

# The Naked Eye

## Ecstasy, Part II

BY MARK MATOUSEK

*Everyone was doing mind-altering drugs again.  
Was this his second chance?*

Between the ages of 15 and 18, I took every drug I could get my hands on except heroin. I smoked huge amounts of marijuana, took uppers, downers (Quaaludes whenever possible), LSD, MDA, psilocybin mushrooms, opium, and THC, which made me float outside my body. I was not trying to expand my consciousness, not at all. I was just trying to get high.

Drugs got me kicked out of high school and sent me to jail three times before I was 18 (once for attacking a policeman trying to pull me out of a totaled car) and might have ruined my life permanently if I hadn't hit the cocaine wall. On a lost weekend with an aspirin bottle full of Peruvian flake that nearly sent me out of my skin, standing on the shoulder of Highway 101 with my white-nostriled girlfriend, screaming at the top of my lungs while she beat me up out of sheer nervous-system brainfry, I realized that the game was over. I had to stop drugs before they stopped me, and I did, cold turkey, for the next 15 years, except for a little pot.

Life was better without drugs, and for some odd reason—with the exception of a few losers I knew who were still getting high and living with their mothers—I assumed that most of my peers had come to the same conclusion. Drugs had gone the way of lava lamps and beanbag chairs. That's what I thought, anyway. Boy, was I deluded.

Hired by this magazine a few years ago to do a story on the rising use of serious mind-altering drugs, particularly MDMA (street name: Ecstasy), I was stunned to learn that not only had tripping not slowed down, but it

was on the vast increase, largely among seekers. The degree of this love affair between looking for God and turning on was mind-boggling. I'd smoked dope with a naked old sadhu in India once and knew how nicely a couple of tokes could hasten unity consciousness. Still, it was a concern to me that the global sangha I'd looked to as a compass was turning out to be such a bunch of dopers.



Ram Dass didn't surprise me—he'd been tripping before I was born—but the personal habits of other luminaries did give me pause. When Ken Wilber (who'd always been a hero to me) told me how much he'd grooved on his 10 Ecstasy trips, I must admit that the purist in me balked a little. When Ken informed me that a good number of spiritual superstars were having their "mystical" experiences on ketamine (which produces little green men and twirling angels), I felt a certain cramp of betrayal. Meanwhile, experts in the field continued to assure me that these drugs could be excellent adjuncts to therapeutic and spiritual

practice. Chemicals could save clients a great deal of time and heartache, and offer a taste of the love they longed for.

I was annoyed to hear all this—annoyed because I seemed to have missed the drug boat. A Zen guy I know told me that ayahuasca (English translation: "vine of the soul") had given him experiences he might have had to sit on a pillow for decades to achieve. I was half convinced that I'd gone narcotics straight a bit too soon, wasted these substances recreationally without enjoying their deeper rewards. Still, I couldn't quite shake my prudishness. I was determined that any inkling of God I got should be authentic. I agreed with Meher Baba's remark that "if God could be found in a pill, He did not deserve to be called God." I was also scared that if I opened the door to chemicals again, I'd never be able to shut it.

Yet I was curious to try Ecstasy, and I said so to a well-known researcher, who shipped me two of his purest brew in case I changed my mind. The caps sat in my bathroom for months. Why, I wondered, was I so chicken? When had my leash become so tight? Here was a shortcut to higher consciousness in the palm of my hand, and I was too wary to take it. I was scared of real live ecstasy, threatened that something I'd swallow could burst my heart open so wide and expose my feelings to such a transcendent degree. Finally, after eight or nine months, I flushed the Ecstasy down the toilet.

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Illustration by Timothy Cook

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Three years passed. I thought nothing about this drug till someone whose intimacy I wanted very much enticed me again. We were going to Miami for my birthday; it would be fun there. With the prospect of an adventure, if not a revelation, I finally said I'd try it.

On the big day, we fasted through breakfast poolside with our criminal pouch (Class One narcotic, punishable by jail) and a bottle of Evian, watching people in lewd bathing suits. Finally, we toasted and took the pills. I held the arms of my chaise like a life vest.

My panic, in retrospect, was absurd. For the next five hours, my companion and I sailed along together on an effortless wave of talk, sun, skin, connection; thoughts slowed down, settling into the moment, softness, contentment. The drug was erotic without being sexual, warming the hours and making the sex I'd expected to have suddenly seem very funny—nowhere near as arresting as looking into beautiful eyes. My mind cooled down like a hot iron pot taken off the fire, thought slowing down to a trickle.

When we finally came down, there was no crash, no LSD annihilation. We ate, we slept, it was gentle. The next morning, everything was still vivid. Absolutely pleasant.

That was the word for it—pleasant—not amazing, fabulous, piercing. Pleasant, not ecstatic. MDMA had turned out to be perfectly enjoyable, but truthfully I was not transformed. I'd had much more ecstatic experiences with teachers I'd known—talking to Mother Meera, for example, or reading the dialogues of Nisargadatta Maharaj. Even a night of vodka and dancing under the midnight sun of Helsinki had sent me dimensions beyond this.

But then again, I was a stoning snob—I'd done it all before, once upon a time.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek is the author of the memoir *Sex Death Enlightenment* (Riverhead Books). He welcomes responses and personal stories at [MMATOUSEK@aol.com](mailto:MMATOUSEK@aol.com).

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