

Psychedelics and Self-Actualization

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In their letter soliciting contributions to this book, the editors wrote, "we came to the conclusion that psychedelic drugs have influenced both the lives of individual users and society in general more than is usually acknowledged—sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically. " I was delighted to receive their invitation, since these words almost exactly expressed my own conclusions after 8 years of psychiatric clinical and research work. For 5 of those 8 years I have worked in areas such as the nature of psychological well-being, non-Western psychologies and religions, consciousness, and the effects of meditation. I have also undertaken a personal study of meditative and non-Western traditions, and I thus have had the opportunity of meeting, interviewing, and studying with a wide range of people in these related disciplines.

Whenever I came to know these people closely, the same story would emerge: that although they rarely acknowledged it in public, the psychedelics had played an important role in introducing them to and facilitating their passage through these disciplines. It occurred to me that this might well be a case of what social scientists call "plurality ignorance:" a situation in which each individual thinks he or she is the only one doing something, although in fact the practice is widespread. In this case, what seemed to be widely unrecognized was that large numbers of people appear to have derived, at least from their own point of view, significant benefits from psychedelics, despite popular media accounts of their devastating dangers.

This suspicion was deepened by an encounter with the editor of a prominent psychological journal. In an extensive review of various Western and non-Western psychologies, I discussed the data on psychedelics and concluded that there was evidence suggesting that in some cases people might find them beneficial. The journal editor was willing to accept the paper provided I removed any reference to positive effects of psychedelics; he thought that the journal could not afford to be associated with such statements. I am familiar with this particular editor's work and know that he is exceptionally open-minded. It appears that we have in our culture, even in the scientific and professional literature, a bias towards reporting only the negative effects of psychedelics.

How, then, can we get a picture of the effects of psychedelics when they are used for personal exploration and psychological growth? One approach suggested by Abraham Maslow, but as yet apparently untried in the area of psychedelics, is to ask people who are exceptionally healthy and use them as bioassayers. Maslow's technique was to identify those individuals who seemed to be most fully actualizing their potential; he called them self-actualizers. (1) He listed 13 characteristics, such as a deep involvement in work, peak experiences, and a good sense of humor, which identify individuals who have attained exceptional psychological well-being. While this approach has many advantages, it is not without its drawbacks and limitations. The concept and criteria of self-actualization are by no means clear, and they are largely lacking in research data and support; individuals are chosen subjectively, with all the possible biases which that entails. (2) However, in the absence of good empirical tests of high level well-being, we are left for the present with subjective judgments.

My research has given me the extraordinary gift of meeting some very remarkable people: mental health professionals, advanced meditators, teachers, gurus, holy people of both East and West who have devoted a large part of their lives to mental training and psychological growth. I have spent considerable time with some of them, interviewing and being interviewed, receiving instruction on various meditative practices, listening to their talks, and socializing. As might be expected, there is a wide range of personalities and psychological maturity. I was able to interview in depth five of the very healthiest Westerners who fit Maslow's criteria and are also successful and eminent in their disciplines.

These four men and one woman range in age from their mid-thirties to their forties. All have university degrees; three are psychologists, and the other two are highly sophisticated psychologically. Four are teachers, either of psychology or of one of the consciousness disciplines such as meditation or Buddhism. All have strong national reputations, and most have international reputations; all have published at least one book. I included the criterion of professional eminence in order to insure that the people were competent and would not be dismissed as irresponsible or as dropouts of any sort.

Personal Experience

Each of these five people has had multiple psychedelic experiences. For three of them the psychedelic experience was crucial in arousing their interest in the consciousness disciplines and directing their professional careers. A fourth received LSD for the first time as part of a legitimate research experiment during the sixties, had a deep religious experience which affirmed and deepened previously dormant interests and

values, and subsequently returned to school to pursue those interests further. All five report that the psychedelics have been important in their own growth and that they continue to find them useful in the context of their own discipline. On the average, they continue to use them two to three times per year, but all have gone for extended periods without use.

General Principles

On the basis of their own personal experiences and what they had learned from working with many people involved in various psychological and consciousness disciplines, they suggested the following general principles, advantages, and disadvantages of psychedelics.

All agreed that they are very powerful tools and that the effects depend very much on the person who uses them and the skill with which they are used. They took it as self-evident that there are many people who should not take psychedelics, especially anyone with significant psychological disturbances. However, they agreed that used skillfully by a mature person, they could indeed be helpful. This meant an appropriate setting, at least at the start, preferably under the guidance of someone who is psychologically mature and psychedelically experienced; an appropriate mental set and expectations, including a preceding period of quiet and/or meditation; and most important, involvement in a psychological or consciousness discipline aimed at deep mental training.

Possible Benefits

The first benefit was the simple recognition that there are realms of experience, modes of self, and states of consciousness far beyond the ken of our day-to-day experience or our traditional cultural and psychological models. These experiences were often said to produce expanded belief systems, making people less dogmatic and more open to as yet unexperienced or undreamt realms of being. One common report was that each experience tended to elicit a deeper realm and a more expanded sense of consciousness and self, so that the previously expanded belief system continued opening and widening.

For all five of the subjects mentioned here, and many of their students, psychedelic experience produced a new interest in depth psychology, religion, spirituality, and consciousness, as well as related disciplines and practices such as meditation. All the

subjects believed that their psychedelic experiences had enhanced their ability to understand these consciousness disciplines. In particular, the esoteric core of the great religious and spiritual traditions could be seen as roadmaps to higher states of consciousness, and some of the most profound material in these traditions became especially clear and meaningful during psychedelic sessions. Several of the subjects reported that they often put time aside during psychedelic sessions to listen to tapes or readings from these traditions; they found these experiences particularly important. This is compatible with the Eastern claim that "Religion is a learning in which a basic requirement is 'First change your consciousness'." (3)

Most of the subjects felt that the psychedelic experience could sometimes supply a guiding vision which provided direction and meaning for one's life thereafter. They mentioned intense emotions such as love, compassion, or empathy, and the recognition that the mind can be and should be highly trained. Three subjects mentioned another residual benefit. Someone who has had a deep positive insight may be able to recall that insight subsequently and use it to guide himself or herself through a situation where it lends an additional useful perspective, even though it is no longer directly available.

There was unanimous agreement that under appropriate conditions the psychedelics could considerably speed and facilitate the process of working through psychological blocks. In some cases this involved material which was already being worked on in an ordinary state of awareness, or could be. In other cases, material inaccessible in an ordinary state could be brought into awareness, sometimes producing dramatic transformations including death/rebirth experiences and alleviation of symptoms. Reviews of the therapeutic effects of psychedelics have not shown clear-cut results, but of course it is very difficult to detect experimentally significant effects of a single intervention.

For some of the subjects the occasional use of psychedelics provided a continuously deepening marker of their progress. No matter how much mental training and psychological exploration they had done, further realms of experience could be revealed by the psychedelics. With each major advance in their mental training, a new realm would open to them. An especially common event was to experience something in a psychedelic drug session which would recur months or years later in the context of a mental training discipline and then spontaneously during daily life. All five subjects believed that both psychedelics and their mental disciplines suggested that the range of experiences which occurred in daily living represented only a small slice of a vast, perhaps unlimited, spectrum.

Traps and Complications

Although they themselves have had few serious problems with the psychedelics, all five subjects thought that there were a number of potential traps and complications. They viewed the major protection against such difficulties as consisting in a commitment to a mental training discipline and the availability of an advanced teacher for consultation about both the psychedelic experiences and the discipline. Not one of the five subjects saw the psychedelics as constituting in and of themselves a path which could lead to deep levels of psychological-spiritual growth or true enlightenment.

Interestingly, the subjects did not see acute painful reactions, such as anxiety attacks or fear of losing control, as necessarily adverse. Rather, they held that with appropriate expectations, previous work, and guidance, such reactions could lead to deep and valuable insights. This is contrary to the traditional psychiatric and emergency room perspective which sees such reactions as purely pathological and requiring medication.

Hedonism was mentioned as one of the traps associated with psychedelics. Using these chemicals for trivial sensory stimulation was seen not as wrong, but as unskillful and unfulfilling. The subjects also noted that it was possible to become attached to the more pleasant experiences, marring later sessions by inappropriate expectations and calculated attempts to recreate those experiences.

Since psychedelic experiences can be extraordinarily intense, there is some danger of not recognizing a fantasy for what it is. As one subject noted, it is not always easy to discern which experiences are valid, especially for people who are intellectually and psychologically sophisticated. Again, the best remedy was seen as a commitment to open-mindedness, ongoing mental training, and the instruction of an advanced teacher.

The same remedy was suggested for the tendency to overestimate the profundity and long-term impact of insights which may be mistaken for profound awakenings. This tendency was seen as decreasing with further experience of either the psychedelics or a mental training discipline. It was felt that deep exploration of either would produce many insights, each one adding a small piece to the gigantic jigsaw puzzle which is the mind.

An inadequate cognitive framework or context was also mentioned as a limiting factor. Sometimes extremely deep insights did occur under psychedelics, and in at least two cases there may have been a transient enlightenment experience. In one of

the subjects it produced a prolonged period of confusion and partial disorientation which in turn led to meditation training. This subject experienced a deep level of enlightenment again after several years' practice and this time found the experience understandable and beneficial.

One subject thought that the main disadvantage of psychedelics is the tendency to underestimate one's own role in creating the resultant experiences. People have too little appreciation of their own power and see themselves as passive victims of drug effects rather than as active creators of experience.

One trap for people with limited experience, the subjects said, is a failure to appreciate the enormous range of potential experiences and the tendency to assume that all sessions will be like the first. Many people have made pronouncements about the nature of psychedelic effects after limited exposure and therefore have failed to appreciate the extent of differences between individuals or between one session and another in the same individual. According to reports by these subjects, as well as Stanislav Grof (4,5) and others, repeated exposure produces a gradual unfolding and deepening sequence of experiences.

Summary

Here then are comments on the pros and cons of psychedelics from five of the very healthiest individuals I have met in the course of my research and personal investigations of various psychological and consciousness disciplines. In each of these individuals the psychedelics played an important yet unpublicized role in their life orientations and professions. Taken in conjunction with the similar findings which they have noticed in their students and colleagues, these reports make it clear that the psychedelics can sometimes have long-lasting beneficial impact. While the five subjects discussed here do not see psychedelics as constituting a pathway in themselves, they do see them as potential facilitators of development for some people engaged in a mental training program or a psychological or consciousness discipline. The experiences and traps associated with psychedelic drugs are not seen as unique but rather as features of any mental training program, although the drugs usually produce them more rapidly and intensely. Needless to say, the capacity to benefit from an accelerated experience depends on the maturity and skill of the individual; all five subjects took it as self-evident that psychedelics should not be used indiscriminately but should be respected as the powerful tools they are.

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