The Use of Entheogens in the Vajrayana Tradition: a brief summary of preliminary findings together with a partial bibliography.

© 2007 R.C. Parker (updated 2008)

Warning: datura is an extremely powerful and dangerous hallucinogen. In addition to the dangers inherent in severe hallucinosis, the plant is quite toxic. There have been reports of coma and death resulting from this toxicity.

The broad definition of entheogen used here is: "plants or substances capable of producing visionary experiences which are used for magico-religious or psychospiritual purposes." The use of entheogens in the Vajrayana tradition has been documented by such scholars as Ronald M Davidson, William George Stablein, Bulcsu Siklos, David B. Gray, Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, Shashibhusan Das Gupta, Francesca Fremantle, Shinichi Tsuda, David Gordon White, Rene de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, James Francis Hartzell, Edward Todd Fenner, Ian Baker, Dr. Pasang Yonten Arya and numerous others. The research of these scholars has established that these plants were definitely used in Vajrayana (within limited contexts) and that they were used in a manner largely consistent with their use in Saivite and shamanic traditions.

This investigation has focused primarily on the use of entheogens in the anuttara-yoga-tantra materials especially (but not exclusively) the Yogini-tantras. The research has centered on the use of datura and cannabis (which are consider entheogenic plants despite the fact that neither is a "classical psychedelic").

The findings which have the most obvious importance are the numerous references to pills, siddhi-drugs, and rasayana elixirs which contain either datura or cannabis. (Stablein 1976, Baker 2004, Gray. 2007, Walter 1986, Fenner 1979, Dash 1988, Arya 1998)

The significance of ointments and homa-rituals making use of datura is not as readily apparent. Davidson has commented on these noting that datura was “employed as a narcotic paste or as wood in a fire ceremony and could be easily absorbed through the skin or the lungs. The seeds of this powerful narcotic, termed "passion seeds" (candabija), are the strongest elements and contain the alkaloids hyoscine, hyoscyamine, and atropine in forms that survive burning or boiling. In even moderate doses, datura can render a person virtually immobile with severe belladonna-like hallucinations.” Numerous references were found to the use of datura in ointments (Stablein 1976, Baker 2004, Hartzell 1991, Davidson 2002). Homa-rituals making use of datura were found to be quite common (Gray 2007, Siklos 1993 & 1996, Tsuda 1974, Fremantle 1971, Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, Hartzell 1991, Davidson 2002). Also found was a detailed meditation on the drug-induced visionary experience as method to gain insight into the nature of reality (Stearns 2006).

Generally speaking, the references that have been located originate in sources that can be divided into three categories:
1) Primary Literature (tantras, original Indian commentaries, and the stories and songs related to the Indian tantric mahasiddhas)

2) Secondary Literature (commentaries, "treasure literature", and rituals texts of Tibetan or Newar origin)

3) Modern Ethnological Research (studies by researchers such as anthropologist and ethnologists which document the use of entheogens within the living traditions of Vajrayana among the Nepalese, Tibetans, Bhutanese etc)

1) A number of the "major" tantras within the Vajrayana tradition specifically mention entheogens (datura and/or cannabis) and their use. These include the Laghusamvara-tantra (aka Chakrasamvara-tantra), Samputa-tantra, Samvarodaya-tantra, Mahakala-tantra, Guhyasamaja-tantra, Vajramahabhairava-tantra, and the Krsnayamari-tantra. Relevant material can also be found in the Candamaharosana-tantra and the Caturpitha-tantra. There are a number of tantras of secondary importance (within the Indo-Tibetan tantric traditions) that mention entheogens such as Amrtakalasa-tantra, Tara-tantra and the Anuttaratara-tantra. Of course, mentions of entheogens can also be found in commentaries on the tantras. Interestingly, some commentaries to tantras will mention the use of specific entheogens even when the tantra itself does not; examples of this are Vajragarbha's Dasasahasrika-Hevajra-tika (a Hevajra commentary) and Pundarika's Vimalaprabha (the main commentary to the Kalachakra-tantra). Included in what is consider the "primary literature" are the traditional stories and songs relating to the tantric mahasiddhas. These include such standard Vajrayana texts as the Caturasiti-siddhapraavrtti and the Carya-giti-kosa-vrtti. Also included are sources of stories and songs relating to the mahasiddhas from the Indian vernacular literature such as the Gopicander-Sannyas (although it could be argued that these vernacular sources are best grouped amongst the "secondary literature")

2) The Tibetan and Newar literature mentioning entheogens. This includes the Tibetan commentarial literature (for instance lam 'bras texts from the sa skya tradition such as _dpal sa skya pa'i lam 'bras kyi chos gces btus__). Although they are usually said to be the work of early Indic visitors to Tibet, I classify the Tibetan "treasure literature" as secondary texts of Tibetan origin. An example of a "treasure text" containing formulas for pills and ointments containing entheogenic substances is the _bi ma snying thig_. Of course it goes without saying that commentaries on the "treasure literature" (which mention entheogens) such as _gter gyi rnam bshad_ or Longchenpa's _snying thig ya bzhi_ are included as secondary texts. Ritual texts would also fall into what I consider the secondary literature.

3) A number of anthropologists, ethnologists, and ethnobotanists have documented the use of entheogens within the living traditions of Vajrayana practiced in Nepal and to a lesser extent Tibet and Bhutan.

When these sources are taken together, their combined weight leaves little room for doubt that Vajrayana has had a well-documented tradition of making use of entheogenic plants
(especially datura and cannabis) for magico-religious and psychospiritual purposes. While this use may never have been particularly widespread, it is certainly significant.

**Partial Bibliographic List of Resources**

It is unfortunate that many of the references to entheogens in the below literature amount to only a couple of sentences buried deep within a scholarly text dedicated to other subjects. Very few of these resources contain a sustained discussion of these plants and their significance in Vajrayana. It is hoped that, in the future, this topic will receive a more thorough treatment.

**Vajrayana and the use of datura and cannabis**

- David B. Gray. 2007, *The Chakrasamvara Tantra (The Discourse of Sri Heruka)* A Study and Annotated Translation (cannabis and datura)


- Bulcsu Siklos 1996, *The Vajrabhairava Tantras* (datura and possibly cannabis)


- Cyrus Stearns 2006. *Taking the Result as the Path: Core Teachings of the Sakya Lamdre Tradition* (datura)

- Rene de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet - The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Dieties* (datura and cannabis)


Tulku Thondup Rinpoche 1997, *Hidden Teachings of Tibet* (datura)


Dr. Pasang Yonten Arya 1998, *Dictionary of Tibetan Materia Medica* (mentions the use of cannabis as a rasayana type elixir in a Tibetan tantra related to the goddess Tara)

Vaidya Bhagwan Dash 1988, *Formulary of Tibetan Medicine* (contains a number of rasayana derived “mercurial medicines” containing cannabis and one with datura)

Lama Zopa Rinpoche 1974, *Kopan Course No. 7* (datura)


---

**Siddha stories and songs**

Keith Dowman 1985, *Masters of Mahamudra; Songs and Histories of the Eighty-Four Buddhist Siddhas* (cannabis and datura)

Benoytosh Bhattacharyya 1931, *An Introduction to Buddhist Esoterism* (cannabis and datura)


Keith Dowman 1988, *Masters of Enchantment* (datura)

Lalit Tiwari (undated), *Siddha Medicine: Its Basic Concepts* (cannabis [Goraksa])

Mike Crowley 2007 personal communication

---

**Datura visions and insight into the illusory nature of reality**

Cyrus Stearns 2006, *Taking the Result as the Path: Core Teachings of the Sakya Lamdre Tradition* (datura)

Herbert V. Guenther 1976, *Kindly Bent to Ease Us: Wonderment* (datura)


Tulku Thonlop Rinpoche 1989, *Buddha Mind: An Anthology of Lonchen Rabjam’s Writings on on Dzogpa Chenpo*


Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche 2006, *Repeating the words of the Buddha* (datura)


Elías Capriles 2006, *Beyond Being Beyond Mind, Beyond History: A Dzogchen founded meta-transpersonal, meta-postmodern philosophy and psychology for survival and an age of communion* (datura)

Keith Dowman 1988, *Masters of Enchantment* (datura)

Keith Dowman 1985, *Masters of Mahamudra; Songs and Histories of the Eighty-Four Buddhist Siddhas* (cannabis and datura)

*Mahavairocanaabhisambodhitrantra* (siddhi drugs and unspecified hallucinogens)

---

Relevant ethnological or ethnobotanical research relating to the use of cannabis

Rene de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet - The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Dieties* (datura and cannabis)


Christian Rätsch 2000, *Shamanism and Tantra in the Himalayas* (information on cannabis, datura, and betel etc in Himalayan traditions)


**Miscellaneous**


Ardussi's *Brewing and Drinking the Beer of Enlightenment* (ointments for siddhis)

**Pan-Indian Yogic tradition and the use of cannabis and datura**

Frits Staal 1975, *Exploring Mysticism* (cannabis and datura)
Pratricia J Morningstar 1985, *Thandai and Chilam: Traditional beliefs about the proper uses of Cannabis*. Published in Journal of Psychoactive Drugs 17(3) pgs 141-165


Sures Chandra Banerji 1992, *New Light on Tantra* (cannabis and datura)


Swami Satyananda Sawaswati 1984, *Kundalini Tantra* (cannabis)

Swami Satyananda Sawaswati 1984, *Sure Ways to Self Realization* (datura and cannabis)


Mircea Eliade 1990, *Yoga: immortality and freedom* (cannabis)