



Conscious Life presents

Psychedelics Ethics

Guest: Liana Gillooly

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[00:00:15] Alexander Beiner

I'm here with Liana Sananda Gillooly, founder and director of the North Star Project, a non-profit committed to a future of worldwide psychedelic healing, delivered ethically, equitably, and accessibly.

She has worked for MAPS, the multidisciplinary association for psychedelic studies, in senior roles for a number of years, and she's a leading voice in the world of psychedelic ethics. So, Liana, welcome.

Liana Gillooly

Hi, thanks for having me.

Alexander Beiner

It's good to reconnect. So we've known each other for a number of years and we connected, especially about four years ago, you were involved with the North Star project, which you're now kind of heading up. And that was a really interesting time in psychedelics with this kind of boom of psychedelic capitalism.

And North Star was really set up to find, I suppose, an ethical North Star for everything that was going on. So it'd be interesting to hear what's going on now four years on from that. And what's the North Star journey been like?

[00:01:17] Liana Gillooly

Yeah, so four years ago, myself and four others founded the project, and we set about consulting with hundreds of stakeholders inside the field to generate a set of principles or values that we all felt were important to embody as we build out the ecosystem inside of psychedelics.

The journey has been long and winding there. It was an important time four years ago because we saw the first companies emerging and we saw that there was going to be an influence of capitalism and its objectives inside of this field, which was a new energy coming into our space.

And so we started with the ethics pledge. We have done a lot of gathering and guild building around specific issues inside of the field with different leaders from companies who share values, coming in and doing collaborative problem solving. And really seeing that we will do it will serve us all more if we collaborate and cooperate rather than treat each other as competition.

And since then, we've put out a 40 page document called *Structures and Practices for Building Purposeful Organizations*. We launched that last June. North Star has been, like, kind of expanded and contracted ourselves much like the space.

And so we're just restarting a project to get way more specific, to take each of the seven principles that we put out all those years ago and provide a lot more color information and detail about what kind of guidelines companies and really organizations inside of the space can utilize to live their values.

Alexander Beiner

And, you know, I know, like you kind of alluded to, it wasn't the simplest journey to get all those stakeholders together. And, you know, so what did you learn in that process?

Liana Gillooly

That, you know, one of the principles is to build trust. There's this saying, move at the speed of trust, that I first encountered through Adrienne Marie Brown's work, but I know she borrowed that from somebody else. And so it's just that it's to move at the speed of trust and to take time and to manage the sense of urgency that many of us can feel during these times.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, that's a lovely phrase. I think that's very important to remember, especially in a field that was really going faster than it was able to go. And I think it's a testament that it's contracted since then.

And you were involved already, very involved in the psychedelic world because you worked for MAPS for quite some time, and you must have learned it quite a lot through that process as well, of watching also MAPS go from not for profit to well, still not for profit, but then having, likes us, this kind of for profit arm, you know, what, what of where are you at right now with that whole journey and what you've learned in that?

[00:04:19] Liana Gillooly

Yeah, yeah. So I wrapped up nearly six years at MAPS in December. I first got involved with MAPS in 2010 when I attended the MAPS conference and then spent a couple years volunteering and supporting in the ways that I could. I worked in the cannabis sector during that time.

And, yeah, so there's so much that I've learned. I was leading up major gift fundraising for MAPS, and then in my last year and a half, almost two years, was leading up strategy at the organization. And there is so much that we learned in the process.

MAPS really held the strong vision that we could build the first major pharma company in the field of psychedelics as a - and there are other major pharma companies - but, but MAPS with MDMA assisted therapy stands to be, (if all goes well, we'll know this August) stands to be the first with a psychedelic assisted therapy. So drug plus therapy approval by the FDA, which would be very groundbreaking and pave the way for the rest of the industry.

And so there was this idea that we could build a non-profit owned and governed pharma company. And so that is the strongly held vision that Rick and others cultivated over many years.

MAPS, all the research for MDMA was funded by philanthropy to the tune of about \$145 million. And so when it came time to, well, you know, at first, Rick and others didn't recognize that there could be an opportunity to sell MDMA at the end of the day as a drug product.

And so when that awareness came in around 2015, they started the MAPS Public Benefit Corporation, which is an important entity format because public benefit corporations have additional obligations beyond achieving fiduciary goals and making investors and other stakeholders more money.

And so the companies get to self define what they mean by public benefit and then have that be prioritized in their orientation and decision making within the work...within the company. So the goal was to do a non-profit pharma company that was wholly owned by MAPS and governed by the nonprofit MAPS, so governed with those non-profit ideals and values.

And so we were successful in that for many years. We needed, we raised \$30 million philanthropically to fund the company. Then we raised another about \$50 to \$60 million in revenue based financing, which was an important, very important move for us, because what revenue based financing is, it promised future returns to investors based on the revenue that the company would produce without selling equity into the company.

And so, again, we needed even more resources. Building a pharma company and setting up a commercialization pipeline is very expensive. It typically takes about half a billion dollars to take a drug through the FDA process and into commercialization.

And so we're still doing this at a fraction of that total cost, but we needed another round of \$100 million, and myself and Rick and others on the team shopped that around to every single person who would talk to us. And we couldn't ultimately sell the vision of having a non-profit owned pharma company.

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And so we ended up selling down 40...about 40... We sold out 56% of the equity of the company to investors, and we retained ten x voting shares, voting rights, and six of nine board seats are appointed by the MAPS non-profit. So there is some governance control. But we did sell down the equity of the company into investors, and which did introduce a new class of interest in our decision making.

So it was a really interesting journey and challenge to try to maintain this vision and achieve this vision in a certain way. And then just the reality is trying to find funding at that scale that shared that vision ended up being. We were unable to do that.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah. But got quite far along the way, right. It's interesting, a big part of my work is looking at how the ways of being and seeing that we're taught in a psychedelic experience or learner experience can be applied to different domains of life, whether that's education or relationships.

And finance is one that's very, very important. And became this huge question four years ago in 2020, when all this money started coming into the space. And I know you've sort of looked at this, you just described some of it. Like, for want of a better term, a more psychedelic and more sort of values driven approach to finance.

There's other kind of models out there. I mean, what have you seen that's interested you in terms of a different way of doing business, basically, aside from the one you just mentioned?

Liana Gillooly

Yeah, well, I have kind of two approaches. There's one that's like the radical and revolutionary way of doing business. And there is a sizable growing global movement of folks who are building what's called the new or the next economy or regenerative business design.

So there are some really prime examples of that. There's foundation owned firms are very big in countries like Denmark. It's something like 60% of publicly traded companies on their markets are large corporations owned by foundations.

We also see companies like Patagonia that put, um, the majority of the shares of their company into something called a perpetual purpose trust, which means that that trust is then governed by a charter. So the, the people who sit in the seats that manage the trust don't matter as much because they're upholding an established charter of how that trust is administered.

And so these are really, that's, that steward ownership, um, model is super fascinating. Um, I have spent a lot of time and put a lot of energy and effort into attempting to embody one of these models. And, and it's just so nascent here in the United States, there's so many less examples of it.

And there was kind of this idea that we're already perceived as a high risk sector, and so adding additional layers of unknowns was difficult for people to stomach. That being said, the other thing I've learned about steward ownership, I have a friend who's about to publish a book on the topic, and he did a big research project of all these companies that identify as being steward owned.

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He found that companies that were successful in doing that were already established and successful and then changed their format and structure over to this model. And so there's those like, how to be totally radical and revolutionary in the way that we operate.

And then there's what I call the harm reduction on capitalism, which is a little bit where most of us are at today, which is basically saying, how do we reduce the potential harms of a system that has perverse incentives and is highly extractive and concentrates values to the top kind of layer of people at the top.

And so I look more towards practices where value can be shared throughout the whole ecosystem, where, you know, employers can be incentivized to make good decisions, where they can be incentivized to pursue public benefit objectives within the organization, rather than just financial objectives.

And so there's all these other layers that are interesting to play with that I think can have very large impacts. And I look forward to the day when maybe Lykos can grow big enough and have enough of the values alignment where it can become one of those revolutionary companies.

But right now Lykos is very busy trying to stand itself up and just be sustainable as a company, which is an enormous task unto itself.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, absolutely. And you know, these things happen in steps, right, rather than overnight. And also revolutions that happen overnight tend to go sour really quickly historically, so it's better to build slow.

So we've covered in a way, one of the ethical considerations around psychedelics, which is finance. And of course that's maybe the biggest one because our whole financial system is, got a lot of problems with it and inbuilt poor incentives.

But there's also other considerations I know you've looked at as well. There's access, for example, there's reciprocity. We took, for example, access in terms of the work you've done with North Star or beyond that, what do you think is important for people to be thinking about? If they're just coming into this field, they're quite new to it. What is access? When we say that word in psychedelics? And why does it matter?

Liana Gillooly

Yeah, so when we say access and really health access and health equity, which are also terms used in the more general healthcare system we're talking about, are treatments widely geographically available? Are treatments available to people from all different socioeconomic backgrounds? Are they available to people from different cultural backgrounds?

These are all really important questions to consider. We know that these treatments are going to be very high cost upfront, primarily due to the format that Lykos is seeking approval for, which is

having two people in the room, one licensed therapist, and likely to be one student or someone with some training as a backup.

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And so these are long therapy sessions, six to eight hours, and so just in the time of the therapist (and therapist hours are really quite expensive). And so we're looking at very high cost treatment initially.

And so when we think about access in the early frame, we're talking about how do we ensure that the licensed therapist right out the gate have a very broad geographical distribution, and how do we target certain centers like state operated behavioral health clinics or large hospital care systems?

We know that people who are experiencing mental health crises, often the first point of contact is inside of the emergency room. So how are we ensuring that there are these points that are where most people access mental health care, where people have this kind of training?

So there's a lot of effort going into those considerations that I know Lykos is taking. In addition, there's this question of cultural and really, like, identity, right? Like, how can people already...

Yeah, I think there's an interesting problem here in the United States, which is different in other parts of the world where mental health care is not actually generally accessible.

So when we're talking about access to psychedelic assisted therapies and these kinds of treatments, we need to actually take one step back and look at the mental health care industry as a whole and look at the ways in which people struggle to feel like it is either for them or to have the resources and support to pursue the help that they need.

So there's a lot of work to be done there. I know that there are therapists who have been organizing to receive better payment from payers because so many therapists don't actually accept insurance, because it's not, it doesn't make financial sense for them because of how low the payment that they get from payers is.

And so there's some advocacy work that's needed on that front. There's also just, like, increased coverage needed. A lot of health packages, health benefits packages don't include mental health care. And so there's just, like, a lot of fundamental, foundational work that needs to happen beyond just inside of the sector.

But then when we take another step back and we. We look at the larger picture and when we're talking about access to psychedelics. So one of the things that we're seeing that needs to be done is we need to look at other formats beyond the therapy, the dual therapist intensive model.

So there's research being done in group therapy models, which would reduce costs greatly and might have very high efficacy as well. And so the pursuit of these other formats is very important.

And in addition to that, I'm very passionate about drug policy reform. I know that the majority of people who will be exposing themselves to non ordinary states in the near future are going to do so outside of a medicalized context.

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And so doing drug policy reform responsibly, where people can be really informed and educated. And I think we need a culture of education around safety in the use of psychedelics, and also training on what's called peer support, I think can be really effective.

And I think that's a whole other layer of access that I'm really passionate about and really, like, the vision I hold is these local community care centers that maybe are funded by towns or cities or counties or states where there's more of a relational, communal element in accessing psychedelics.

And for people who might not be suffering from acute mental health conditions, I think people who are suffering from those conditions should absolutely seek care through the medicalized context. And we absolutely need that avenue open.

But I'm looking more broadly towards how do we generate more wellness in our culture and in our society. And I think that those formats are going to be very important and there's some good efforts underway to pursue those formats.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, and you know, that really excites me, the group works side of it. Because I do that, you know, for healthy, you know, I'm trained as a counselor, so I'm not trained to work with very people who are really, really struggling. And so obviously we have screening, but people generally, if you do that well and you have supervision, then you can screen people fairly well.

And then what's amazing about group work is that it's not just the psychedelic experience, it's the connection with the group and this sense of communitas. And that is incredibly healing. There's actually a researcher here in the UK, Rosalind McAlpine, who's at UCL, and we just did a one day Breaking Convention event a couple weeks ago.

And part of her research is researching people in real settings having psychedelic experiences. And part of what she was pointing out is it's impossible to distinguish what's the group and what's the psychedelic because it all becomes one cohesive whole. And I think that's going to be really interesting as an area for research moving forward. And yeah, I think the economics of it are a bit easier.

Liana Gillooly

There's one more quick comment too, which is this knowledge that these treatments are going to be high cost. Early on, there's some effort going into setting up and establishing patient access funding, and this will be third party administrated pools of funding where therapists can apply on behalf of their patients to have the cost of their treatments be subsidized.

And so we're already seeing some of that take place. And I think any, that's like a bare minimum of any company that might be selling a pharma product in the space to add to support and resource those funds is going to be incredibly important. And I know it's a big part of Lykos's plan moving forward.

[00:20:30] Alexander Beiner

Yeah, I think that's vital. Also, you know, something you mentioned before about peer support. I think a lot of people, and a lot of people might not be aware of this if they entered the field later or they're just newer to it.

But back in the day there was much more of a sense of a community in some ways, especially online. There was a few websites like Erowid where people would talk about their experiences and say, "I took this much and this happened". And then people could get some sense of harm reduction through that.

I was part of a forum called the Grow Report in sort of 2006, 2007. And for me, that experience of connecting with other like minded people, pre social media and, you know, also text only and anonymous because everyone was concerned about the legality, which also binds people together.

That was very formative for me and that really helped me to really explore different, you know, for example, different types of therapy or different types of modality or breath. Probably the first time I ever heard about breath work was there. Different types of philosophy, talking about the big world shattering ontological experiences that we've had.

And then there's other people to talk to you about it like, "Well, my take on is this. My take on it is that". I think that's core. I want that to see more of that and for that to come back. And it's part of, I think many of us, yourself included, I'm guessing, who've been in this space for a while, there's a sense of community or there was a sense of community.

Liana Gillooly

For sure. Yeah, yeah. And I really hope we don't get into any of this like homogenous approaches to these things. And really what excites me so much around these, this local network is just the uniqueness of the culture around engaging with non ordinary states that might emerge in these kind of community care settings I think is super special.

And psychedelics are so deeply relational. And so being part of a community of exploration is completely foundational to my experience. And I just would never want to lose that as we. As this movement continues to grow and expand.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, absolutely. So there's another word that's used often in the discussion of psychedelic ethics, which is reciprocity. And that is a contentious word in some ways. That's a tricky word because it means a lot of different things to a lot of different people. But this is something that I know you've looked at. What's a good definition of reciprocity that we might use, in your opinion?

[00:23:03] Liana Gillooly

Yeah, it's interesting. We started a lot with using the word reciprocity and have kind of moved into the phrasing around benefit sharing. And so this is the concept that we know and have the knowledge that psychedelic companies have benefited from the wisdom and knowledge and often cases the plants of Indigenous communities from around the world.

And so this is asking the very real question of how can this movement that stand that, you know, now has billions of dollars pumping through it, how can it extend its benefits to and share it with the holders of the original holders of this knowledge and the wisdom about these plants and substances?

And so it's a very fundamental question, and there's a lot of opportunity to ground ourselves in the wisdom of people of First Nations and Indigenous communities that I think would...I would really hope that we seriously consider a lot of the reflections and information that's coming out of those communities.

There's some publications that are worth reading around how to practice benefit sharing in good ways. And... But what I will share is this, is that this question of what is a good guideline for businesses is actually quite fraught, because the truth is obviously there is no monolithic answer.

There is no single community that represents the voice of mushrooms or the voice of Peyote, right. And so there's a lot of tricky territory that people can step into. People can seek counsel from one or two people and then believe that they have done consultation with their whole tribe, when these people might not even be representatives of the tribe, just members of the tribe.

And so it's tricky, but it's necessary. So the Indigenous Medicine Conservation Fund is one group that is doing extraordinarily deep consultation on keystone medicines and biocultures. And so I'm taking a lot of cues from them.

And, yeah, and so the work around the recommendation for companies is underway right now with people like Sutton King and Julia Mandy have a project that's focused on this.

And I think the big question that people get into and something that we've grappled with over at MAPS and Lykos, is this idea where it's like, "Okay, well, MDMA was derived in a laboratory, right?. It was discovered by Merck Pharma in, like, 1912, I believe. And so, like, what is owed to Indigenous or First nations peoples?".

But then when you go all the way in and you understand where folks like Stan Grof and Leo Zeff learned how to work with non ordinary states, which the MAPS protocol is built off of their teachings, there's this question of, you know, is something owed? Because so much of the knowledge about how to work with people in these states came from the wisdom of Indigenous folks.

And so these are ongoing questions. I think that there's also Nagoya protocols and free and prior informed consent. So anybody who might be working with a molecule that has a connection to a culture, I would recommend starting there and taking those protocols very seriously.

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And it's hard work, but it's necessary work if we are going to build a decolonial movement that can uplift and uphold the incredible wisdom that is so deeply informed this entire space. And so it's a complex topic and I'm hoping that the work that's happening right now can start to illuminate some deeper guidelines for businesses and entities operating inside this space.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, absolutely. It's so complex also globally, it's different in every global context. Some of the things are similar, but then in the UK we have our own UK and Ireland and we have psilocybin mushrooms, we have no living Indigenous tradition of using those. It seems almost certain that they were used. But the Druids didn't write things down and then they were killed by the Romans and other people.

And, you know, so there's this often I think there's this yearning in the west to connect to different traditions in order to understand how to do this. But then I think in that yearning often there's a forgetting of... There's a mixing up of different influences and there's a forgetting of things. And so it just becomes such a complex soup.

But I think as the field develops, I think we're all trying to unsoup that soup in some way. And I guess that takes me onto the subject of values, which is something I also wanted to ask you about. The idea of values is a very interesting question. Well, in many ways, CS Lewis, the writer, he said human beings can no more think up a new value than think up a new primary color.

So for some people, values are derived from the divine and from the earth. For others, values are something we choose to make as human beings. But I'm really interested in this idea of psychedelic values because in a sense that's partly what you've been engaged in, is what are the values of this community or communities?

And this is quite a big question, I guess. But in your mind, if you think of the word psychedelic values, what are some of the things that come to mind that you've seen pretty consistently echoed in different communities you've connected with?

Liana Gillooly

Yeah, such a good question. It's such a deep question, right. We spent a lot of time talking with people about values and we built out a set of principles that were formed from a set of values. And so I worked hard on MAPS's values that are published and out in the world as well.

And so when I think about value, it's really integrity, inclusivity, this moving at the speed of trust, one continues to arise, creating equality and justice. Being a field that's oriented towards justice, and then this idea of paying it forward and bringing along others with us.

MAPS has one called 'be the bridge', which I think is super important and also, like, 'see past the paradox'. So, understand that people from all different backgrounds and worldviews are invited into this field to participate, that we're not like one...We don't all share the same worldview and vision for the future.

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I think early on in my psychedelic exploration, I thought that anyone who tried acid had the same exact worldview and insights that I did, and that is absolutely not the case. Psychedelics are nonspecific amplifiers, they are very context dependent and can actually reinforce a person's belief systems. And so it's important we recognize all of these elements.

And, yeah, I think there's, like, this benefit sharing reciprocity piece and being mindful of the histories involved in these movements. That psychedelic movement is inextricably tied to drug policy reform and to not separate. I mean, there's this whole...

One of the values I wish we held more as a psychedelic space is having a non hierarchy of different drugs and not breaking them into good drugs and bad drugs categories and not believing that people who use psychedelics are different from people who use other substances. My friend has a shirt that says, heroin is a plant based medicine that I love.

So it's just like, all of those reminders are really important. And one thing I'll share, too, is, like, in this effort to generate a set of values, it's really around creating a shared language and kind of an attractor coalition of people who might not perfectly embody these values but are striving towards them, are aspiring towards them.

So the goal is not to, you know, shun anyone who might not be living in perfect integrity, but to create an invitation and to support one another, I think that's another big one, is like, how do we care...compassion and support of each other is so fundamental. And being in relationship, we cannot be accountable to those who we are not in relationship with.

And so that's such a accountability is such an incredibly significant part of this whole movement. So I think about that as, and it's kind of why we called it North Star instead of...and why we didn't create a bunch of checkboxes. For people to kind of say that they are achieving their values in some sort of just, like, basic metric way.

It's really... I'm really into, in this moment, understanding how do we set the culture for how entities in this space operate. How do we set a culture of collaboration over competition? How do we set a culture and create certain norms so that when entities or individuals step outside of that, that there is this, like, "Hey, are you sure you want to behave that way?".

Like, "Come join this. Come join us in this, like, much more fun party, so to speak, and help us, you know, live our values and have high integrity in the ways that we operate". Because I think ultimately that's what psychedelics bring us closer to is that sense inside of ourselves of how important it is to live a life of purpose and integrity.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, really nicely said. And it feels like that has to be or an important aspect of that is a bottom up approach rather than top down, right. It's a grassroots. Build it and they will come. Like, "It's more fun over here in this particular culture than over there", you know?

[00:33:26] Liana Gillooly

Yeah. Than in this, like, you know, cutthroat, you know, investor takeovers, IP fights, like, all of that is bound to happen. And who are the winners and losers in those situations? I think if we stay really oriented towards the outcomes of participants and patients, that is going to be one of the best orienting lenses for all of us to do our work through.

Alexander Beiner

Wonderful. Well, Liana, thank you so much. It's been really great to have you on.

Liana Gillooly

Yeah, thanks so much for having me. Super fun.