

With Best Intention: Psychedelic Intention-Setting Rituals as Rites of Sacralization

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ABSTRACT:

This essay explores the ritual function of psychedelic intention-setting ceremonies, using ethnographic data from Burning Man 2023. Drawing from the rites of passage framework established by Arnold van Genn and popularized by Victor Turner, this piece argues that intention settings functions as rites of separation that symbolically sacralize the ensuing psychedelic experience for participants. Intention setting signifies to the ritual actors that the psychedelic experience is special, distinct from other kinds of drug experiences, and is morally virtuous and spiritual.

Introduction

At Burning Man 2023, the Cloud-9 Camp's night-long ceremony with the psychedelic 2C-B (4-bromo-2, 5-dimethoxyphenethylamine) began with one question: "Would anyone like to speak a word of intention? Just one word—for yourself, for this journey."

This question marked the start of their intention-setting ritual and their entrance into the psychedelically altered state of consciousness. Intention setting is a ubiquitous practice among psychedelic users and frequently precedes psychedelic experiences in clinical, spiritual, and personal use settings.¹ To understand the ubiquity of this practice and its role in the psychedelic experience, this chapter analyzes the form and function of Cloud-9's intention-setting ritual, drawing from ethnographic observation and interviews with the 14 camp members who participated in the ceremony.²

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¹ Michael C Mithoefer, *A Manual for MDMA-Assisted Psychotherapy in the Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* (MAPS, 2017), 47, <https://maps.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MDMA-Assisted-Psychotherapy-Treatment-Manual-V8.1-22AUG2017.pdf>; Alex K. Gearin, "Primitivist Medicine and Capitalist Anxieties in Ayahuasca Tourism Peru," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 28, no. 2 (2022): 496–515, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13705>; Suzannah Weiss, "How to Set an Intention for Your Drug Trip," *Vice News*, September 19, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/akg8ap/how-to-set-an-intention-for-your-drug-trip>.

² Sections of this paper are drawn from the author's Master of Divinity thesis: Jeffrey Breau, "Recreating Religion: Psychedelics, Burning Man, and SBNR Communitas" (MA diss., Harvard Divinity School, 2024).

I argue that for psychedelic users, intention setting serves as a rite of separation—a recurring and ritualized practice that marks the start of a psychedelic trip and prepares users for a particular type of experience. I contend that intention setting’s primary function is to consecrate or make sacred the trip ahead, making it what I term a “rite of sacralization.” It signifies to the ritual actors that the psychedelic experience on which they are embarking is special in that it is distinct from other kinds of drug experiences and that its nature is morally virtuous and spiritual.

Methods

I conducted ten days of fieldwork in 2023 with 14 members of the pseudonymous Cloud-9 Camp at Burning Man, the annual arts festival and temporary city located in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert. In the weeks prior to and following Burning Man, I conducted 18 one-on-one Zoom interviews with my interlocutors, each of which averaged 90 minutes; five Cloud-9 members were interviewed twice, and one participant was not interviewed. My interlocutors are regular Burning Man participants (each has attended an average of nine “Burns”), and they are experienced psychedelic users. Most of them estimated that they had taken psychedelics hundreds of times throughout their lives. Everyone in the study was white and between 35 and 46 years old; most lived in California’s Bay Area.³ I have altered names and identifying details and verified quotes with participants before publication.

All of my interlocutors—except for Naomi, who is Jewish—locate themselves outside of established religious traditions. Seven of the 14 Cloud-9 members identify as “spiritual” or “spiritual but not religious.”⁴ The rest identify as agnostic, synthesist, “Gaian nature religion,” or “Buddhist-inspired psychedelic.” What unites the group’s diverse and eclectic religiosities is a belief in psychedelics as spiritual tools that are important to their religious lives. Intention-setting rituals are the standard way in which they begin psychedelic experiences and, as I show below, a key way in which they differentiate sacred from profane psychedelic use.

Cloud-9’s Intention Setting

On Thursday, Burning Man’s fifth night, Cloud-9 members gathered in the group’s bell-dome tent. Faye handed everyone a pressed pill containing the psychedelic 2C-B. 2C-B is a synthetic psychedelic that was first synthesized by Alexander Shulgin; it is closely related to the naturally occurring tryptamine mescaline. It is a dose-sensitive molecule: even a few additional milligrams appreciably increase the intensity of the experience. The subjective 2C-B experience is characteristic for its unique visual alterations and relatively lucid headspace, especially at moderate doses. The pills Faye passed out contained 20mg of 2C-B, which most users consider a low to moderate dose.

Moments after Faye distributed the pills, the intention-setting ritual began with Kristen’s question, cited at the start of this essay: “Would anyone like to speak a word of

³ See Amanda Lucia’s *White Utopias* for a detailed analysis of race and diversity at Burning Man. Amanda J. Lucia, *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals* (University of California Press, 2020).

⁴ Robert Fuller’s *Spiritual, but not Religious* remains an instructive text on the SBNR phenomena. Nancy Ammerman’s article “Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion” highlights the complexity within the SBNR label, as does Lisa Mercadante’s *Belief without Borders*. Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but not Religious: Understanding the Unchurched America* (Oxford University Press, 2001); Nancy Ammerman, “Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no. 2 (2013): 258–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24644008>; Lisa Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (OUP USA, 2014).

intention? Just one word—for yourself, for this journey.” Whispered words soon filled the air: *presence, connection, belonging, chosen family, purpose, spiritual play, and lying*.

“Lying?” Kristen asked, thumbing her hair with an incredulous look. Sasha, who had said *lying* and seemed surprised at Kristen’s reaction, began to clarify. Quickly, someone realized she had said “flying,” and the group exploded into peals of laughter. What she meant by the intention of “flying” was never interrogated, just as none of the prior intentions were.

After the laughter subsided, Sasha offered an “addendum” to the intention setting and requested that everyone in the group “find someone [to] connect with and share your intention more deeply [during the trip] and then check in with again tomorrow.” She later told me this was meant to create an “integration moment” during and after the trip—a moment that would allow the intentions and experiences from the night to become incorporated into sober consciousness.⁵ Following Sasha’s addendum, Faye asked the group to take a deep breath together. Then, everyone swallowed their pills.

Intention’s Power

Intention and intention setting are regarded by psychedelic users and researchers as a critical factor determining the nature of a psychedelic experience.⁶ Intention-setting practices can be traced back to the New Thought movement that flourished in the United States during the nineteenth century. New Thought viewed positive thinking and “mind magic” as critical actions that could shaping material realities.⁷ In the 1970s and ‘80s, New Age writers like Rhonda Byrne and Deepak Chopra repopularized these ideas and promoted the power of positive thinking.⁸ Here, the willful direction of consciousness is considered a means of manipulating unseen energies that can change reality outside the mind. For instance, one might become wealthy by focusing on, or manifesting, the desire or intention for more money. My interlocutors were, for the most part, open to the possibility that unseen energies or realms exist, but they were generally cautious of—and even treated with suspicion—philosophies, especially New Age philosophies, that claimed to know the true nature of reality.

That said, almost everyone in the group had experiences—with or without the use of psychedelics—that defied their understanding of scientific materialism. Simon, for example, told me about a mystical experience he had at a festival that seemed beyond comprehension and suggested the ability to communicate through subtle energies. When I asked what he

⁵ Geoff J. J. Bathje, Eric Majeski, and Mesphina Kudowor, “Psychedelic Integration: An Analysis of the Concept and Its Practice,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022): 824077–824077, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.824077>.

⁶ For example, Myron Stolaroff, a first-wave psychedelic researcher, considered motivation and “deep intention” the “single most important” characteristic for a spiritual psychedelic trip. William Richards, discussing the Johns Hopkins psychedelic trails, considered intention of “critical significance” and suggests that proper intention is what separates safe and successful psychedelic experience from a dangerous or unproductive ones. He gives the example of proper intention as “genuinely seek[ing] personal and spiritual growth,” which leads to the motivation to confront “frightening or dark” internal situations that arise during the trip. Simply taking psychedelics with the intention of “seeing what might happen” is provided as an example of an improper intention. Myron Stolaroff, “A Protocol for a Sacramental Service,” in *Psychedelics and Spirituality: The Sacred Use of LSD, Psilocybin, and MDMA for Human Transformation*, ed. Thomas B. Roberts (New York: Inner Traditions International, Limited, 2020), 180; William Richards, *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 185–87.

⁷ Amanda J. Lucia, *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals* (University of California Press, 2020), 141; Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 438.

⁸ Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret* (Simon and Schuster, 2011); Deepak Chopra, *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success: A Practical Guide to the Fulfillment of Your Dreams* (Amber-Allen Publishing, 2010); Wayne W. Dyer, *The Power of Intention: Learning to Co-Create Your World Your Way* (Hay House, Inc, 2010).

thought was happening, he said, “I don’t really know. I leave room for mystery.” Then, after a moment, he offered a tentative explanation: “I think a lot of [what was happening] had to do with intention.”

Rite of Separation

Among scholars of religion, there is a much-theorized class of rituals called “rites of passage.” Rites of passage are ritual actions that accompany literal and figurative transformations; rituals around birth, coming of age, marriage, and death are quintessential rites of passage. This ritual framework was first articulated by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in the early 1900s, and his work was a major influence on anthropologist Victor Turner, whose theories of liminality, grounded in van Gennep’s work, remain widely cited today.⁹ Specifically, it was van Gennep’s tripart sequence of rites of passage that Turner found most generative. In this model, van Gennep identifies three distinct phases that comprise a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation.¹⁰ These phases, which he also refers to as preliminal, liminal, and postliminal stages, are themselves comprised of sub-rites and rituals, which van Gennep calls rites of separation, rites of transition, and rites of incorporation, respectively.¹¹

Recent scholarship has described raves, festivals, and psychedelic experiences as rites of passage and applied van Gennep’s three-part structure to differentiate phases of the experience.¹² Following Turner, this research tends to focus on the middle (liminal or transitional) stage of the rite of passage. I am interested in the stage that immediately precedes the liminal period—the preliminal or separation stage. Rites of separation performed during the preliminary period are critical for preparing the ritual actor and ritual space for the transformations that will follow. In van Gennep’s writing, typical rites of separation include those that mark literal breaks from community, such as those performed at the start of a pilgrimage; symbolic separations, such as passage through a consecrated threshold; and purification rites that ensure the ritual actor is unblemished, mentally and physically, for what comes next.¹³

Thursday night’s intention setting served as a rite of separation for the Cloud-9 group. It was, in fact, the only organized activity done once the group had assembled but *before* the 2C-B was ingested. The group was concerned about how late they were starting and, as a result, moved most preparation activities, including introductions, to after the psychedelic was consumed. The delayed start did abbreviate the intention setting, but no one questioned its placement or suggested that it, too, be moved to after the 2C-B was taken.

Intention Setting’s Functions

⁹ Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 1966 (Aldine Pub. Co, 1969).

¹⁰ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 10–11.

¹¹ Ibid., 11.

¹² Leandros Kyriakopoulos, “Liminality (Re-)Realized in the Psychedelic Rave,” *Anthropology and Humanism* 46, no. 2 (2021): 226–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anh.12329>; Lee Gilmore, “Of Ordeals and Operas: Reflexive Ritualizing at the Burning Man Festival,” in *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*, ed. Graham St John (Berghahn Books, 2008); David Dupuis, “The Psychedelic Ritual as a Technique of the Self: Identity Reconfiguration and Narrative Reframing in the Therapeutic Efficacy of Ayahuasca,” *HAAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 12, no. 1 (2022): 198–216, <https://doi.org/10.1086/719792>; Des Tramacchi, “Chaos Engines: Doofs, Psychedelics, and Religious Experience,” in *FreeNRG: Notes from the Edge of the Dance Floor*, ed. Graham St John (Common Ground Pub., 2001), 171–88, <https://www.edgecentral.net/freenrg>.

¹³ Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 15–26.

The intention setting was brief, taking no more than a minute, but I frequently heard about its role in shaping the night's experience during my interviews. My interlocutors offered varying explanations for why it was important. Will, who maintains the most materialist worldview in the group, interpreted intention setting psychologically and sociologically, explaining that intention setting is a "self-reflection process" and a way to create psychological "safety" in a group by encouraging sharing and connection. Both he and Peter, who were the least integrated in the group before Thursday, independently complained during interviews that the intention setting had not been involved enough. They believed the trip would have been more valuable and transformative if there had been more time for intention setting.

Although Will and Peter emphasized the practical importance of intention setting, the practice clearly also held symbolic value for them and the rest of the group. Will, articulating a common understanding among psychedelic users, told me that the important part of intention setting was, in fact, not the intention. I was repeatedly told that intentions are meant to be flexible, changeable, and shape the experience even if the stated "intention" is never achieved. Encapsulated in the word "intention" is a desire for balance between doing something with purpose and not being too attached to a particular outcome. Intention setting is not meant to articulate a specific goal or outcome for the trip. Instead, intention setting is done in order to transform the experience symbolically.

Dan, one of the leaders of Cloud-9 Camp, offered the clearest explanation of this symbolic role. He told me that setting an intention before a psychedelic trip is the simplest way to turn a psychedelic into a "sacrament." "That happens just with setting the intentions," he told me. "It's really just a shift in the mindset." For Dan, intention setting was a critical differentiator between a "sacred" and a "profane" psychedelic experience because setting intentions shifts your mindset and signals that you are "stepping into a ritualistic space."

Dan's comment mirrors van Gennep's understanding of how rites of separation function. Using the example of a temple door, van Gennep discusses how the consecrated threshold becomes a boundary "between the profane and sacred worlds."¹⁴ Ritual actors prepare to cross this boundary with rites of separation, including those that mark the door as special and prepare the body to enter the new world. To analogize this to the psychedelic experience, it is the moment of consumption that is the threshold—the temple door—that grants passage from one world to another. Intention setting, as Dan's comments illuminate, is a rite of separation that consecrates both the threshold (drug) and the ritual actor (drug user), shifting them from a profane to a sacred state. It is, in this way, a rite of sacralization.

Rite of Sacralization

As a rite of sacralization, intention setting signals that the forthcoming experience is special, meaningful, and spiritual. We see this most clearly when we account for how the group understands the symbolic meaning of the term "intention" and, by extension, intention setting. For Cloud-9, acting with or having "intention" implies care, moral clarity, and prosociality. Dan, for example, told me that it was the low level of intentionality in commercial rave settings that caused the spaces to be filled with trash, drug abuse, and bad trips.

Similarly, the implied prosocial nature of intention setting becomes clear when we consider how the group responded to Sasha's misheard intention of "lying." Although it is surely surprising for a friend to say they intend to lie to you, it is notable that this was the only intention met with confusion and interrogation. The prior positive intentions were all accepted with affirmative nods and vocalizations. Even the correction of "flying" went unquestioned. As an intention, "lying" challenged both the group's cohesion and their assumptions about what it means to set an intention. Precluded from the group's understanding of intention is

¹⁴ Ibid., 20.

the possibility that someone would *intend* to be careless, would *intend* to hurt others, or would *intend* to lie.

Sasha further articulated the moral and spiritual importance of intention-setting during an interview. She told me that there is a big difference between “purely recreational” and “intentional recreational” psychedelic use. This difference has spiritual and societal consequences. Purely recreational psychedelic use is, in her view, drug use without a moral value. As she sees it, moral value is imbued in the trip by an opening intention-setting ritual, and “purely recreational” trips lack these rituals. Intentional recreational psychedelic use, on the other hand, contains morality, care, and purpose. These traits are signified through an intention-setting ritual. She said:

It's an order of magnitude difference in terms of what you can do when you have an intention that you're like checking in on.... I guess part of the reason I feel gross [about unintentional psychedelic use] is that I feel not everyone is getting what they could out of it....That's just such a waste of potential when we're in an absolutely critical planetary emergency.

She was quick to catch herself: “Who am I to judge? I can't tell from the outside whether someone's going through some inner work, spiritual development.” Sasha sees psychedelics as powerful tools for personal spiritual development and environmental stewardship. And, as her comments show, intentionality via intention setting is the key to cultivating these potentials.

Conclusion

When Cloud-9 performs an intention-setting ritual, they are cultivating a shared sense of morality, care, and purpose. When performed as a rite of separation, the intention setting then imbues the pending psychedelic experience with these same values. It is important to note that the specific intention being set is of secondary importance to the ritual act itself because the primary purpose of an intention-setting ritual is not to lead the group or trip to a particular outcome. Rather, intention setting is done to symbolically mark the trip as special, transformative, and sacred. It functions as a rite of sacralization.