

Dennis McKenna

A late night chat with Dennis about his thoughts on Salvia, ayahuasca, and more

by Michael Pinchera

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MICHAEL PINCHERA: When did you first hear about entheogens and their divine purposes?

DENNIS MCKENNA: It's hard to pinpoint. I remember first hearing about entheogens, must have been in the early sixties. I remember my mother and one of her friends talking about "did you know they have some drug that will make you remember things, or look into your mind and realize you're a rapist", that kind of thing. This must have been when the media had just started alluding to LSD, and not always negatively. Several things followed in short order, the Life Magazine article about Wasson, which I don't actually remember; but I do remember the one about LSD, and then Huxley's books, a number of things, made us realize that this was something worth looking into.

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MP: So about what age was this when your mom and her friends discussed drugs that made you realize you were a rapist?!?! Hah!

DMK: I must have been about 11 or 12. I didn't take LSD until I was 16, but I had smoked weed about a year before that. It wasn't for lack of trying, my first attempts were with morning-glory seeds, following the Newsweek articles about that. We went down to the local seed shop and bought up the entire supply! My encounters with morning glories were inglorious, to say the least. Mostly, I just got sick. Didn't do enough. I have since had much better luck with baby woodrose.

ME: Did Terence turn you on to this world, or did you start using these just with local friends?

DMK: I went to Berkeley, where Terence was living at the time, and San Francisco for the "Summer of Love" in 1967. That summer was the first time I'd taken LSD. It wasn't until several years later that I was actually able to access entheogens and find out what was going on... Terence was a student in California by then... He turned me on first, to weed, in the city park across from our house.

MP: You like (baby Hawaiian) woodrose seeds better than morning glories?

DMK: I think woodrose seeds are kind of neglected. I thought they were pretty good, though I did have one harrowing experience when I took too much.

MP: Could you explain?

DMK: Well, I was living in Boulder at the time, with my girlfriend. I must have been about 19. We went up to a lake outside town, and I must have taken about 25 seeds. She took maybe half as much. It was very strong, but also very physically uncomfortable, something like ergotism. Lots of cardiovascular type

symptoms, for both of us even though she had taken less, the weight difference evened it out... and there was also lots of paranoia. We were in a cafe in this town and became convinced that the cops were in there, and trailing us... so we fled, and managed to get on the highway and hitch a ride... but it was fairly hair-raising, in a kind of Furry Freak Brothers kind of way... Later I found out that 7-12 is about the right range, for my weight... I've since had very positive, very clear experiences on it.

MP: What entheogen(s) do you feel the most connected with?

DMK: I think, for me, the tryptamine hallucinogens, or more specifically, the orally-active tryptamines, which means psilocybin and ayahuasca... Both are wondrous substances, and both have been very good to me... although they are different, obviously. Most of the interesting events of my life I owe to one or the other, and I don't just mean trips, although they count too. It's more about the path they set you on. If you're interested at all in psychedelics, it's hard to be casual about it.

MP: Is there a great difference between a Yaje trip when the Yaje is made up of only DMT and MAO-inhibitors compared to the traditional concoction which includes various Solanaceous and Nicotiana ingredients?

DMK: I don't know. It's hard to systematically evaluate these things, because every curandero, in Peru, has his own concoction, things that he liked to put in it. It's hard to know what you're getting from these sources... and there's lots of variation. In Brazil, I have mostly drunk with the UDV [União de Vegetal], and their material is very clean, only B caapi, and psychotria... but it can be very strong, if they want it to be... They [the UDV] have these ceremonies, they have buildings, essentially circular churches, and they are organized into nucleos which are kind of like parishes... it's all centered around these temples, which are also like community centers. They are usually circular, with raised steps like an amphitheater inside, and these comfortable chairs. They gather every Saturday night and the mestres, in the center, hand out the brew... I have often been to sessions of upwards of 500 people... it's actually a very moving experience.

MP: There seems to be some confusion about the actual tryptamine contents and levels of various plants. Can you help clarify the amounts of DMT and 5-MeO DMT which are present in plants such as *Desmanthus illinoensis* and *Mimosa hostilis*?

DMK: *Desmanthus illinoensis*... *M. hostilis*, all of these things have tryptamines, but you're right, there's a lot of variation. Probably the best sources are *A. colubrina*, or some of the Australian Acacias... also *Diploteris carbrerana*, is a rare and underutilized DMT plant, and it's excellent...

MP: Don't *A. colubrina* seeds have high levels of 5-MeO and some Bufotenine?

DMK: No. No 5-MeO. It's mainly bufotenine, which is kind of a mystery because it's incredibly strong, but bufotenine is not supposed to be active... because it doesn't penetrate the blood-brain barrier... so goes the conventional wisdom!

MP: So does *A. colubrina* contain DMT or other visual tryptamines?

DMK: The one who has worked with it is Ott. He says, you grind up one seed, maybe roast it slightly first. Grind into a fine powder, and snort it. The effects are

immediate and strong. He swears it works. Yes, it contains some DMT and bufotenine.

MP: There has been mention, on the Heffter Organization home page, that possibly eight other Salvia species contain chemicals like those which give Salvia divinorum her power, can you elaborate?

DMK: Well, diterpenes similar in structure to Salvinorin are actually pretty widespread in nature. They occur in a number of other Salvia species, and even species outside that family... but they are similar in structure, not identical. Nobody knows anything about their pharmacology. They may be inactive, or they may be active, or they may be neurotoxins that will drop you dead in your tracks. This is another area where caution is advised... but I've no doubt that there are many other psychoactive diterpenes out there.

MP: I am dying for species names!

DMK: Some Salvias which contain the Salvinorin "backbone" are: *S. rubescens*, *S. splendens*, *S. truxillensis*, *S. pseudococcinea*.

MP: Are those as rare as Salvia divinorum?

DMK: Don't know. You probably won't find them at your local garden shop... then again, you just might. You will have to look into it. There is a young man I met at the Millennium conference just recently, I think he's a post-doc at UCSF or something. He had a very interesting idea for characterizing a Salvinorin receptor, and I think a sample I isolated sometime ago got to him and he is now working on this project. He wants to isolate a DNA library from a mouse brain, and express that in frog oocytes; the receptors will express on the surface of the egg, and then he can incubate it with Salvia divinorum and if it spikes a polarity change, he knows he's got it! Then he can start fishing out the gene using molecular probes, and finally whittle it down... I thought it was brilliant, to the degree I understand it. He had some other interesting ideas, too, to use 5MeO - DIPT, which causes auditory distortions, to study the genetic basis of bird songs... interesting guy. This is the sort of thing that needs to happen with psychedelics... they need to be recognized for the tools that they are. People need to get over their fear, and their awe, to a certain degree and just realize that we have in psychedelics tremendous tools for understanding the mind.

MP: Wow, something that a McKenna doesn't fully understand!

DMK: Believe me, there's lots I don't understand... in fact, the older I get, the less I understand... and the more I understand that I don't understand... And I think this is also part of what psychedelics teach one. The consistent "understanding" if you will, that comes home to me when I take psychedelics, especially psilocybin or ayahuasca, is that, we really only comprehend a very small part of reality, and that small part, very imperfectly. Something like, "you monkeys only think you're running the show..." and that is both humbling and reassuring.

MP: Quite humbling! Who have you been influenced the most by in your entheogenic studies or journeys? *DMK:* Well, a lot of people. Some of the ones who are most important are not known for their involvement in this field, and actually weren't. I had a supervisor, Dr. Siegel, who was a teacher when I was a master's student in Hawaii in the mid-'70s. He was really my scientific father. He taught me to look at everything with curiosity, and outside the boundaries... the

man could find connections between everything. That was a very important experience for me. He taught me how to link imagination and science. And then there were others, more familiar to everyone.. Schultes... Shulgin, Wasson, etc. I'd have to say that Schultes was a big influence... I tried to study under him, even made a pilgrimage to Harvard in the early '70s to meet him, and try to get into grad school... He was wonderful, very kind and encouraging, but Harvard didn't see me as "their" kind of student, so I didn't get accepted... as it turned out, this was for the best. I ended up going to the U. of Hawaii, where Dr. Siegel took me under his wing, then I went to UBC to study psilocybin under Neil Towers, another mentor and wonderful person...if I had gone with Schultes, I would have become a plant taxonomist, as it was, I leaned more toward chemistry/pharmacology. So it was a good trade-off.

MP: Do you feel entheogen explorers are assisting human evolution by slowly altering the genetic makeup of the species, transforming into Dr. Leary's "futants"?

DMK: No, I don't really think they work on that level. Genetic evolution is a slow process, much outstripped by cultural evolution. I do think psychedelics propel the cultural evolution process... the changes of the last fifty years or so owe a lot to the diffusion of psychedelics into the wider society... and it's still happening. Things like ayahuasca are literally "emerging from the jungle" because they have a very important message for our species... I really think these plants are the way we communicate with the rest of the biosphere...I'm not speaking in any mystical sense here, I'm talking biochemistry. You really have to view these compounds in the larger context. Psychedelics, the natural ones anyway, are plant secondary compounds. A good deal of human history is shaped by human interactions with plant secondary compounds. Contacts between Europe and Asia were about spices, Europe raped the New World to get their hands on their drug and food plants, coca, chocolate, etc., even while vigorously stamping out the "demonic" entheogens.

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MP: Do you have any strong opinions about Dr. Leary?

DMK: Leary? I didn't know the man well, but basically, I admired him. I think he had some very interesting ideas, and in lots of ways he was ahead of his time. I remember an incident in high school. We were in one of those "antidrug" assemblies, where they get some narc to come in and basically tell you a bunch of lies about drugs. LSD was the big scare at the time, and they talked about Leary, and how they couldn't make heads or tails of what he said. And of course, I and about three other people in the school were the only ones doing drugs at that time, and we thought what Leary said made perfect sense!

MP: His own special LSD-code language!

DMK: Right. These people, the teachers, were like idiots. They had no idea what he could possibly mean by "cellular consciousness," and, you know, "journeying through the superelectronics of DNA..." but we could all relate to that, because we'd been there!

MP: What are your opinions on the feline/child anesthetic Ketamine?

DMK: I haven't had sufficient experience with it to say much. I've taken it once... it was pleasant enough, but didn't grab on, since I never repeated it. Some people seem to find a lot in it. I think it's a very safe anesthetic, and that's a good thing about Ketamine.

MP: What are your visions or ideas for December 21, 2012?

DMK: Well, you'll have to take that up with my brother. He is the inventor of the time wave, and the one who is focused on this date. I think basically what he says is true, but by the time we get to 2012 things will be so bizarre that it may as well be the eschatology. So I think its going to happen that way rather than some catastrophic event on 12/21/12.

MP: Do you have any thoughts on the identity of Soma?

DMK: Yes. I think clearly Soma has to be either a psilocybin mushroom or a Peganum harmala/DMT admixture combination. I don't buy the A. muscaria theory; clearly soma is a tryptamine. It could be S. cubensis; it could be P. harmala and... what? Lots of possibilities. Did you realize that the burning bush that God appeared to Moses in was an Acacia? The North African Acacias are often loaded with DMT... what was this guy smoking? Acacia could be the lost DMT admixture of soma.

MP: What can we do, as entheogenic worshippers/gardeners/explorers to positively affect the straight public's views on entheogens?

DMK: I think the thing that will ultimately persuade the public is if medical applications are found for these compounds. That can change people's ideas, and in fact, it may be the only way, in our uptight society, that these drugs can ever be integrated. But then the other possibility is religion; and I think you're going to see some interesting battles and some odd alliances in the next few years over psychedelics and religious usage. Because cults like the UDV are spreading to Europe, and the U. S., and they are legitimate religions which happen to use ayahuasca. So it will be interesting to see how all this sorts out.

MP: Have you any advice for current students of Ethnography/Anthropology/Chemistry?

DMK: Find a specialty and get very good at it. If you want to do research on psychedelics, don't go looking for a program where you can do that, because there aren't any. Instead you have to make your own program, go through the back door, so to speak. Again, this is where the right mentor can make all the difference.

MP: I would just like to thank you so much. I have greatly enjoyed this extremely informative experience! It has been a true joy!

DMK: Thanks. Over & out...

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[Michael Pinchera](#) is a journalism major and entheogen enthusiast.