

# Towards the Unknown

Terence McKenna

New Dimensions

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Michael Toms: Well, do you think we're in a state of transition? Are we moving from one culture to another?

Terence McKenna: We are certainly in a state of transition; we have arrived at nothing less than the end of history. However, it is not something to be alarmed about. I imagine it's simply the normal situation that prevails when a species is preparing to depart for the stars.

MT: Do you think we're preparing to depart for the stars?

TM: On the scale of a hundred or a thousand years, I think it's an unavoidable conclusion. That span of time in geological terms is hardly the wink of an eye. In fact, from that perspective, all of human history appears as a preparation for human transcendence of planetary existence.

MT: Do we want to get away from the planet?

TM: I think you have to take the view that certainly the planet is the cradle of mankind, but inevitably one cannot remain in the cradle forever. The human imagination, in conjunction with technology, has become a force so potent that it really can no longer be unleashed on the surface of the planet with safety. The human imagination has gained such an immense power that the only environment that is friendly to it is the vacuum of deep space. It is there that we can erect the architectonic dreams that drive us to produce a Los Angeles or a Tokyo, and do it on a scale and in such a way that it will be fulfilling rather than degrading. So, yes, I think we cannot move forward in understanding without accepting as a consequence that we have to leave the planet. We are no longer the bipedal monkeys we once were. We have become almost a new force in nature. I think of language and cybernetics as an amalgam of computers and human brains and societal structures that has such an enormous forward

momentum that the only place where it can express itself without destroying itself is, as James Joyce says, “up n’ent.”

MT: So long, long ago, in a faraway galaxy, a *Star Wars*-style society may be in our future, as opposed to our past?

TM: It’s in our present, I think. Our future is probably almost unimaginable. I think the transformation that leaving the planet will bring will also involve a transformation of our consciousness. We are not going as 1950s-style human beings; we are going to have to transform our minds before we are going to be able to leave the planet with any amount of grace. This is where I think the psychedelics come in, because they are anticipations of the future. They seem to channel information that is not available by the laws of normal causality, so the experience is really that of a prophetic dimension — a glimpse of the potential of the far centuries of the future through these compounds. No cultural shift of this magnitude can be unambiguous. The very idea that as a species we would leave the earth behind us must be as rending an idea as that a child would leave its childhood home. Obviously, it’s a turning away from something that, once left behind, can never be recaptured. However, this is the nature of going forward into being: a series of self-transformations, a sense of level shifting. And we now simply happen to have reached the moment of ascent to a new level that is linked to leaving the planetary surface physically and to reconnecting with the contents of the unconscious collectivity of our minds. These two things will be done simultaneously. This is what the last half of the 20th century, it seems to me, is all about.

MT: By and large, psychedelics have really not been accepted into the mainstream. Do you see a change in that?

TM: Not particularly. They hold a certain fascination for a persistent minority and in that way they do their catalytic work upon society, which is to introduce new ideas and to release a certain kind of creative energy into society. I certainly would not like to see a return to the psychedelic hysterias of the 1960s. I think it’s fine that these things are now the subject of interest of a much smaller group of people, but perhaps a group of people with a greater commitment, a better idea of exactly what these things are. It’s really the same people; it’s just a smaller group of them, and they have accumulated experience over the past twenty years, though I certainly don’t think all psychedelic frontiers are conquered.

One of the subjects that I write and speak about is a phenomenon many people experience with the psilocybin family of hallucinogens that has not been included in the standard model of psychedelic substances. I am referring to the Logos-like phenomenon of an interior voice that seems to be almost a superhuman agency — a kind of *genius loci*. I consider this an alien intelligence — an entity so beyond the normal structure of the ego that if it is not an extraterrestrial it might as well be. Its bizarreness and its distance from ordinary

expectations about reality is so great that if flying saucers arrived here tomorrow from the Pleiades it would make this mystery no less compelling in comparison. It amuses me that the scientific community has taken over the search for extraterrestrial intelligence and defined it as they care to define it and have dedicated radio telescopes to search the galaxy for signals. The world's largest radio telescope is at Arecibo in Puerto Rico, and within the shadow of that installation, psychedelic mushrooms grow in the fields and the cows graze quietly in the sunshine. It's a marvelous interpenetration of the near and the faraway.

I believe that the place to search for extraterrestrials is in the psychic dimension, and there the problem is not the absence of communication but an abundance of signals that must be sifted through, because the fact of the matter is that shamans and mystics and seers have been hearing voices and talking to gods and demons since Paleolithic times and probably before. We shouldn't rule out this approach to communication. It seems to me far more likely that an advanced civilization would communicate interdimensionally and telepathically, and the amounts of time available for an intelligent species to have evolved these kinds of communication are vast.

I think that it's very interesting then that the tryptamines, psilocybin and DMT, at effective doses very reliably trigger what could only be described as contactlike phenomena, not only the interior voice in the head but also the classical flying saucer motifs of the whirling disc, the lens-shaped object, the alien approach. This seems to be something hardwired into the human psyche, and I would like to find out why. I think it's a very odd fact of human psychology, and I don't buy any of the current theories, ranging from that nothing at all is happening to that this is, in fact, a species from a world around another star that is getting in touch with us. I think this alien intelligence is something so bizarre that it actually masquerades as an extraterrestrial so as not to alarm us by the true implications of what it is.

MT: Your statement implies that it's something external to ourselves, and I wonder about that.

TM: This dualism of the interior and the exterior may have to be overcome. It obviously transcends the individual; but I suspect it is something like an Overmind of the species and that the highest form of human organization is not realized in the democratic individual. It is realized in a dimension none of us has ever penetrated — the mind of the species. It is the hand at the tiller of history. It is no government, no religious group, but actually what we call the human unconscious; however, it is not unconscious, and it is not simply a cybernetic repository of myth and memory. It is an organized entelechy of some sort, and though human history is its signature on the primates, it is very different from the primates. It is like a creature of pure information. It is made of language. It releases ideas into the flowing stream of history to boost the primates toward higher and higher levels of self-reflection. We have now reached the point where the masks are beginning to fall away and we are discovering that there is an angel within the monkey, struggling to get free. This is what the historical crisis

is all about. I am very optimistic. I see it as a necessary chaos that will lead to a new and more attractive order.

MT: Terence, you were talking about extraordinary realities, and it occurs to me that there is an enormous amount of prejudice against the psychedelics and the use of hallucinogenic substances, almost as if there's an inordinate fear to open up the closet that these substances reveal. What about that prejudice? How is it going to be resolved? What is the resolution of that?

TM: I think it's more complicated than a prejudice. It's a prejudice born of respect, because most people sense that these compounds probably actually do what their adherents claim they do. It's possible to see the whole human growth movement of the 1970s as a wish to continue the inward quest without having to put yourself on the line the way you had to when you took 250 gamma of LSD. I think all these other methods are efficacious, but I think it's the sheer power of hallucinogens that puts people off. You either love them or you hate them, and that's because they dissolve worldviews. If you like the experience of having your entire ontological structure disappear out from under you — if you think that's a thrill — you'll probably love psychedelics. On the other hand, for some people that's the most horrible thing they can possibly imagine. They navigate reality through various forms of faith; whereas with the psychedelics the doors of perception are cleansed and you see very, very deeply.

I spent time in India and I always visited the local sadhus of great reputation. I met many people who possessed what I call wise old man wisdom, but wise old man wisdom is a kind of Tao of how to live. It has nothing to say about the dimensions that the psychedelics reveal. For that you have to go places where hallucinogenic shamanism is practiced, specifically the Amazon Basin, and there you discover that beyond the wisdom of simply how to live in ordinary reality there is a gnosis of how to navigate in extraordinary reality. This reality is so extraordinary that we cannot approach what these people are doing with any degree of smugness, because the frank fact of the matter is that we have no more viable theory of what mind is than they. The beliefs of a Witoto shaman and the beliefs of a Princeton phenomenologist have an equal chance of being correct, and there are no arbiters of who is right. Here is something we have not assimilated. We have been to the moon, we have charted the depths of the ocean and the heart of the atom, but we have a fear of looking inward to ourselves because we sense that is where all the contradictions flow together. The kind of prejudice leveled against psychedelics attended psychoanalysis during the '20s and '30s when it was thought to be superfluous or some kind of fad. Psychedelics touch a very sensitive nerve. They touch the issue of the nature of humans, and some people are uncomfortable with this.

MT: What is the value of exploring extraordinary realities?

TM: I believe it's the same value that attends the exploration of ordinary realities. There's an alchemical saying that one should read the oldest books, climb

the highest mountains and visit the broadest deserts. I think that being imposes some kind of obligation to find out what's going on, and since all primary information about what is going on comes through the senses, any plant or any compound that alters that sensory input has to be looked at very carefully. I've often made the point that, chemically speaking, you can take a molecule that is completely inactive as a psychedelic, reposition a single atom on one of its rings, and suddenly it's a powerful psychedelic. Now, it seems to me that this is a perfect proof of the interpenetration of matter and mind. The movement of a single atom from one known position to another known position changes an experience from nothing to overwhelming. This means that mind and matter, at the quantum mechanical level, are all spun together. This means that in a sense the term "extraordinary reality" is not correct if it implies a division of category from ordinary reality. It is simply that there is more and more and more of reality, and some of it is inside our heads and some of it is deployed out through three-dimensional Newtonian space.

MT: I think most of us just simply accept the everyday reality as the only one. You're talking about journeys into nether regions far beyond most people's conception or desire.

TM: I think there's a shamanic temperament that is characterized by a craving for knowledge — knowledge in the Greek sense of gnosis. In other words, knowledge not of the sort where one subscribes to *Scientific American* and it validates what you believe, but cosmologies constructed out of immediate experiences that are always found to be applicable. You see, I don't believe that the world is made of quarks or electromagnetic waves, or stars or planets, or any of these things. I believe the world is made of language and that this is the primary fact that has been overlooked. The construction of the flying saucer is not so much a dilemma of hardware as it is a poetic challenge. People find it very hard to imagine exactly what I'm talking about. What I'm saying is that the leading edge of reality is mind and that mind is the primary substratum of being. We in the West have had it the wrong way around for over a millennium, but once this is clearly understood, using what we have learned in our little excursion through three-dimensional space and matter, we will create a new vision of humanity that will be a fusion of the East and the West.

MT: You suggest that the world is made of language, yet I think of these extraordinary realities that are totally beyond any language that we use in any ordinary sense.

TM: Yes, they are beyond ordinary language. I always think of Philo Judaeus writing on the Logos. He posed to himself the question, "What would be a more perfect Logos?" and then he answered, saying it would be a Logos that is not heard but beheld, and he imagined a form of communication where the ears would not be the primary receptors, but the eyes would be. A language where meaning was not constructed through a dictionary of spoken words, but

where three-dimensional objects were actually generated with a kind of hyper-language so that there was perfect understanding between people. This may sound bizarre in ordinary reality, but these forms of synesthesia and synesthetic glossolalia are commonplace in psychedelic states.

MT: Terence, could you identify Philo for us and tell us who he was?

TM: He was an Alexandrian Jew of the 2nd century who made it his business to travel around the Hellenistic world discussing all the major cults and religious and cosmogonic theories of his day. So he's a major source of Hellenistic data for us.

MT: How would you relate to Socrates' view of the world?

TM: I think that it's hard not to be a Platonist, but it's something that perhaps we should struggle against, or at least struggle to modify. I think of myself as sort of a Whiteheadian Platonist. Certainly the central Platonic notion, that of the Ideas — archetypal forms that stand outside of time — is one that is confirmed by the psychedelic experience. The Neoplatonists — the school of Plotinus and Porphyry — are psychedelic philosophers. Their idea of an ascending hierarchy of increasingly more rarified states is a sophisticated presentation of the shamanic cosmology that one experientially discovers when one is involved with psychedelics.

MT: What I think most of us don't realize is that Greek culture and the Eleusinian Mysteries incorporated the use of something very akin to psychedelics. Essentially Western civilization is based on a culture that had at its core an experience and a ritual that used psychedelics.

TM: Yes, for over 2,000 years everyone who was anyone in the ancient world made the pilgrimage to Eleusis and had this experience that Gordon Wasson and Carl Ruck have argued very convincingly was a hallucinogenic intoxication produced by ergot. But of course, as soon as the Church solidified its power, it closed these Platonic academies and moved against so-called pagan and heretical knowledge. Not only the Platonists but all the Gnostic sects and mystery schools were repressed. I like to think that this repression ended in a very odd way when in 1953 Gordon Wasson and his wife Valentina discovered the psilocybin mushroom cult in the village of Huautla de Jiménez. It was as if Eros, who had been martyred in the Old World, was found sleeping in the mountains of Mexico and resurrected. The experience of the mushroom is very much the experience of a *genius loci*, a god on the Grecian model — not the god who hung the stars in heaven, but a local god, a pre-Christian, bacchanalian nature power that is very alien and yet resonates with our expectations of what that experience would be like.

MT: Interesting that the mushroom is a symbol in our culture of death and

destruction — the symbol of the nuclear explosion.

TM: Yes, my brother has made the point, asking, “What mushroom is it that grows at the end of history? Is it the mushroom of Fermi and Oppenheimer and Teller, or is it the mushroom of Wasson and Albert Hofmann and Humphry Osmond?”

MT: Somehow I think the latter is safer.

TM: It may not only be safer; it may open the way to escape from the former. It’s like a pun of physics that the force of liberation and the force of destruction could take the same form. It’s what alchemists call the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

MT: It seems an amazing synchronicity. I was interested in talking with Andy Weil, the author of *The Natural Mind*, about the fact that a new genus of psilocybin-containing mushrooms is appearing that has never been seen before. It’s almost as if they’re appearing now for a reason.

TM: It’s amazing how many new species have been discovered since people have bent their attention to hallucinogenic mushrooms. There have been psilocybin mushrooms reported from England and France, localities where, so far as we know, there is no cultural history of usage at all. However, it’s interesting that cultural usage seems to come very early in human history. Hallucinogens are hardly welcome in agricultural societies. I think it was Weston La Barre who made the point that once one learns how to grow plants, one’s gods shift from the ecstatic gods of the hallucinogens to the corn god or the food god, and life is no longer about divining the hunt and the weather through the ecstatic use of hallucinogens. Rather, it becomes about being able to get up every morning and go to work and hoe the crop. You mentioned earlier the prejudice against hallucinogens. I think cultural suppression of hallucinogens reaches back to the beginning of agriculture when there was competition among plant gods that exemplified lifestyles that were alien to each other.

MT: Is psilocybin illegal?

TM: Yes, it’s a Schedule One drug. It was placed on the list at the same time as LSD, even though the issue was presented to the public in terms of LSD being made illegal. Actually, at that time a number of compounds were made illegal, yet there was never any public debate. All psychedelics were viewed the same way, and LSD was used as the model. Actually, these compounds vary widely. There is a spectrum of psychedelic effects and certain compounds trigger some of them. But, yes, psilocybin is illegal.

MT: Are the mushrooms illegal?

TM: The mushrooms also are illegal, as they contain psilocybin.

MT: You recall Andy Weil saying that he walked along a downtown Seattle residential street picking up psilocybin mushrooms from the front yards of residential homes.

TM: English law took the view that it was preposterous to try to outlaw a naturally occurring plant. They took the position that only the chemical was illegal, which I think is a very wise position. But I notice that Canada recently chose the American interpretation over the British one.

MT: The kind of knowledge and the kind of information you're putting forward is not generally available. It's not the kind of information and knowledge that one would find in the typical academic anthropology curriculum, yet it seems to be a knowledge that is ever expanding. Somehow it's outside of the cultural institutional entities. Number one, why do you think that is the case? Of course there's a logical answer to that one, but what do you see as the future of this kind of information and knowledge?

TM: I think in a sense it signals the rebirth of the institution of shamanism in the context of modern society. Anthropologists have always made the point about shamans that they were very important social catalysts in their groups, but they were always peripheral to them — peripheral to the political power and, actually, usually physically peripheral, living some distance from the villages. I think the electronic shaman — the person who pursues the exploration of these spaces — exists to return to tell the rest of us about it.

Hopefully we are now coming into a period of maturity as a species. We can no longer have forbidden areas of the human mind or mindless cultural machinery. We have taken upon ourselves the acquisition of so much power that we must now understand what we are. We cannot travel much further with definitions of humanity inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition. We need to truly explore the problem of consciousness, because as human beings gain power they are becoming the defining factor on the planet. The questions that loom are, "Is man good?" and then, if the answer is yes, "What is man good for?"

The shamans will point the way because they are visionaries, poets, cultural architects, forecasters — all these roles that we understand in more conventional terms rolled into one and raised to the  $n$ th power. They are cultural models for the rest of us. It has always been true that the shaman has access to a superhuman dimension and a superhuman condition and thereby affirms the potential for transcendence in all people. The shaman is an exemplar, if you will, and I see the new attention that's being given to these things signaling a sense on the part of society that we need to return to these models. This is why, for instance, in the *Star Wars* phenomenon Skywalker, the name of a major character, is a direct translation of the word "shaman" out of the Tungusic, which is where Siberian shamanism comes from. So these heroes that are being instilled in the

heart of the culture are shamanic heroes; they control a force that is bigger than everybody and holds the galaxy together; this is true, as a matter of fact. As we explore how true this is, the limitations of our previous worldview will be exposed for all to see. I think it was J. B. S. Haldane who said, "The world may not only be stranger than we suppose, it may be stranger than we *can* suppose."

MT: I think that the character Yoda is a shamanic-type character.

TM: Very much so.

MT: As we talk about shamans and shamanism, again that brings up cross-cultural currents. Do you see shamanism taking on a new form?

TM: I believe, along with Gordon Wasson and others, but in distinction to Mircea Eliade, who is a major writer on shamanism, that it is hallucinogenic shamanism that is primary. Where shamanic techniques are used to the exclusion of hallucinogenic plant ingestion, the shamanism tends to be vitiated; it is more like a ritual enactment of what real shamanism is. The shamanism that is coming to be is coming to be within people in our culture who feel comfortable with psychedelic plants and who, by going into those spaces and then returning with works of art or poetic accounts or scientific ideas, are actually changing the face of the culture.

I connect the psychedelic dimension to the dimension of inspiration and dream, and I think history has always progressed by the bubbling up of ideas from these nether dimensions into the minds of receptive men and women. It is simply that now, with the hallucinogens, we actually have a tool to push the button. We are no longer dependent upon whatever factors previously controlled the ingression of novelty into human history. We have taken that function to ourselves, and this will intensify and accelerate the cultural crisis toward its ultimate resolution.

MT: So as we continue to move toward the further exploration of these spaces, we can expect social change as a result of personal change?

TM: Tremendous social change. In fact, what is happening is a tendency toward what I call turning the body inside out. Through our media and cybernetics, we are actually approaching the point where consciousness can be experienced in a state of disconnection from the body. We have changed. We are no longer bipedal monkeys. We are instead a kind of cybernetic coral reef of organic components and inorganic technological components. We have become a force that takes unorganized raw material and excretes technical objects; we have transcended the normal definitions of humans. We are like an enormous collective organism with our data banks, our forecasting agencies and our computer networks, and the many levels at which we are connected into the universe. Our self-image is changing; the monkey has been all but left behind and, shortly, *will* be left behind.

Again, I take the flying saucer to be an image of the future state of humanity. It is a kind of millenarian transformation of the human where the soul is exteriorized as the apotheosis of technology. It is that eschatological event that is casting enormous shadows backward through time over the historical landscape. That is the siren singing at the end of time, calling all humanity across the last hundred millennia toward it. Calling us out of the trees and into history, and through this series of multileveled cultural transitions to the point where the thing within the monkeys — the creature of pure language and pure imagination whose aspirations are entirely titanic in terms of self-transformation — that thing is now emerging, and it will emerge as humanity leaves the planet. It's not something quantized and clearly defined. Nevertheless, it is what the next fifty or so years will be about. At the end of it, the species will be off-planet and transformed and fully wired from the depths to the heights.

MT: Are we talking about another version of the Christian death, resurrection, ascension into heaven?

TM: Except that it is coming into history. What is happening is that the paradise promised the soul is actually going to enter into history. Technological man took the apocalyptic aspirations of Christianity so seriously that we are going to realize them. It has become the guiding image of what we want to be. I'm reminded of the poem by William Butler Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," where he speaks of the artifice of eternity and says:

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enameling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

This is the image of the human body become an indestructible cybernetic object; yet within that indestructible cybernetic object there is a holographic transform of the body that is released into the dream. It is an image of the human transformed and released into a hyperspace of information, where one is a thing of eternal circuitry but one appears to be walking along an unspoiled beach in Paradise. We are going to find the power to realize our deepest cultural aspirations. This is why we must find out what our deepest cultural aspirations are.

MT: What about the idea that these spaces that we've been talking about — that you've been illuminating — are spaces that can be achieved without the use of psychedelics?

TM: I scoured India, and my humble, personal opinion is that it is highly unlikely. I've always approached people of spiritual accomplishment with the

question, “What can you show me?” Wise old man wisdom is one thing, but the hallucinogen-using shaman of the Amazon seems to be able to go far beyond that. There may be physical techniques for duplicating this, but the efficacy and the dependability of the hallucinogens seems to me to make them the obvious choice. Only a series of cultural taboos would cause one to engineer around hallucinogenic shamanism. It is the obvious path to transcendence. People must face the fact that, at one level, we are chemical machines. That doesn’t mean we are that at every level, but it does mean that there is a chemical level where we can intervene to change the pictures that are coming in and going out at higher levels.

MT: You’re not suggesting that people should do this by themselves?

TM: Take hallucinogens? Well, I don’t know about taking them by themselves — probably not, although I always prefer to. What I am suggesting is that hallucinogens be taken in a situation of minimum sensory input. Lying down in darkness with eyes closed cannot be surpassed. People want music; they want to walk around in nature and all these things. Nature and music are beautiful in their own right; they are the adumbrations of the psychedelic experience that we deal with in ordinary reality. In confrontation with the deep psychedelic experience these things are hardly more than impediments. Very interesting things are happening in the utter blackness behind your eyelids while lying still in silent darkness, and that is where the mystery comes from and goes to.

MT: My question had to do with use or nonuse of a guide.

TM: Oh, I don’t think people should do this without a guide unless they feel confident from long experience that they don’t need a guide.

MT: Terence, it’s been fascinating. I think we could probably go on for another few hours if we had time.

TM: It’s a pleasure to talk with you about this. I like to have these ideas get out. I think it’s important that we discuss all this in a way that is only now becoming possible because of the situation in the 1960s. Now we need to shed all that and look back and look forward and try to make a mature judgement for our culture based on the facts of the matter.

MT: Thank you for being with us, Terence.

TM: Thank you.