more, not less, of what was happening to them when we came together to ask the important questions. It is not unusual for some students to take every course I teach, as many as six courses, sometimes waiting years for a particular course to come around in the schedule.

While in some cases the activation my students experienced was quite powerful, there were no casualties and many positive breakthroughs. The non-traditionally aged woman I quoted as thinking she was "losing her mind" is glad to have lost it. She used our time together to make important changes in her life and has become a good friend. I love to teach and, by the usual measures, my students have valued our time together. My teaching evaluations are consistently very high, and I have a sentimental file filled with "thank you" letters from my students, some of whom still send Christmas cards. In short, I believe I have taken good care of my students through the years.

I do not think we need to be afraid of the energetic resonances that spread out around us as a result of our spiritual practices. We need to be careful, of course, and to act responsibly and compassionately at all times. But I think we can trust that we are where we are supposed to be. Furthermore, in her haste to criticise my spiritual method, Thomas again misses the major point being made in this chapter. I do not believe that what happened in my classes was the result simply of energetic resonances springing up between my students and my person, but rather was triggered by the emergence of a true *group energy* in the classroom, what I have called the "class mind" and the "course mind." This is the larger and more important story.

#### The Task Ahead

While Thomas seems to appreciate some of the concepts presented in *Dark Night, Early Dawn*, she says that there are "many inaccuracies and on certain issues [Bache's] findings do not go far enough and can therefore prove misleading." Unfortunately, she does not elaborate on what these inaccuracies are beyond a few comments, and that's a shame because *this is exactly where I think a productive conversation could begin*. As I said in my preface, I assume that my perspective is incomplete, because the subject is simply too vast for any one mind to encompass in its totality. I assume that no one person's experience of the universe, however deep, will tell the whole story. I am intrigued, therefore, when someone steps forward with experiences that are different from mine in important ways, because here the opportunity arises to see more together than either of us can see on

our own. Rather than attempting to diminish spiritual methodologies that differ from our own, I think we would be better served bringing together multiple perspectives from multiple experiential methods so that we can refine and extend our collective vision of the Great Mystery.

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**Prof. Chris M. Bache, PhD** has been a professor of religious studies at Youngstown State University for over 2 decades teaching in transpersonal studies, comparative spirituality, consciousness research, and Eastern religions. For two years he was the Director of Transformative Learning at the Institute of Noetic Sciences. His most recent book is 'Dark Night, Early Dawn: Steps to a Deep Ecology of Mind'.

<sup>1</sup>Zahner, R. C., *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* (1959); Smith, H., "Do Drugs Have Religious Import?" *J. Philosophy* (1964), and "Psychedellic Theophanies and the Religious Life," *Christianity and Crisis* (1967). Other discussants include: Clark, W. C., "Religion and the Consciousness-Expanding Substances" in Booth, E., ed., *Religion Ponders Science* (1964); Havens, J., "Memo on the Religious Implications of Consciousness-Changing Drugs," *J. Scientific Study of Religion* (1964); and Pahnke, W., and Richards, W., "Implications of LSD and Experimental Mysticism," *J. Religion and Health* (1966). This debate has matured considerably in recent years; see Badiner, Alan, ed., *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics* (2002), Smith, Huston, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception* (2000), and Grof, Stanislav, *The Cosmic Game* (1998).

### Know Deeply, Know Thyself More Deeply

Go deeper than love, for the soul has greater depths,  
Love is like the grass, but the heart is deep wild rock  
Molten, yet dense and permanent.

Go down to your deep old heart, and lose sight of yourself.  
And lose sight of me, the me whom our  
turbulently loved.

Let us lose sight of ourselves, and break the mirrors.  
For the fierce curve of our lives is moving again to the depths  
Out of sight, in the deep living heart.

D H Lawrence

### REFLECTIONS ON THE COLLECTIVE

If people crowd together and form a mob, then the dynamisms of the collective man are let loose – beasts or demons that lies dormant in every person until he is part of a mob. The change of character brought about the uprush of collective forces is amazing. A gentle or reasonable being can be transformed into a maniac or savage beast. One is always inclined to lay the blame on external circumstances, but nothing could explode in us if it had not already been there. – C G Jung

Try as he will, man seems incapable of forming an international community, with power and prestige great enough to bring social restraint upon collective egoism. He has not even succeeded in disciplining anti-social group egoism within the nation. The very extension of human sympathies has therefore resulted in the creation of larger units of conflict without abolishing conflict. – Reinhold Niebuhr

Politics is connected with herds rather than with individuals, and the passions which are important in politics are, therefore, those in which the various members of a given herd can feel alike. The broad instinctive mechanism upon which political edifices have to be built is one of co-operation within the herd and hostility towards other herds.

Bertrand Russell