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Psychedelic Experience and Personal Growth

# Molecular Mysticism: The Role of Psychoactive Substances in the Transformation of Consciousness

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There is a question that has troubled me, and no doubt others, since the heyday of psychedelic research in the 1960s, when many groups and individuals were concerned with the problems of assimilating new and powerful mind-altering substances into Western society. The question, simply stated, was this: why did the American Indians succeed in integrating the use of peyote into their culture, including its legal use as a sacrament to this day, when those interested in pursuing consciousness research with drugs in the dominant white culture succeeded only in having the entire field made taboo to research, and any use of the substances a criminal offense punishable by imprisonment? The use of peyote spread from Mexico to the North American Indian tribes in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and has found acceptance as a sacrament in the ceremonies of the *Native American Church.* It is recognized as one kind of religious ritual that some of the tribes practice; as well as being acknowledged by sociologists for its role as an antidote for alcohol abuse.

This intriguing puzzle in ethnopsychology and history was personally relevant to me, since I was one of the psychedelic researchers who saw the enormous transformative potentials of "consciousness expanding" drugs, as we called them, and were eager to continue the research into their psychological significance. It would be fair to state that none of the early explorers in this field, in the 1950s and early 1960s, had any inkling of the social turmoil that was to come, nor the vehemence of the legal-political reaction. Certainly Dr. Albert Hofmann, that epitome of the cautious, conservative scientist, has testified to his dismay and concern over the proliferation of patterns of abuse of what he so poignantly called his "problem child" *(Sorgenkind).* Thus resulted the strange paradox that substances regarded as a social evil and a law-enforcement problem in the mainstream dominant culture are the sacrament of one particular sub-culture within that larger society. Since the Native American sub-culture is a much older and ecologically more sophisticated culture than the European white culture which attempted to absorb or

eliminate it, and since many sensitive individuals have long argued that we should be learning from the Indians, not exterminating them, the examination of the question posed above could lead to some highly interesting conclusions.

The answer to the ethnopsychological puzzle became clear to me only after I started observing and participating in a number of other American Indian ceremonies, such as the healing circle, the sweat lodge, or the spirit dance, that did not involve the use of peyote. I noted what many ethnologists have reported: that these ceremonies were simultaneously religious, medicinal, and psychotherapeutic. The sweat lodge, like the peyote ritual, is regarded as a sacred ceremony, as a form of worship of the Creator; they are also both seen and practiced as a form of physical healing, and they are performed for solving personal and collective psychological problems. Thus, it was natural for those tribes that took up peyote to add this medium to the others they were already familiar with, as a ceremony that expressed and reinforced the integration of body, mind, and spirit. In the dominant white society, by contrast, medicine, psychology, and religious spirituality are separated by seemingly insurmountable paradigm differences. The medical, psychological, and religious professions and established groups, each separately, considered the phenomenon of psychedelic drugs and were frightened by the unpredictable transformations of perception and world-view that they seemed to trigger.

Thus, the dominant society's reaction was fear, followed by prohibition, even of further research. None of the three established professions wanted these consciousness-expanding instruments; and neither did they want anyone else to have them of their own free choice The implicit assumption is that people are too ignorant and gullible to be able to make reasoned, informed choices as to how to treat their illnesses, solve their psychological problems, or practice their religion. Thus, the fragmented condition of our whole society is mirrored back to us through these reactions. For the Native Americans, on the other hand, healing, worship, and problem-solving are all subsumed in the one way, which is the way of the Great Spirit, the way of the Earthmother, the traditional way. The integrative understanding given in the peyote visions is not feared, but accepted and respected. Here, the implicit assumption is that everyone has the capability, indeed the task, to attune themselves to higher spiritual sources of knowledge and healing, and the purpose of ceremony, with or without medicinal substances, is regarded as a facilitating of such attunement.

## Psychedelics as Sacrament or Recreation

Several observers, for example Andrew Weil (1985), have pointed out the historical pattern that as Western colonial society adopted psychoactive plant or food substances from native cultures (most of which are now regarded as belonging to the Third World), the pattern of use of such psychoactive materials devolved from sacramental to recreational. Tobacco was regarded as a sacred, or power plant, by Indians of North, Central, and South America (Robicsek 1978); it is still so regarded by Native Americans, even though in the white Western culture and in countries influenced by this dominant culture, cigarette smoking is obviously recreational, and has even become a major public health problem. The coca plant, as grown and used by the Andean Indian tribes, was treated as a divinity — Mama Coca—and valued for its health-maintaining properties; cocaine, on the other hand, is purely a recreational drug and its indiscriminate use as such also causes numerous health problems. In this and

other instances desacralization of the plant-drug has been accompanied by criminalization. Coffee is another example: apparently first discovered and used by Islamic Sufis who valued its stimulant properties for long nights of prayer and meditation, it became a fashionable recreational drink in European society in the seventeenth century, and was even banned for a while as being too dangerous (cf. Emboden 1972; Weil & Rosen 1983). Even cannabis, the epitome of the recreational "high", is used by some sects of Hindu Tantrism as an amplifier of visualization and meditation.

Since originally sacramental healing plants were so rapidly and completely desacralized upon being adopted by the West's increasingly materialistic culture, it should not be surprising that newly discovered synthetic psychoactive drugs have generally been very quickly categorized as either recreational, or "narcotic", or both. Concomitantly, as the indiscriminate, excessive, non-sacramental use of psychoactive plants and newly synthesized analogues spread, so did patterns of abuse and dependence; predictably, established society reacted with prohibitions, which in turn led to organized crime activities. This in spite of the fact that many of the original discoverers of the new synthetic psychedelics, people such as Albert Hofmann and Alexander Shulgin, are individuals of deep spiritual integrity. Neither they, nor the efforts of philosophers such as Aldous Huxley and psychologists such as Timothy Leary to advocate a sacred and respectful attitude towards these substances, were able to prevent the same profanation from taking place.

The newly discovered phenethylamine psychedelic MDMA provides an instructive example of this phenomenon. Two patterns of use seem to have become established during the seventies: some psychotherapists and spiritually inclined individuals began to explore its possible applications as a therapeutic adjuvant and as an amplifier of spiritual practice; another, much larger group of individuals began using it for recreational purposes, as a social "high" comparable in some respects to cocaine. The irresponsible and widespread use in this second category, by increasing numbers of people, understandably made the medical and law-enforcement authorities nervous, and the predictable reaction occurred: MDMA was classified as a Schedule I drug in the United States, which puts it in the same group as heroin, cannabis, and LSD, making it a criminal offense to make, use, or sell, and sending a clearly understood off-limits signal to pharmaceutical and medical researchers.

When Hofmann returned to the Mazatec shamaness Maria Sabina with synthetic psilocybin in order to obtain her assessment of how close the synthesized ingredient was to the natural product, he was following the appropriate path of acknowledging the primacy of the botanical over the synthetic. The argument could be made, and has been made, that perhaps for every one of the important synthetic psychedelics, there is some natural plant that has the same ingredients and that this plant is our connection to the larger lost knowledge of indigenous cultures. Perhaps it should be our research strategy —to find the botanical host for the psychedelics emerging from the laboratory. In the case of LSD, research on the use of morning glory seeds in ancient Mexico and baby woodrose in Hawaii, each of which contain LSD analogues, would allow us to discover a shamanic complex involving this molecule. If Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck are correct in their proposal that an LSD-like ergot-derived beverage was used as the initiatory sacrament in Eleusis, the implications are profound (Wasson et al 1978). Using Rupert Sheldrake's theory of morphogenetic fields, one could suppose that by re-growing or re-hybridizing this particular plant, we could tune in to and re-activate the morphogenetic field of the Eleusinian mysteries, the ancient world's most awe-inspiring mystical ritual.

There is no inherent reason why sacramental use and recreational use of a substance, in moderation, could not co-exist. In fact, among Native Americans, tobacco often does play this dual role: after a

sacred pipe ritual with tobacco or other herbs, participants may smoke cigarettes to relax. We know the sacramental use of wine in the Catholic communion rite; and we certainly know the recreational use of wine. We are able to keep the two contexts separate, and we are also able to recognize when recreational use becomes dependence and abuse. One could envision similar sophistication developing with regard to psychoactive plant products. There could be recognized sacramental and therapeutic applications; and certain patterns of use might develop that were more playful, exploratory, hedonistic and yet could be contained within a reasonable and acceptable social framework that minimizes harm.

The "abuse" of a drug, in such a relatively enlightened system, would not be a function of who uses it, or where it originated, or whether doctors or other authorities condone it, but rather of the behavioral consequences in the drug user. One becomes recognized as an alcoholic, i.e., an abuser of alcohol, when their interpersonal and social relationships are noticeably impaired. There should be no difficulty in establishing similar abuse criteria for other psychoactive drugs.

## Psychedelics as Gnostic Catalysts

In 1968, in a paper "On the Evolutionary Significance of Psychedelics" published in *Main Currents of Modern Thought, I* suggested that the findings of LSD research in the areas of psychology, religion, and the arts could be looked at in the context of the evolution of consciousness:

> If LSD expands consciousness and if, as is widely believed, further evolution will take the form of an increase in consciousness, then can we not regard LSD as a possible evolutionary instrument?... Here is a device which, by altering the chemical composition of the cerebro-sensory information processing medium, temporarily inactivates the screening-programs, the genetic and cultural filters, which dominate in a completely unnoticed way our usual perceptions of the world.

From the perspective of almost twenty years reflection, I now propose to extend and amplify this statement in two ways: (1) the evolution of consciousness is a transformation process that consists primarily in gaining insight and understanding, or *gnosis;* and (2) the acceleration of this process by molecular catalysts is not only a consequence of new technologies, but is also an integral component of traditional systems of transformation, including shamanism, alchemy, and yoga.

In psychedelic research, the "set-and-setting hypothesis", which was first formulated by Timothy Leary in the early l 960s, has become accepted by most workers in the field. The theory states that the content of a psychedelic experience is a function of the set (intention, attitude, personality, mood) and the setting (interpersonal, social, and environmental) and that the drug functions as a kind of trigger, or catalyst, or non-specific amplifier or sensitizer. The hypothesis can be applied to the understanding of any altered state of consciousness when we recognize that other kinds of stimuli can be triggers, for example, hypnotic induction, meditation technique, *mantra,* sound or music, breathing, sensory isolation, movement, sex, natural landscapes, a near-death experience, and the like. Generalizing the set-and-setting hypothesis in this way helps us to understand psychoactive drugs as one class of triggers

within a whole range of possible catalysts of altered states (Tart 1972; Zinberg 1977).

An important clarification results from keeping in mind the distinction between a state (of consciousness) and a psychological trait; between state changes and trait changes. For example, psychologists distinguish between state-anxiety and trait-anxiety. William James, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1961), discussed this question in terms of whether a religious or conversion experience would necessarily lead to more "saintliness", more enlightened traits. This distinction is crucial to the assessment of the value or significance of drug-induced altered states. Only by attending to both the state-changes (visions, insights, feeling) and the long-term consequences, or behavioral or trait changes, can a comprehensive understanding of these phenomena be attained.

Having an insight is not the same as being able to apply that insight. There is no inherent connection between a mystical experience of oneness and the expression or manifestation of that oneness in the affairs of everyday life. This point is perhaps obvious, yet it is frequently overlooked by those who argue that, on principle, a drug could not induce a genuine mystical experience or play any role in spiritual life. The internal factors of "set", including preparation, expectation, and intention, are the determinants of whether a given experience is authentically religious; and equally, intention is crucial to the question of whether an altered state results in any lasting personality changes. Intention is like a kind of bridge from the ordinary or consensus reality state to the state of heightened consciousness; and it can also provide a bridge from that heightened state back to ordinary reality.

This model allows us to understand why the same drug(s) could be claimed by some to lead to nirvana or religious vision, and in others (for example, someone like Charles Manson) could lead to the most perverse and sadistic violence. The drug is only a tool, a catalyst, to attain certain altered states; which altered states being dependent on the intention. Rather, even where the drug-induced state is benign and expansive, whether or not it leads to long-lasting positive changes is also a matter of intention or mind-set.

The drug indeed seems to reveal or release something that is in the person; which is the factor implied in the term "psychedelic"—mind manifesting. In my opinion, the term "entheogen" is an unfortunate choice because it suggests the god within, the divine principle, is somehow "generated" in these states. My experiences have led me to the opposite conclusion: the god within is the generator, the source of life energy, the awakening and healing power. For someone whose conscious intention is a psychospiritual transformation, the psychedelic *can* be a catalyst that reveals and releases insight or knowledge from higher aspects of our being. This is, I believe, what is meant by *gnosis*—sacred knowledge or insight concerning the fundamental spiritual realities of the universe in general and one's individual destiny in particular.

The potential of psychedelic drugs to act as catalysts to a transformation into *gnosis,* or direct, ongoing awareness of divine reality, even if only in a small number of people, would seem to be of the utmost significance. Traditionally, the number of individuals who have had mystical experiences has been very small; the number of those who have been able to make practical applications of such experiences has probably been even smaller. Thus, the discovery of psychedelics, in facilitating such experiences and processes, could be regarded as one very important factor in a general spiritual awakening of collective human consciousness. Other factors that could be mentioned in this connection are the revolutionary paradigm shifts in the physical and biological sciences, the burgeoning of interest in Eastern philosophies and spiritual disciplines, and the growing awareness of the multi-cultural oneness of the human family brought about by the global communications networks.

## Psychedelics in Traditional Systems of Transformation

In my earlier writings, I emphasized the newness of psychedelic drugs, the unimaginable potentials to be realized by their constructive application; and I thought of them as first products of a new technology oriented towards the human spirit. While I still believe that these potentials exist, and that synthetic psychedelics have a role to play in consciousness research and perhaps consciousness evolution, my views have changed under the influence of the discoveries and writings of cultural anthropologists and ethnobotanists, who have pointed to the role of mind-altering and visionary botanicals in cultures across the world.

One cannot read the works of R. Gordon Wasson on the Mesoamerican mushroom cults ( 1980), or the work of Richard E. Schultes and Albert Hofmann (1979) on the profusion of hallucinogens in the Americas, or the cross-cultural work of such authors as Michael Harner (1973), Joan Halifax (1982), Peter Furst (1976), and Marlene Dobkin de Rios (1984), or the cross-culturally oriented medical and psychiatric researchers such as Andrew Weil (1980), Claudio Naranjo (1973), and Stanislav Grof (1985), or more personal accounts such as the writings of Carlos Castaneda, or Florinda Donner ( 1982), or the McKenna brothers (1975), or Bruce Lamb's biography of Manuel Cordova (1971), without getting a strong sense of the pervasiveness of the quest for visions, insights, and nonordinary states of consciousness; and, further, the sense that psychoactive plants are used in many, but by no means all, of the shamanic cultures that pursue such states. Thus, I have been led to a view closer to that of aboriginal cultures, a view of humanity in a relationship of co-consciousness, communication and cooperation with the animal kingdom, the plant kingdom, and the mineral world. In such a world-view, the ingestion of hallucinogenic plant preparations in order to obtain knowledge for healing, for prophecy, for communication with spirits, for anticipation of danger, or for understanding the universe, appears as one of the oldest and most highly treasured traditions.

The various shamanic cultures all over the world know a wide variety of means for entering non-ordinary realities. Michael Harner (1980) has pointed out that "auditory driving" with prolonged drumming is perhaps as equally widespread a technology for entering shamanic states as hallucinogens. In some cultures, the rhythmic hyperventilation produced through certain kinds of chanting may be another form of altered state trigger. Animal spirits become guides and allies in shamanic initiation. Plant spirits can become "helpers" also even when the plant is not taken internally by either doctor or patient. Tobacco smoke is used as a purifier, as well as a support to prayer. Crystals are used to focus energy for seeing and healing. There is attunement, through prayer and meditation, with deities and spirits of the land, the four directions, the elements, the Creator Spirit. Through many different means, there is the seeking of knowledge from other states, other worlds, knowledge that is used to improve the way we live in this world (through healing, problem-solving, etc.). The use of hallucinogenic plants, when it occurs, is part of an integrated complex of interrelationships between Nature, Spirit, and human consciousness.

Thus, it seems to me that the lessons we are to learn from these consciousness-expanding plants and drugs have to do not only with the recognition of other dimensions of the human psyche, but with a radically different world-view; a world-view that has been maintained in the beliefs, practices, and

rituals of shamanic cultures, and almost totally forgotten or suppressed by twentieth century materialistic culture. There is of course a certain delightful irony in the fact that it has taken a material substance to awaken the sleeping consciousness of so many of our contemporaries to the reality of non-material energies, forms, and spirits.

In discussing alchemy as the second of the three traditional systems of consciousness transformation mentioned above, I would like to emphasize first that we have only the minutest shreds of evidence that ingestion of hallucinogens played any part in the European alchemical tradition. The use of solanaceous hallucinogens in European witchcraft, which is related to both shamanism and alchemy, has been documented by Harner (1973:125-130). Likewise, in Chinese Taoist alchemy, the use of botanical and mineral preparations to induce spirit-flight and other kinds of altered states has been discussed by Strickmann ( 1979). A complete account of the role of hallucinogens in alchemy has not as yet been written. Possibly our ignorance in this field is still a consequence of intentional secrecy on the part of the alchemical writers.

Mircea Eliade, in his book *The Forge and the Crucible* (1962), made a strong case for the historical derivation of alchemy from early Bronze Age and Iron Age metallurgy, mining, and smithing rites and practices. One could argue that alchemy is one form of shamanism: the shamanism of those who worked with minerals and metals, the makers of tools and weapons. Many of the concerns and interests of the alchemists parallel shamanic themes. There is the strong interest in purification and healing, in discovering or making a "tincture" or "elixir" that will give health and longevity. There are visions and encounters with animal spirits, some clearly from the imaginal realms. There are stories and visions of divine or semi-divine figures often personified as the deities of classical mythology. There is the recognition of the sacredness, the animating spirit, of all matter. And there is the integrated world-view, which sees spirituality, religion, health and illness, human beings, the natural world and its elements, all interrelated in a totality.

It might be objected that there does not seem to be the equivalent of a shamanic journey in alchemy; no clear indication of an altered state of consciousness in which visions, or power, or healing abilities are attained. It appears to me that the alchemical equivalent of the shamanic journey is the opus, the work, the experiment with its various operations, such as *solutio, sublimatio, martificatio,* and the like. The focus is more on the long-term personality and physical changes that the alchemical initiate has to undergo, just as the shaman in training does. The experiments in alchemy were regarded as meditative rituals, during which visions might be seen in the retort or furnace, and interior psychophysiological state changes triggered by the observation of chemical processes.

Furthermore, in an interesting recent work, R.J. Stewart (1985) has argued that in the Western tradition of magic and alchemy, which has roots in pre-Christian Celtic mythology and beliefs, and of which traces can still be found in folklore ballads, popular songs, and nursery rhymes, the central transformative experience was an underworld journey. This underworld or otherworld initiation involved taking a "journey" into other realms, encounters with animal and spirit beings, attunement with the land and the ancestors, meditative rituals centering around the tree of life symbolism, and other features that place this tradition clearly into the ancient stream of shamanic lore found in all parts of the globe.

Turning now to yoga as the third of the traditional systems of evolutionary transformation of consciousness, we need not concern ourselves with the question of whether the use of visionary botanicals is a decadent or debased form of yoga, as Eliade (1958) seems to believe; or whether the use

of hallucinogens was primary, in the Vedic-Indian tradition as the Soma cult, as Wasson (1968) has proposed. Sometimes, with the latter view, the corollary is proposed that yoga methods were developed when the drug was no longer available as an alternative means for attaining similar states. Suffice it to say that in the Indian yoga traditions, in particular the teachings of Tantra, we have a system of practices for bringing about a transformation of consciousness with many parallels to shamanic and alchemical ideas.

The use of hallucinogens as an adjunct to yoga practices is known to this day in India, among certain Shivaite sects in particular (Aldrich 1977). Those schools and sects that do not use drugs tend to regard those that do as decadent, as belonging to the so-called left-hand path of Tantra, which also incorporates ritual food and sexuality *(maithuna)* as valid aspects of the yogic path. Under the influence of nineteenth century Western occult and theosophical ideas, this left-hand path tended to be equated with "black magic", or "sorcery". In actuality, the designation left-hand path derives from the yogic principle that the left side of the body is the feminine, receptive side; and thus, the left-hand path is the path of those who worship the Goddess *(Shakti)*, as the Tantrics do, and incorporate the body, the delight of the senses, nourishment, and sexuality into their yoga. Thus, as in shamanism and alchemy, we find here a strand of the tradition that involves respect and devotion to the feminine principle, the mother goddess, the earth and its fruit, the flesh and blood body, and the seeking of ecstatic visionary states.

It is true that the Indian yoga traditions seem not to have the same concern for the natural world of animals, crystals, and plants as is found in shamanism and alchemy. The emphasis is more on various inner and subtle states of consciousness. Nevertheless, there are interesting parallels between the three traditions. The focusing of inner light-fire energy in different centers and organs of the body, as practiced in Agni Yoga and Kundalini Yoga, is similar to the alchemical practice of purification by fire, and to shamanic notions of filling the body with light (Metzner 1971, 1986). The Indian alchemical tantric tradition had the concept of rasa, which is akin to the European alchemical concept of "tincture" or "elixir". *Rasa* has internal meanings—feeling, mood, "soul", and external referents—essence, juice, liquid. *Rasayano* was the path or way of rasa, the way of fluid energy-flow, that involves both external and internal essences.[1] As a third parallel, I will only mention the Tibetan Buddhist *Vajrayana* system, which is a remarkable fusion of Tantric Buddhist ideas with the Tibetans' original Bon shamanism: a system in which the various animal spirits and demons of the shamans and sorcerers have become transformed into personifications of Buddhist principles and guardians of the dharma (Govinda 1960).

## Conclusions

It appears incontrovertible that hallucinogens played some role, of unknown extent, in the transformative traditions of shamanism, alchemy, and yoga. If we regard psychotherapy as the modern descendant of these traditional systems, then a similar, if limited, application of hallucinogens could be made in various aspects of psychotherapy. And this has in fact already occurred, as the various studies of psychedelics in alcoholism, terminal cancer, obsessional neurosis, depression, and other conditions testify (Grof 1985; Grinspoon & Bakalar 1979). It seems likely that these kinds of applications of psychedelics as adjuncts to psychotherapy will continue, if not with LSD and other Schedule I drugs, then with other, newer, perhaps safer psychedelics.

What appears unlikely to me is that this kind of controlled psychiatric application will ever be enough to satisfy the inclinations and needs of those individuals who wish to explore psychedelics in their most ancient role, as tools for seeking visionary states and hidden forms of knowledge. The fact that the serious use of hallucinogens outside of the psychiatric framework continues despite severe social and legal sanctions suggests that this is a kind of individual freedom that will not be easy to abolish. It also suggests that there is a strong need, in certain people, to re-establish their connections with ancient traditions of knowledge in which visionary states of consciousness and exploration of other realities, with or without hallucinogens, were the central concern.

It may be that such a path will always be pursued by only a very limited number of individuals; much as the shamanic, alchemical, and yogic initiations and practices were pursued by only a few individuals in each society. I find it a hopeful sign that some, however few, are willing to explore how to reconnect with these lost sources of knowledge, because, like many others, I feel that our materialist-technological society, with its fragmented world-view, has largely lost its way, and can ill afford to ignore any potential aids to greater knowledge of the human mind. The ecologically balanced and humanistically integrated framework of understanding that the ancient traditions preserved surely has much to offer us.

Furthermore, it is very clear that the visions and insights of the individuals who pursue these paths are visions and insights for the present and the future, not just of historical or anthropological interest. This has always been the pattern: the individual seeks a vision to understand his or her place, or destiny, as a member of the community. The knowledge derived from altered states has been, can be, and needs to be applied to the solution of the staggering problems that confront our species. This is why the discoveries of Albert Hofmann have immense importance—for the understanding of our past, the awareness of our presence, and the safeguarding of our future. For, in the words of The Bible: "where there is no vision, the people perish."

## Footnote

1. We may say that the physico-chemical processes of the rasayana serve as the vehicle for psychic and spiritual operations. The elixir obtained by alchemy corresponds to the 'immortality' pursued by tantric yoga (Eliade 1958 283). (back)

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**The Psychedelic Library Homepage**

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