

Shrink Rap Radio #10, October 29, 2005, Psychology, Psychedelics, Meditation and Art

David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Bert Kaplan, M.A.
(translated from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Susan Argyelan)

Dr. Dave: Okay, well, I’m in the studio today with my good friend, Bert Kaplan. So, Bert, originally you planned to be a psychologist. And you went all the way through the coursework of a doctoral program, and then you got out. I’d like to go through some of that history with you. First of all, when did you first know you wanted to be a psychologist? And what was it that drew you to the field?

Bert Kaplan: Well, I would have to say, talk about my experience with drugs, particularly with LSD, which was...

Dr. Dave: Okay, we’re going to get right into the nitty gritty here, huh?

Kaplan: Yes, that seems to be an answer to your question..

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Kaplan: I can recall that time when I was in college in the ‘60s, in the early ‘60s, rather bewildered about my direction in life. And I had started smoking some pot; people were starting to do that. Although it was not in the early ‘60s; it was not very prevalent at all. But the man I had been scoring some pot from – small amounts – came up to me one day and said, “Bert, if you like smoking this dope, you’ll love this stuff.” And he handed me a couple of sugar cubes, LSD sugar cubes. This was only 1960. A couple of nights later, my friend and I took this stuff in a friend’s apartment, and we spent the next 36 hours really high on acid. And it went from a very beautiful, inspiring to very ugly and frightening, particularly towards the end, when it just wouldn’t stop. You know, couldn’t get to sleep, and it wouldn’t end. And finally, it did, but it was a very powerful experience, needless to say, and...

Dr. Dave: Somehow, this leads into your deciding to major in psychology at some point?

Kaplan: Yes (laughs). Well, it was a direct experience from then. I experienced my self, my life, my world; it completely shattered my worldview.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Kaplan: And anything I thought I knew before that time, I wasn’t so sure of anymore.

Dr. Dave: Uh-huh.

Kaplan: And I really wanted to explore what I had gotten a glimpse of, and I thought that through psychology, I could really come to know that land that I had glimpsed on this drug. So, I started taking psychology courses...

Dr. Dave: Where was this?

Kaplan: This was at Brooklyn College.

Dr. Dave: Right, and we met, actually, while you were in a Master's program at the University of Montana. And I was there at that same time; that's where you and I met. But how is it that you ended up in Montana?

Kaplan: Well, to be honest, let's see... Harvard wasn't exactly knocking on my door! (laughs) My GPA was not all that great!

Dr. Dave: Uh-huh.

Kaplan: And I had been through Montana. A friend of mine – in fact, the same man that I took the LSD with – we had hitchhiked around the country, my first time out of New York. And we hitchhiked through Montana, through just amazing states in the country. And I just fell in love with Montana, and I knew if the opportunity arose, I would like to live there for some time.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Kaplan: So, the University of Montana accepted me, and I decided to go out there. It was just going to be a year for a Master's program.

Dr. Dave: Okay, great. And then... I was a year ahead of you while we were at Montana. I had already been in the Master's program for a year at that time. So, then when I graduated, I took off from Montana for the University of Michigan, while you were still there, finishing up your M.A. program. And then, I believe Montana developed a doctoral program sometime after I left that you stayed on for after your M.A. Is that right?

Kaplan: Yes. Yes, right. Yeah, I guess by this time I realized I wanted to pursue it further, and I liked living in Montana. I did *not* like living in New York, I realized, so I decided to stay on and enrolled in the Ph.D. program and spent the next six years or so...

Dr. Dave: Wow, six years?

Kaplan: Yes.

Dr. Dave: Yep. And, you know, I have a number of friends who started out in graduate school but didn't finish up, for one reason or another. And I know that life

has a way of throwing up various obstacles and alternatives. What can you tell us about your reasons for not finishing up, given that you'd done all the coursework, and I guess you just had the dissertation research left.

Kaplan: Yes, and I was well on my way with working with the dissertation. It's interesting; here again, just what got me started, got me out of it: LSD.

Dr. Dave: Uh-oh...

Kaplan: I really hadn't fooled around with LSD for... It had been a very scary experience that first time. I knew I was going to do it again, but it wasn't 'til the – I guess this was 1969, after being in Montana for six years, and by this time, drugs were *much* more common...

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm...

Kaplan: Seemed like everybody – even in Missoula, Montana – was smoking dope and doing acid, and I started doing it again...and fairly often, at this point.

Dr. Dave: I need to insert that Dr. Dave does not advocate (laughs) the use of drugs.

Kaplan: (laughs) Yeah, that's a whole separate issue. I don't advocate 'em, either. I would say, though, in my case – in this particular instance, at that time and place – it was what I needed to do, and it was very beneficial in my life. But my whole worldview again was changed, and I came to realize that my reasons for being in the Ph.D. program were not really my own. I... in the insights under the influence of this drug, I realized what I was doing was, in large part, what my mother had wanted me to do: to become a doctor, become a professional...

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Kaplan: ...a Jewish mother's dream.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Kaplan: And a large part of my work there was to fulfill *her* goals, not mine, as well as the realization that I really was not getting the understanding into myself that I wanted, that I had originally entered the program for, so...

Dr. Dave: Wow, very interesting, and that probably leads in to the central topic of our conversation, which has to do with your experiences in the practice of Buddhist meditation. And so, I'm assuming that... Why don't you tell me about how your path led to the practice of meditation? What brought that about? It was some time, I guess, after Montana, after you were out of graduate school, had decided to drop out. I guess you came to California?

Kaplan: Yes, yes, I came to California for various reasons. Just came to visit, actually, and ended up never leaving. I had heard the word “meditation” in those years of drugs. A friend of mine had started to meditate, and I remember the moment I heard that term. I was very influenced by it, and it struck me: I knew at some point in my life I would turn to that, although it took many years – not until, I think it was 1987 when I met my first teacher, [Easwaran](#) – that I really was able to learn how to meditate and began to do it on a regular basis.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm... And so, what impact did that have on your life in terms of, you know, you mentioned that you wanted to come to a fuller knowing of yourself, and that you had thought that you would find that in psychology. But in some ways, psychology disappointed you. You know, what’s been the impact of Buddhist thought, philosophy and meditation on your life?

Kaplan: Yeah. Wow, that’s a (laughs) complex question; complex answer! But trying to be brief, my initial response with Easwaran was very powerful – as much, though, as the LSD, and I had another round of transformation in my life. I pretty soon gave up all drugs, drinking, smoking, and really tried to purify myself under his guidance. And, I started meditating on a regular basis. Started to, after a while, really get a sense – a sense of myself. It’s a very complex process. It involved, also, after a number of years, moving on to another form of meditation that I more practice now, [vipassana](#), associated with [Spirit Rock Center](#), in Woodacre, California, where I started to do long, long retreats.

Dr. Dave: Well, meditation is an Eastern approach to exploring the inner world. And in the West, we’ve developed counseling and psychotherapy as ways of exploring the inner world. What do you see as the interplay between counseling/therapy and meditation?

Kaplan: I think there’s a very strong interplay. I’ve tried in my life to explore anything I felt that would lead to what I considered to be my life purpose, my life goal, if I can use those phrases. To understand myself; figure out just what I’m doing here, why I’m here. And I found some degree of answers in both areas. Psychotherapy, I would say, more helps with the day-to-day difficulties in living on the more physical plane...

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm...

Kaplan: ...whereas the meditation – of course, these are broad generalities. But meditation helps in a more spiritual aspect. I want to pursue –

Dr. Dave: In terms of, try to ground this more in your own life experience for me, if you will. I mean, where did, what issues in your life did counseling or therapy help you with, and what issues has meditation helped you with?

Kaplan: Well, to go back a little bit, in my life – my earlier days of my life, as a youth – I had a, I saw myself with a lot of fairly serious problems. I was a troubled person; I dealt with a lot of depression – fairly serious depression – and really, feelings of, low feelings of self-esteem and self-worth, and struggled with these for many years. It's hard to separate the two, you know, when I really think about it, but the meditation was very effective in coming to see myself in a more realistic light and being able to let go of a lot of the self-judgment, the self-criticalness, and coming to accept myself as I was.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm...

Kaplan: This is, I think, one of the major teachings in Buddhism, that I value so much.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, psychology, too, talks about self-esteem. You know, there've been lots of books written about self-esteem, and that's important. And yet, somehow in the meditation – and maybe the therapy and the counseling you had helped your self-esteem area; I don't know – it sounds like the meditation gave you some kind of perspective, gave you some distance from yourself, or how would you describe it? I don't -

Kaplan: Yeah, yeah. I think that's a good, that's a good phrase. Certainly, some distance...some basic principles of guidance in my life, one of which said not to take it so seriously. It's not all that serious, and it's not all about *me*.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm...

Kaplan: These kinds of things. Really, I'm not in control to the extent that I thought I was.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah...

Kaplan: And that life, to see life more in terms of a process, rather than some kind of a product or goal-oriented. And to try to relax and enjoy the moment. Of course, these things are easier said than done, but through the practice of meditation, I think there's something in that practice itself – particularly on long, long retreats, for me – that allowed my body to actually incorporate these principles and learn to live by them on a more intuitive basis.

Dr. Dave: I know in recent years, you've gone off on a number of these retreats that I've been aware of, where you've gone off for ten days at a time...

Kaplan: Mm-hmm, yeah...

Dr. Dave: ...and I gather there's very little talking, if any, other than maybe the teacher who has these, the breaks during which there's some kind of inspiration talk or guidance.

Kaplan: Mm-hmm, yes, yes.

Dr. Dave: But the rest of the time is spent pretty much in silence, isn't it?

Kaplan: Yes. Yes, it's a most amazing experience. Trying to do them for ten days is about as much as I can spare from the rest of my life at this point. But they've been so, so powerful; so rich, particularly all the silence is so much. The silence. They are done in silence, as you say, except for these talks, these [Dharma](#) talks, where the teacher will discuss things in the evening that we're going through. But, to sit there in periods of alternating sitting meditation and walking meditation, and spending six, eight, ten, ten hours a day in meditation, in silence, with no reading or TV nor telephone...just, you're pretty much stuck with yourself.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah. I haven't done this. I flirt with the notion and certainly have been inspired to try it, by you and by other friends of mine who've gone on these retreats. As I project myself into it and imagine it, I imagine starting off with some sense of enthusiasm and energy, which would then transition into boredom...(laughs)

Kaplan: Yes. Absolutely! (laughs) It gets very boring!

Dr. Dave: (laughs) And that's where I get hung up!

Kaplan: Yeah, yeah...

Dr. Dave: I generally flee from boredom...

Kaplan: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: ...and keep myself maybe excessively busy.

Kaplan: Yes. So, there's a perfect example of what you're saying, David, how we deal with our life in general. We all tend to flee from boredom.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm...

Kaplan: The beauty of the retreat is, you can't do it. You can't flee. There's nowhere to go.

Dr. Dave: Uh-oh...(laughs)

Kaplan: So you've got – yes! So you're stuck! You've got to *sit* there and bear with it! And...and it *transforms!* It really does. The first few days can be difficult; most people find there's some degree of difficulty. But you reach a period – invariably, I have, and I think most people in every retreat after the first few days – where things

kind of seem to open up. You kind of go through a wall. You hit a wall, and then you go through it. And things kind of open up; and not to say it's all light and beauty after that, but you do experience a lot of light and a lot of beauty, and a lot of joy, as well as, very often, tremendous insights of personal, as well as spiritual, momentum.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Kaplan: It's an amazing experience.

Dr. Dave: Well, I've seen a process of transformation in you over the years that I've known you.

Kaplan: Yes.

Dr. Dave: And probably through a mix – I know there were some pretty intensive forms of therapy that you were involved with...

Kaplan: Yes.

Dr. Dave: ...in the early years after we got reunited. There was a – for the audience – there was a long period during which Bert and I were separated, and then we kind of rediscovered each other – discovered that we were both in California – by coincidence; both in Sonoma County. And, we were able to pick up our friendship again. And, we came together, actually, as fathers. We had known each other first as young men...

Kaplan: Yes.

Dr. Dave: ...as young, as very young men. (laughs) And when we hooked up again later, the place that we really connected around was our love of our children...

Kaplan: Yes, I remember that, yes.

Dr. Dave: ...and talking about that. So, that was really important for us. And now, I forgot where I was going with this. Oh, I remember now. So, I've seen you evolve over the last years, and one of the things that happened in that evolution was a wonderful flowering as an artist. Because when I knew you in Montana – and even when I reconnected with you here in California – you *weren't* an artist!

Kaplan: Mm-hmm, right...

Dr. Dave: At least, you weren't *creating* art. Something happened, and now you are, by my lights, a successful artist...

Kaplan: Thank you.

Dr. Dave: ...somebody whose paintings are beautiful to behold and sell for good money. So, what happened?

Kaplan: (laughs) There again, it's a complex question, and many strands to that. But, in one sense, I think the art is just a symptom, if I can use that phrase, of my general process of transformation that I've gone through over the years. It's something I had wanted to do all my life and drew early on in my life, but was so self-critical and so full of self-doubt that I could never give myself the chance to pursue it. And you have to, in art, you have to be bad in order to learn to be better.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Kaplan: And it wasn't until I was well into this process – this so-called process of transformation, which I really do view it in my life – that at some point, I was able to let go of a lot of the self-criticalness and not be so fearful of making mistakes and being bad. And, I... certain commitment, whereto I really wanted to do this. This is the love of my life, and I committed myself to do it, and I did it.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Kaplan: Not that I, not that I'm a... Well, I've come a long way, let's put it that way, huh?

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Kaplan: I'm very pleased with my progress in the field of art.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, as indeed you should be. What's your view of psychology today? I know you've been away from the formal study of psychology per se for a long time, but nevertheless, you did go through a rather long and rigorous training in psychology, read lots of books...

Kaplan: Mm-hmm...

Dr. Dave: ...got involved in research; were in training, I believe, to be a psychotherapist...

Kaplan: Yes.

Dr. Dave: So I'm wondering, you know, what's your view of psychology today? And where do you see that in relation to the place of Buddhist philosophy, or vipassana philosophy/meditation?

Kaplan: Mm-hmm... Yeah, well, as you say, I've been away quite a bit from the field of psychology. From what I see, though, psychology itself has made a major

transformation over the years and is much more involved with spiritual matters, which to me, is essential. I don't recall there being very much interest in that. I know there was in California, but not much in Montana at all. That has grown tremendously – the spiritual aspects, the spiritual awareness in the field of psychology.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, there's a whole field that's emerged known as transpersonal psychology...

Kaplan: Yes, yes.

Dr. Dave: There are even doctoral programs which are devoted to transpersonal psychology, and if you had started out today in a doctoral program, you might've found something that was closer to what you were originally looking for.

Kaplan: Yes. Yes.

Dr. Dave: Because I know when we were in that program in Montana, behaviorism kind of ruled the day...

Kaplan: Yes, right. (laughs) Skinner!

Dr. Dave: Yeah. B.F. Skinner, and it was all about animal psychology and so on, and not much to nurture the spirit.

Kaplan: Right. Right, right. Today, I notice that a lot of my teachers have been through periods of personal psychotherapy, and some of them, like [Jack Kornfield](#), (inaudible) therapists themselves and they're living as psychotherapists. My...

Dr. Dave: These are the people that you regard as spiritual teachers that you're referring to.

Kaplan: Yes. Jack Kornfield is one that comes to mind...

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Kaplan: ...co-founder at Spirit Rock. It's been very important in my life during periods... certain periods, I... been very helpful in my transformation process, undergoing personal psychotherapy.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Kaplan: It's a little more difficult to talk about that; actually, to separate the strands. But at times, that has been very important.

Dr. Dave: Okay. You know, one of the reasons I ask is because I'm sure that some of the people who are listening – who will listen to this session – are maybe struggling in their own lives with issues of depression, issues of being overly self-critical, and so on. So, if there are any, sort of, insights that you can share, or that they can glean from what you've said, you know, that would be of great benefit.

Kaplan: One of the main principles that I try to work with in myself, and I think I referred to this before, but this idea of opening up, of accepting what's going on in the moment. Not trying to fight it or flee from it or ignore it, but opening up to it as best I can, even if it's painful or difficult. I think there's so much to learn that we do learn...maybe we learn the most, through these periods of difficulty, the darkness, periods of darkness...

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah.

Kaplan: ...and they're just as necessary in life as the periods of joy and sunshine. They're no fun; we don't want to experience them, but they're there...

Dr. Dave: Right.

Kaplan: ...and not to fight them so much, and to know that they – as a rule – *don't* last forever. And life is change, and things will change.

Dr. Dave: You're a husband, a father of two beautiful daughters, a businessman – we haven't talked about that – an artist; a psychologist, even if non-practicing at present; a Buddhist meditator – and somehow, all of these threads have come together in who you are today. What have you learned in your life that you'd like to share with the audience who will listen to this show? Now, I know that's a little redundant of the previous question, but I'll give you another crack at it.

Kaplan: (laughs) Well, one of the things – even just listening to the question, realizing in my own life how rich my life has been, and how tremendously grateful I am, just tremendously grateful. I feel such gratitude for being able to explore these areas – just becoming a family man, a husband and father, has been such a major piece of my life. All of these things are just so rich. I think I've tried to just live my life according to my inner guide, to trust myself. I think maybe that's the, maybe a big piece, too. That I've learned to be able to trust myself; that ultimately, all the answers that I've searched for – whatever I've found – has been within me all the time, and to learn – and to try to continually learn – to remember to look inside for those answers.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah. Is there a book or two, perhaps, that you would recommend for someone who wishes to learn more about the sorts of things that we've been talking about?

Kaplan: There are a few. There's many books. I used to be, and still am, a... books have been very important in my life... One of the older books that I recall: [Stephen Levine](#), *A Gradual Awakening*. I remember being very struck by that book. Sri [Ram Dass](#) – all of his books have been just wonderful stuff. And I should mention also the books of [Joseph Goldstein](#), his books have been useful for me, too.

Dr. Dave: Okay, great. Well, I think we've come to the end of our session, and I really want to thank you for being willing to share such deep and personal material. I know a lot of the stuff that you shared comes from periods of your life that were painful, difficult, challenging...

Kaplan: Yes.

Dr. Dave: ...and I appreciate your willingness to be candid and put that out there.

Kaplan: Well, thank you, David. I've really enjoyed this. It's been fun for me.