Psychoactive Plants in Tantric Buddhism

Cannabis and Datura Use in Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism

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This article represents a fairly comprehensive survey of references to datura and cannabis in Indo-Tibetan tantric Buddhist texts that have been translated into English. The online version includes more Tibetan and Sanskrit transliterations, links to referenced articles, and additional related material. See Erowid.org/extracts/n14/tantra. The authors wish to thank Professor David B. Gray and Professor Geoffrey Samuel for their encouragement and many helpful suggestions.

Since the beginning of modern discourse about psychedelics in American intellectual culture, seminal authors have noted parallels between psychedelic experiences and contemplative practices of Asia. In his 1954 essay *The Doors of Perception*, Aldous Huxley likened his experience of mescaline to the insights precipitated by yoga and meditation. Author R. Gordon Wasson went further, arguing that some spiritual disciplines of India may be intended to evoke an experience that was originally entheogenic in nature.[1]

By the late 1960s, counterculture rhetoric strongly associated psychedelics and Eastern mysticism. Alan Watts tackled the topic in his 1962 book *The Joyous Cosmology*; Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, and Ralph Metzner later wrote a guide to psychedelic experiences based on the fourteenth-century tantric manual *Bardo Thödol*, the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.[2]

Psychedelic experience and Eastern meditation have become so intertwined in Western culture that their roots are difficult to disentangle. Fortunately, in recent years several thoughtful book chapters and articles have appeared examining the complex relationship between the explosion of psychedelic counterculture and the contemporaneous popularization of Buddhism in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s.[3]

Cakrasamvara, Tibet House Museum

Unfortunately, the history of psychoactive plant use by Buddhists in Asia has not been addressed with comparable rigor. Although interesting speculative work has been written on the subject,[4,5] a focused analysis of explicit textual evidence has not been published. Over the last few decades, university religious studies departments have produced translations of Buddhist tantric texts of unprecedented quality, providing ample material for an examination of psychoactive plant use by Buddhists in Asia. This article considers some of the evidence with respect to tantric Buddhism in India and Tibet, focusing on the use of cannabis and datura.

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Tantric Buddhism

The term "tantra" refers to a great many religious practices and beliefs. It is so difficult to define, that some religious historians argue the word has little meaning other than to mark extreme or taboo practices.[6] The Sanskrit word and its Tibetan equivalent (*rgyud*) refer to the texts that form the scriptural basis for the religious movement, and also mean "continuum" or "lineage".

Despite the difficulty in pinning down the term, different tantric lineages generally share some characteristics. Practices and scriptures are often secret, with instructions given in private by teachers to students with whom they have consecrated a formal guru/disciple relationship. Many tantric practices must be authorized by empowerment ceremonies, which sometimes last for days or weeks and may carry lifelong practice commitments as a condition of receiving them.

Most tantric scriptures are practice-oriented texts associated with specific deities. Tantric meditation and ritual often involve complex visualizations of these deities—so much so that the Tibetan polymath Tsong Khapa (1357–1419) proposed "deity yoga" as the defining characteristic of tantra.[7] Many tantric yogas are intended to elicit extraordinary states of consciousness, including sexual yoga with real or visualized partners and energy yogas that manipulate body heat, respiration, or dreaming.

The concept of tantra as a sex-positive religion devoted to embracing the material world is a modern construction that bears little resemblance to the historical tantric practices and beliefs of Asia.[8]

Tantra began to take shape as a major religious movement in India between the sixth and ninth centuries CE.[9,10] Many of the extant tantric texts were written in these years and the movement reached a peak that lasted several centuries. Most tantras were composed in Sanskrit in India and Central Asia, and many were eventually exported to China and Tibet.

During 950–1200 CE, Tibet underwent a period of upheaval followed by a "renaissance", in which the old Tibetan empire collapsed and reorganized into a society ruled by a complex network of powerful clans and religious institutions.[11] During this renaissance, enormous resources and labor were devoted to painstakingly translating Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit into Tibetan. The Tibetan written language had been developed during the seventh century by a committee of religious scholars specifically for the purpose of translating scriptures from Sanskrit.[12] Many Buddhist tantras that are lost in their original Sanskrit forms still exist in the Tibetan scriptural canon.

Why Look to Tantra?

There are several reasons to look to tantra for psychoactive substance use in pre-modern Buddhist Asia. The first and most important is that non-tantric monastic Buddhism is far less tolerant of violations of scriptural precepts than tantric Buddhism. Buddha's injunction against consuming intoxicants precludes the open use of psychoactive substances by members of the Buddhist monastic establishment. In contrast, tantric Buddhism can allow for, and even applaud, shocking transgressions as a sign that the yogi has transcended ordinary patterns of valuation and behavior.

While non-tantric Buddhist practice was overwhelmingly the purview of ordained monks and nuns in medieval India, the *tāntrika*, or practitioner of tantra, was often a layperson.

A mainstay of tantric literature is the *siddha*, a sorcerer-like yogi who achieves extraordinary powers such as flight or psychic abilities through religious practice. Unlike the introverted monk quietly seeking liberation behind monastery walls, the *siddha* expresses spiritual attainment in the world. In their biographies, tantric *siddha*s often commit outrageous acts of apparently reckless violence, consumption of intoxicants, or sexual conduct.[13] In one famous legend, the guru *Hāḍipā* of the *Nāth siddha* lineage is said to have broken a five-year fast by consuming enormous quantities of hemp, *Strychnos nux-vomica* (*Kucila*, the "strychnine tree"), and datura.[14]

In addition to accommodating the use of psychoactives, tantric texts sometimes include encyclopedic instructions for the use of medicinal plants. Ayurvedic medicine and yoga are two important antecedents to tantra,[9] and those disciplines provide a template for simultaneously developing both body and mind in the service of liberation.[15] This holistic approach to spiritual practice is preserved in several important Buddhist tantras in which physical, mental, and spiritual ailments form a single complex of related concerns that must be treated in tandem. This approach is an easy rhetorical fit with pre-tantric Buddhist scriptures, which sometimes describe Buddha as a doctor and suffering as an illness.[16] Consequently, some Buddhist tantras include compendious information about medicinal plants, including cannabis and datura.

D. stramonium, Photo by Acidmon

Datura in Buddhist Tantra

Both *Datura stramonium* and *Datura metel* are well-documented in India and Tibet. In Sanskrit datura is known as *dhattūra*, while in Tibetan the plant is *da dhu ra*. Datura's effects were described in several ayurvedic *materia medica*. It is mentioned in the *Kāmasūtra* (ca. 4th–6th century CE), which says: "If food be mixed with the fruit of the thorn apple (dathura) it causes intoxication".[17] It also advises a man to anoint his penis with honey infused with datura and long peppers (*pippali* = *Piper lungum*) before sexual intercourse to make his partner "subject to his will".[17]

[...] tantric *siddhas* often commit outrageous acts of apparently reckless violence, consumption of intoxicants, or sexual conduct.

Datura is associated with several Hindu and Buddhist deities. *Vāmana Purāṇa*, a pre-modern devotional text dedicated to Vishnu (date unknown), tells that datura sprouted from the chest of the god Śiva.[18] Its flowers are sometimes used as ceremonial offerings—a practice that continues to this day in Nepal.[18] Wrathful

deities in tantric Buddhism are said to be fond of datura,[19] which is sometimes used as a ritual offering to placate these deities.[19] References to datura in the pre-eleventh century *Vajramahabhairava Tantra* have been used to argue on behalf of an Old World origin of *Datura metel*.[20]

This compound "becomes an ointment for the eyes. After applying it one revolves around and around like a bee."

The psychoactive effects of datura have long been recognized in Tibet. The religious author Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092–1158) used the effects of datura to illustrate how our senses can be distorted, writing: "When datura […] is eaten, appearances manifest as yellow."[21] The third Dodrup Chen Rinpoche (1865–1926), a Tibetan scholar-yogi, compares a cryptic "nectar rendering liberation" to the power of datura. He writes, "[I]f one takes the nectar by itself the [subtle body] will receive blessings spontaneously and excellent accomplishments will be achieved, like being intoxicated by alcohol […] and being deluded with visions by Datura or thorn apple[…]".[22]

Datura intoxication may have been widespread in *siddha* culture. In *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, Ronald M. Davidson observes:

> [M]any of the *siddha* scriptures discuss ointments and drugs, especially those applied to the eyes or feet. The use of the various species of datura (especially [*Datura metel*]) is particularly evident. Sometimes termed the "crazy datura" (*unmattadhattura*) or "*Śiva*'s datura," it was generally employed as a narcotic paste or as wood in a fire ceremony and could be easily absorbed through the skin or the lungs.[10]

The use of datura in various rites is prescribed by a number of seminal tantras that exerted a profound influence on Indian and Tibetan religious culture. Most of the known datura references pertain to magico-religious rites of attack intended to cause enemies to go insane, to destroy their wealth, or to drive them away.

The *Guhyasamāja Tantra* (ca. 8th century CE) is generally considered one of the earliest extant Buddhist tantras.[6] This key scripture describes the basic architecture of tantric practice and is venerated by several schools of Tibetan Buddhism—particularly the Gelukpas, who take it as the central tantra.[23] In the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, Buddha Vajradhara gives instructions for undertaking the destruction of evil-doers:

> [M]aking an image of the enemy with the excrement and urine of those who follow the great Dharma, wrathfully burn it in a fire of thorn-wood, and even the Buddha will certainly perish. […] So he said black mustard-seeds, salt, oil, poison, and thorn-apple [datura], these are taught as the supreme destroyers of all the Buddhas.[24]

Similarly, the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* (ca. late 8th century CE) is highly venerated in Tibet to this day. It states: "Should the well-equipoised one immolate mustard oil with crows' wings and [the victim's name] in a *datura* fire, he will immediately be expelled or killed."[25]

The *Cakrasamvara Tantra* also tells that a *tāntrika* can drive an enemy insane using magical implements, including a charnel ground cloth bound around the "five intoxicants". The Tibetan commentator Budön Rinchen Drup explains that "five intoxicants" refers to the root, stem, leaves, flower, and fruit of the datura plant[25]—all of which contain psychoactive alkaloids.[18] In another reference to datura, the tantra claims that immolating "one hundred and eight golden fruits" (*kanakaphala*, explicated as "datura fruit" by the commentator Jayabhadra) will allow one to become insubstantial.[25]

The *Vajramahabhairava Tantra* (ca. 10th century CE) contains instructions for killing an enemy saying that the practitioner should perform a rite: "naked, with disheveled hair and facing south, draw the sixteen-section wheel of *Vajramahabhairava* […] on a shroud in venom, blood, salt, black mustard, *nimba* (*Azadirachta indica*) and *Datura* juice using a pen made from a raven feather or from human bone."[20]

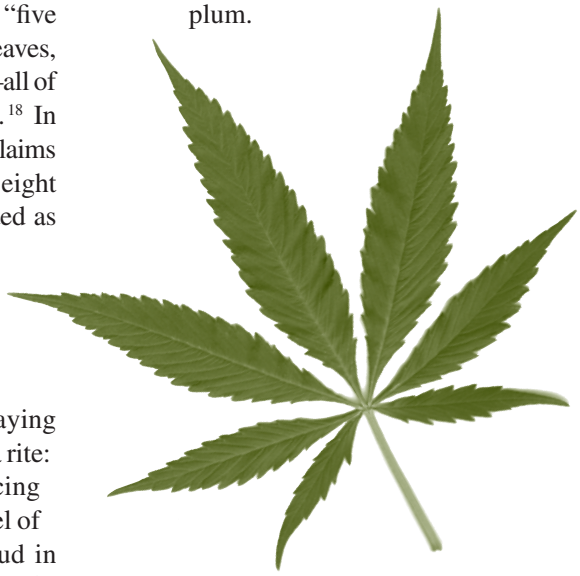
This tantra also provides instructions for using the ash of datura wood to magically break a relationship between a man and woman, or to drive people away.[20] Datura fruit may be used in magical rituals to drive an enemy insane:

> […The practitioner] takes *Datura* fruit and, mixing it with human flesh and worm-eaten sawdust, offers it in food or drink. He recites the mantra and that person will instantly go insane and then die within seven days.[20]

and to destroy wealth:

> Then if, wanting to turn wealth into poverty, [he] performs a hundred and eight burnt offerings at night in a fire of cotton using *Datura* fruit, (that wealth) will indeed become trifling.[20]

Datura was sometimes included in ritual fire offerings that may have produced psychoactive smoke. A key eleventh century commentary on the *Kālachakra Tantra* by *Puṇḍarīka* describes: "When the oblation is offered in the octagonal pot, [on a fire made with *arka* faggots, with thorn-apples [datura] and *kusumadyas* offered into the fire, it accomplishes stupefactions [of the enemy] […]".[26] *Arka* has been identified as milkweed and *kusumadyas* as Assyrian plum.



Cannabis Leaf, Image by Tganja

The *Mahākāla Tantra* (ca. 8th–12th century CE) contains extensive *materia medica* and magical instructions. In chapter twelve, "On Ointments", it instructs practitioners to harvest datura and two other plants, and mix them with the bile of a black cat and honey. This compound "becomes an ointment for the eyes. After applying it one revolves around and around like a bee."[16]

In a similar vein, tantra historian Ronald Davidson notes that the use of datura in tantric rituals "may have something to do with the *siddha* fascination with flying or perhaps inform[s] their iconography, for a common report from the use of datura is the sensation of aerial transport or the feeling of being half-man and half-animal."[10]

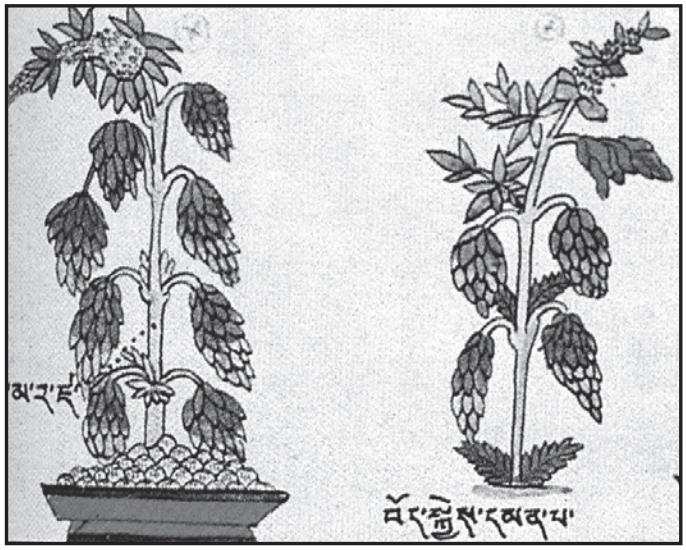
The *Mahākāla Tantra* also offers instructions to find lost treasure by creating a magical pill that includes datura:

> After having ground the following medicines one should make pills: the seed grain of *khoḍiyā*, the seed of sesbania, the juice of the leaf of the waved-leaf fig tree, the juice of *Villarsia cristata*, the powder of the regurgitation of cow, the juice of *Śiva*'s intoxicant [= datura], the juice of the root of the wormseed and onion leaf together with the bile of a snake and honey which has been kept under the ground. When two days [have] gone by, at a cool time (of the day) one should anoint (the eyes) and one will see a hole in the ground.[16]

The fourth chapter of *Kṛṣṇa-yāmari* (ca. 10th century) gives instructions for a wrathful ritual visualization in which the yogi makes "the index finger red with the resins from the thorn-apple leaves and also the seeds of [datura]".[26]

Cannabis in Buddhist Tantra

Like datura, cannabis has a long history in Asia. Scholars have argued that cannabis may have been first cultivated in China in Neolithic times[27] and the plant has been well-known throughout India, Nepal, and Tibet for millennia. Cannabis is referred to in the *Vedas* as "source of happiness" and "liberator".[27]



Cannabis Drawing, from *Marijuana Medicine* by Rätsch

Perhaps the earliest-known literary reference to cannabis appears in the Hindu scripture *Satapatha Brahmana* (ca. 800 BCE).[28] Cannabis also appears in an early medicinal work, the *Sushruta Samhita* (written sometime between 400 BCE and 600 CE) as an antiphlegmatic.[27] In early works of Ayurveda, cannabis is said to "increase gastric fire", i.e., digestion and appetite.[27] Vaṅgasena's *Compendium of the Essence of Medicine*, an eleventh-century Bengali medicinal text, describes cannabis (*bhanga*) as "a drug like opium" and prescribes it as a medicine to enhance longevity.[29]

Like datura, cannabis has been prominently associated with the Hindu god Śiva since ancient times. Cannabis plays an important role in some Hindu tantra lineages, where it may have been used during tantric rites to help adepts overcome their aversions to taboo-breaking religious practices.[29,30] In the *Mahāyāna* tradition, Buddha is said to have subsisted for six years of ascetic practice on nothing but hemp seeds.[31]

Tantra scholar David Gordon White notes that cannabis use was a widespread part of the influential *Nāth siddha* lineage.[9] Additionally, he notes that in the Buddhist *Tārā Tantra*, cannabis is "essential to ecstasy".[9] In that tantra, Buddha says that drinking wine without having consumed cannabis "cannot produce real ecstasy".[32] In this context "ecstasy" is a technical term describing the experience of bliss caused by particular yogic achievements, and an important step in becoming enlightened.

Cannabis serves a magico-medicinal function in several major tantras. Including its datura references described above, much of the *Mahākāla Tantra* concerns the search for the "perfect medicine", a psycho-spiritual elixir that will transform the body and mind in the service of liberation.[17] This lineage extols the use of medicinal herbs (*ausadhi*) to achieve "attainments" or "powers".

Forty-two of the *Mahākāla Tantra*'s fifty chapters include formulas for using medicinal plants, and many of these plants are psychoactive. A partial list includes plants that have been identified as *Acorus calamus*, *Areca catechu*, *Artemisia* spp., *Cannabis sativa*, *Cinnamomum camphora*, *Datura metel*, *Myristica fragrans*, *Nelumbo nucifera*, *Peganum harmala*, and *Valeriana wallichii*. The plants are employed to attain health,

Like datura, cannabis has been prominently associated with the Hindu god Shiva since ancient times.

Cannabis & Sexual Tantra

Anthropologist Christian Rätsch has argued that cannabis is used in tantric sexual yoga, pointing out centuries of belief about its sexual effects in Asia.[27,28] However, because Rätsch focuses on the Hindu/Buddhist syncretic tantric culture of Nepal, relying on Hindu sources for textual support,[36] the relevance of his findings to historical Buddhist tantra is unclear.

wealth, wisdom, and supernatural powers such as seeing underground and flying.

These formulas include cannabis in several different forms, including leaves, resin, and other plant material.[17] Given that these cannabis products are included in the "perfect medicine" formulas of the *Mahākāla Tantra*, cannabis may perhaps be considered a significant part of this tantric lineage.

The *Cakrasamvara Tantra* (described in the datura section above) also emphasizes the magico-medical role of cannabis, stating that a mixture of compounds including cannabis will help one "become a yogin who does what he pleases and stays anywhere whatsoever."[25] The translator notes that all the plants in this recipe are edible, and this formula may therefore refer to the preparation of material for oral consumption, possibly as "*siddhi*-pills".

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Discussion

While ample textual evidence exists to establish that cannabis and datura have appeared in some Buddhist tantras, the relative importance placed on psychoactive plants in Buddhism remains an open question. In his discussion of psychoactive plants in the *Mahākāla Tantra*, William George Stablein argues that the use of psychoactive plants in Buddhism may constitute an entheogenic tradition, writing:

> To the extent that the [*Mahākāla Tantra*] speaks for itself it is clear that what we are calling Tantric medicine includes pharmacologically induced experiences that could indeed be called religious. This may indicate a unique transmission of Buddhist Tantra that is not unlike the psychedelic phenomenon in the New World shamanism and the Vedic rite.[16]

While it is natural to assume that any ritual involving datura or cannabis would capitalize on the plants' psychoactivity, both plants were associated with important deities for many centuries before any tantras were written. They may have been valued for their symbolic importance rather than for their effects.

In the case of datura, many of the references do not clearly direct the yogi to ingest the plant material. For example, the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, and the *Vimalaprabhā* of *Puṇḍarīka* tell that datura is to be burned. While it is possible that the smoke from such a fire would be psychoactive if inhaled, it may not have been part of the ritual to inhale the smoke.

Ronald Davidson claims that the smoke of datura fire offerings was indeed psychoactive, saying datura "was generally employed as a narcotic paste or as wood in a fire ceremony and could be easily absorbed through the skin or the lungs."[10] In support of this position, it is worth noting that Gustav Schenk described experiencing profound psychoactive effects after inhaling smoke from an unknown number of henbane seeds, which contain some of the same psychoactive alkaloids as datura, although in lesser concentrations.[33] Schenk also describes datura smoke as psychoactive.[33]

There is textual evidence that datura's psychoactive effects may have played a part in some tantric rituals. The *Mahākāla Tantra* says the yogi who applies a datura ointment will "revolve like a bee". Parts of the datura plant are referred to in the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* as "the five intoxicants". The *Vajramahabhairava Tantra* may be saying that if you put datura in someone's food, they will go insane.

Were psychoactive plants regarded as helpful for achieving liberation? The *Tārā Tantra* seems to say so; the scripture quotes Buddha as saying that wine without cannabis will not produce "ecstasy", a key attainment in the technique of subtle energy yoga that it describes.[9,32] However, the *Tārā Tantra* is a relatively minor scripture and did not exert a strong influence on Buddhist religious culture.

The value placed on psychoactive plants is less clear in the more important tantras. The datura references found in the *Guhyasamāja* and *Cakrasamvara Tantras* pertain to magico-religious rites that may be useful, but would probably not be considered essential to the attainment of liberation by most Buddhists.

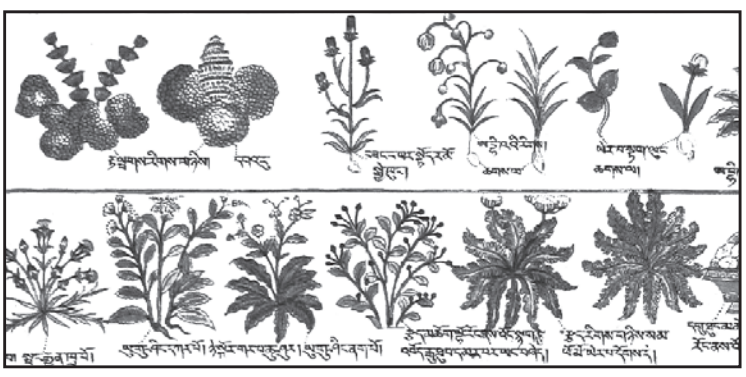
Geoffrey Samuel, author of several books and essays on Buddhist religious culture, suggests that the use of psychoactive plants in the Indian *siddha* cultural milieu may have been similar to current use observed among modern itinerant ascetics (*sadhus*) in Asia.[34] Such use has been documented throughout the Himalayas, where the plants are consumed by *sadhus* for a variety of goals, including healing, recreation, and yoga.[35] Given its large number of applications, it may indeed be that cannabis was regarded by *sadhus* and *siddhas* of medieval India as a useful tool.

The Stablein thesis that a strong parallel exists between psychoactive plant use in Tibet and in New World entheo-shamanism, however, appears to go beyond the available evidence. While psychoactive plants appear in Tibetan

recipes for alchemical elixirs and sacred medicines, Samuel proposes that such use was "not aiming at the more dramatic transformations of consciousness with which we are familiar when looking at the use of entheogens in other cultures."[34]

Even in the paradigmatic entheogen-using traditions of Meso- and South America, it can be difficult to make a clear distinction between "worldly" and "spiritual" use. Ayahuasca in South America and psilocybin-containing mushrooms in Mexico have been used to treat illnesses and perform magical feats such as locating lost objects—does this disqualify the traditions from being considered entheogenic? Surely not. Given the complex motivations and interests that drive use of entheogens the world over, it may indeed be appropriate to call Buddhist use of psychoactive plants entheogenic. However, the ayahuasca vine is venerated by the ayahuasca cults of South America, while it is much less clear that any Buddhist tradition has venerated the use of psychoactive plants to a comparable degree. Entheogens may have been viewed as important in some tantric sects, but the available textual evidence is not sufficient to establish that the use of these plants was regarded as a central part of spiritual practice for most *tāntrikas* of India and Tibet.

[…] it may indeed be appropriate to call Buddhist use of psychoactive plants entheogenic.



Medical Thangka, from SD Rubin Foundation

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