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Why Is Everyone Smoking Toad Venom?

How an illegal amphibian-venom-derived psychedelic became the loudest whisper at a dinner party near you.

BY ALEX KUCZYNSKI

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In Southampton, soccer moms drop their kids off at school after taking their thrice-weekly microdose of psilocybin mushrooms, then meet for oat milk lattes. In Sun Valley, private retreats dedicated to tripping on MDMA or the Amazonian elixir ayahuasca are becoming almost as common as backyard

barbecues. (Just don't bring the kids.) In Silicon Valley, tech entrepreneurs and financiers turned psychonauts believe that taking small doses of LSD, in either liquid or tab form, helps with creativity and productivity in the workforce. Even rightwing internet investor Peter Thiel has put a formidable stake in Compass Pathways, a publicly traded psychedelic medicine company.

But now there's a weirder, wilder new drug appearing on the menu for moneyed types in search of mind expansion: the Toad, otherwise known as 5-MeO-DMT (or, if you really want to know its correct name, 5-methoxy-N, N-dimethyltryptamine), or DMT, or Bufo. In his landmark 2018 memoir, *How to Change Your Mind*, Michael Pollan referred to it as the Everest of psychedelics.

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Bufo is one of the most potent psychotropic drugs ever discovered.

Tamer El-Shakhs, an owner of the chic Malibu dispensary 99 High Tide and a sommelier, if you will, of all things hallucinogenic, told me that just as Everest is a mountain you would climb only a few times in your life, Bufo is a drug you would not want to take more than a few times. "It is so intense, and the

experience so total and so life-changing, that I don't think you would want to do it—or need to do it—more than a couple of times,” he says. Yet none of that has stopped a number of celebrities from openly talking about their experiences, from Mike Tyson to Chelsea Handler to reality TV star Christina Haack, who wrote about her Bufo experience in an Instagram post last July. “I had taken time off social, hired a spiritual coach, and smoked a Bufo toad (which basically reset my brain and kicked out years of anxiety in 15 mins),” she wrote. Hunter Biden has described it as a “salve” in helping him kick drug addiction.

What exactly are these people smoking? Bufo is the venom of the Sonoran desert toad, *Bufo alvarius*, which contains the molecule 5-MeO-DMT, one of the most potent psychotropic drugs ever discovered. Until recently it was so obscure the U.S. government did not list it as a controlled substance until 2011. For nine months of the year the Sonoran desert toad lives under the sands of the Mexican desert to survive the scorching heat, but when the winter rains arrive, it emerges for a Caligula-like orgy of eating and fornicating. Glands on the sides of its neck and legs emit a venom so toxic it can cause death in a predator within seconds. Bufo hunters catch the toads at night using flashlights—the toads freeze when confronted by a bright light—then milk the venom from the toad's parotid glands, typically holding a mirror up to catch the spray. Overnight, the milky venom dries on the glass, turning into flaky crystals, leaving behind only the 5-MeO-DMT and none of the lethal toxin. (The toads are allegedly unharmed.)

Sonoran Desert Toad, in his natural habitat.

BRAD WILSON, DVM / GETTY IMAGES

The crystals (typically a dose is 50 mg) are smoked in a glass pipe; participants are asked to inhale slowly for eight seconds and hold in the vapor for at least several seconds more. And then they enter a consciousness rocket ship ride. The effects are immediate and intense.

Most people who try Bufo describe a feeling of oceanic boundlessness, of oneness with the universe. They describe a high level of ego dissolution. Some describe a fusion with God, a visceral connection with the divine source of all life, and a sense of connection with all beings. From my one experience taking ecstasy, or MDMA, that all sounds par for the course for hallucinogenic drugs. (The next day I remember thinking, I felt one with the universe with that person? Sheesh.)

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With Bufo, however, most users experience such a dissolution of the self and ego that they feel they are dead, or dying, that they exist in a blank space, and they slowly reemerge, to be born again, flushed of all their perceived flaws and addictions and no longer able to feel pain from past trauma. In Pollan's book he says, "I felt an inexplicable urge to lift my knees, and as soon as I raised them, I felt something squeeze out from between my legs, but easily and without struggle or pain."

On a Joe Rogan podcast in 2019, Mike Tyson spoke about how Bufo had completely changed his life. "It's almost like dying and being reborn... It's almost like you're dying, you're submissive, you're humble, you're vulnerable—but you're invincible still in all." And in late 2021 Tyson told the *New York Post* that "in my trips, I've seen that death is beautiful."

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This might, in part, explain Bufo's surprising ascent to trip du jour among a certain social set. For those who trade in power, it might be the one thing that can help them see past their own egos, if only temporarily. Maybe it feels especially good for those who are expected to meet high standards of success and image, allowing them to let go of some of the demand for effortless, excessive perfection. Also, it's expensive, rare, hot fodder for dinner party conversations—and it's also less of a commitment than some other trendy trips. Unlike an ayahuasca ceremony, during which you might spend hours hallucinating and vomiting and days recovering, the Bufo trip is intense but fast. Typically, participants in a Bufo ceremony are clearheaded within an hour. Many of the companies that lead tours outside the United States for the Bufo ceremony, such as Behold Retreats, limit groups to five people, with three facilitators.

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Bufo is of course just part of a larger psychedelic wave washing over the United States. Microdosing psilocybin is being promoted as a method for healing trauma and treating depression and addiction, and there's a recognition that Silicon Valley is placing big financial bets on psychedelic drugs, which lends the movement credibility. Whereas psychedelics were once the symbol of a radical generational counterculture led by Timothy Leary and Jim Morrison, these drugs (LSD, psilocybin, ibogaine, MDMA) are now practically a mainstay among the class of people who 40 years ago would have clutched their pearls and

invoked Nancy Reagan, Richard Nixon, and Carrie Nation. Today America's intelligentsia is in the grip of a hallucinogenic fever dream, where it's normal to walk into a house in the Hamptons or Malibu and have the hostess, pearls swinging around her neck (perhaps the same ones her mother was wearing 40 years ago) offer you something that half a decade ago you never would have thought of ingesting. After all, recreational marijuana is legal in 18 states plus the District of Columbia.

Cannabis party, 1950

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The shift came in 2018, when Pollan published *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence*. Here was a guy I had met a few times in the *New York Times* newsroom (I was a reporter there); he would occasionally come in to see the food editors, a shambling, middle-aged intellectual white guy from Long Island who had taught at Harvard and Berkeley, who wrote mostly about food and the value of vegetarianism. And now, instead of admonishing us to “eat food, not too much, mostly plants,” he had written a book and he was preaching a new gospel: Try psychedelic drugs. I did. And now I think maybe we all should.

In Los Angeles on a sunny December weekend, El-Shakhs, the marijuana entrepreneur, told me that dozens, if not hundreds, of ceremonies featuring ayahuasca, psilocybin, ibogaine, MDMA, and Bufo take place in Southern California every weekend. He introduced me to a friend of his, a hallucinogenic facilitator (who asked not to be named, since use of Bufo is illegal in the U.S.); she told me that she will conduct Bufo ceremonies for people coming out of trauma. Another facilitator told me she prefers a synthetic, lab-made version of Bufo, “mostly because it’s vegan.” (Remember, this was in L.A., where kosher LSD is also a thing. I’d really like to find the rabbi who blesses the LSD.)

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Dr. Lea Lis, a New York psychiatrist, told me psilocybin, MDMA, and ketamine are now available in more medicinal, controllable formats, and that is the appeal. “We’re not seeing the 1960s paradigm, with people overdosing on acid.” The old trope was a hippie freaked out on too much acid who jumped off a roof. “Now we’re seeing clinical studies and careful doses, and that gives people a sense of greater safety.” (Coincidentally, we spoke on the phone while she was at a convention for MAPS, the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, a nonprofit organization that promotes awareness and acceptance of the use of psychedelics and marijuana in place of or along with more traditional psychotherapeutic treatments.)

A healer in California who has worked with what he describes as “American royalty,” and some of whose clients I know personally, told me Bufo is perhaps the most ideal form of hallucinogen. “Ayahuasca, that’s like McDonald’s or Burger King by now,” he says, adding that the original shamans from Peru have been overtaken by North American Instagram healers and former reality TV stars. “You know, some guy with a white feather and 15,000 followers.”

In 2019, Johns Hopkins scientists published a paper titled “Fast-Acting Psychedelic Associated with Improvements in Depression/Anxiety,” in which they described a lessening of anxiety and depression when Bufo was given in a ceremonial group setting. Approximately 80 percent of the participants reported improvements in anxiety and depression after a Bufo session. These improvements were related to “more intense acute mystical effects during the 5-MeO-DMT experience, as well as increases in rating of the personal meaning and spiritual significance of the experience.” Improvements were also related to stronger beliefs that the

How to Change Your Mind:
What the New Science of

experience contributed to enduring well-being and life satisfaction.

I spoke to a close friend about her experience with Bufo. Because she comes from a well-known and wealthy family, she spoke on condition of anonymity. She had severe childhood trauma beyond what most of us experience and has spent several years dealing with personal health issues. “I finally decided talk therapy wasn’t enough,” she told me. She invited a facilitator to New York, and for a week he prepared her for the “ceremony” by having her take a mild hallucinogen twice before her DMT trip and learn breathing techniques to keep herself calm during the experience. And by setting her intentions.

“He spent a lot of time with me before I did it,” she said. “He connected with me and grounded me, and I felt like he prepared me well for the experience. This is not something you would want to do with someone who is unfamiliar with the drug.”

" It was like doing 30 years of therapy in two weeks."

Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence

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Within seconds of inhaling the Bufo, “all of a sudden I was seeing prisms and geometric shapes, and I felt like I was passing out, but not in a bad way. I started to drift into something; a different world was opening up.”

Often, if users have experienced past trauma, they may start crying and screaming. “I suddenly felt this massive amount of rage come out of me,” she said, “and I came out punching and I wanted to attack him and punch him, and he said go ahead, let it out.” She did punch him. For a couple of weeks afterward, the ocean shimmered a little more brightly and the plants and flowers in her garden seemed to bloom more beautifully. “What it did was essentially open up a huge emotional vortex in me that allowed all of this rage and sorrow to pass through my body and out of my life forever. It was like doing 30 years of therapy in two weeks.”

KRISTIN FITZPATRICK

She kept going to see the psychiatrist who had been treating her for depression for a year and a half after the experience. “He said, ‘Wow, you’re doing amazingly. You do not have depression.’ It was a huge energetic shift.”

To be clear, this is not a party drug, as the hallucinogenic facilitator in Los

Angeles told me. “This is an experience that requires preparation and trust and intention. But you don’t always know what the Bufo will bring out in you. You don’t want to write a script before you get to the play.” Without proper preparation, things can go terribly wrong, as they did in 2020, when a Spanish porno actor was charged with the murder of a fashion photographer during an ill-conceived Bufo ceremony. Even Pollan writes in his book that his own experience was “just horrible.”

When I spoke with an intake specialist for Behold Retreats, a company that organizes various hallucinogenic retreats around the world, he asked me a number of questions about my health, especially my mental and cardiac health. (Because, frankly, I am now curious about trying Bufo. I’ve had my share of trauma over the past few years, and to have them sandblasted out of my system, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*–style, seems irresistible.)

“This is not a drug you’d use at a house party, like, ‘Hey, let me lose my ego here!’” one facilitator said. “This is more about assuming you can ride a roller coaster and not die of fear but give in to the freedom. Then get off safely.”

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