

REFLECTIONS ON LSD, ZEN MEDITATION AND SATORI

G. Ray JORDAN, Jr.

University of Southern California, Los Angeles

In the March 1961 issue of *Psychologia* Dr. Wilson Van Dusen presented LSD as a new means of arriving at *satori*, the Zen experience of sudden enlightenment. He said that the use of LSD is a faster method than years of meditation and suggested that the drug "could perhaps be used in a monastery in conjunction with conventional Zen practices to facilitate the student's development..." (1). From a background of some limited experience with Zen and several firsthand experiences with LSD as a normal subject under widely varying conditions I shall respond both favorably and critically to Van Dusen's ideas as I develop certain tentative reflections of my own.

In this article I shall not attempt a general description of LSD and the whole range of its known effects. Information of this sort can be found elsewhere, for example in Dr. Janiger's "The Use of Hallucinogenic Agents in Psychiatry," in the July and August 1959 issues of *The Californian Clinician* (2).

Because of the importance of personal background factors to the direction and mode of development of LSD experiences I shall present the emergence of my reflections in autobiographical sequence. Others' accounts of their LSD sessions as well as my own experiences have convinced me that Van Dusen is right when he says that "in a sense" one's LSD experiences are fabricated out of one's prior interests and desires (3). I do not think, on the other hand, that either LSD or Zen experiences are necessarily "nothing but" personal subjective projections. One of my observations simply has been that the individual subject and his background are among the most crucial elements determining the nature of the experience. I have used this observation to help give order to several diverse ideas. These ideas are tentative, and I present them mainly in the hope that they will provoke further discussion from others familiar with Zen and / or LSD.

For several years before my first LSD session I had studied Zen academically and had practiced Zen meditation (*zazen*) under the guidance of a couple of Zen monks in the United States. Shortly before this initial experience with the drug I had read Aldous Huxley's account of his first mescaline session in *The Doors of Perception*, and I had talked with two or three normal LSD subjects who had had "good" experiences of an enlightening nature. I approached the experiment hoping that I also would have a "good" experience but additionally anticipating an adventure of unknown dimensions somewhat like a trip through uncharted country. The adventure began about thirty minutes after I had swallowed .75 gamma of LSD in a psychiatrist's office. During the day I was given freedom of movement within a suite of five rooms and an outside yard.

In the course of this first session I often saw movement in such things as walls, concrete, rocks, etc., and generally perceived the world as brighter than ordinary. There was one frightening moment when I felt that I might be caught on a habit-forming narcotic.

Rational reflection on what I knew about LSD banished the paranoia. There was also a terrifying but exhilarating moment when my face in the mirror became a wolf's face, then a leopard's or panther's face and finally melted like formless hot wax below the eyes. After my face returned to normal I was disappointed when no more transformations occurred. All these events and others were important aspects of my first LSD session. There were, however, other moments which better indicated the major motif of the whole session.

Several times during the day I attempted to meditate in the fashion I had learned from my Zen teachers by concentrating the mind on or beneath my feet. Two or three of these efforts were while seated and two or three while walking. Most of the time I was unsuccessful in concentrating. There was too much going on, too much active energy. I was too strongly fascinated by all the activities of sense/feeling (exterior sense data and deepest interior feelings completely unified). By very great effort I was able to achieve the meditative consciousness twice for very brief periods while walking. Although each time the duration was only thirty seconds to a minute the meditation was as deep or intense as any I had ever experienced.

One of these moments of meditation was terminated by the most significant event of the day. I was suddenly overwhelmed, dissolved, exhilarated by the words "This is what all the Buddhas have lived and died for!" I was overwhelmed, but, to speak accurately, there was no sense of "I" apart from the experiencing. I did not actually hear the words. Neither did I not hear them. They seemed to come from the sky and from within my body, yet they did not sound in my ears as from an ordinary voice. They were simultaneous with a sense/feeling realization that all of reality *is* or *flows* in an infinite number of dimensions, all of which completely interpenetrate each other so that all dimensions are contained in each. Thus each form of life and existence was experienced as containing all other forms. The voice responsible for the words seemed to be that of my beloved Zen teacher then deceased. The realization was not like a spiritualistic communication from the dead, for the voice was also that of all Buddhas, a universal or "collective" consciousness which has nothing outside itself.

Those familiar with the concepts of the Kegon school of Buddhism may recognize the striking similarity of my realization and the Kegon *ji-ji-muge hokkai* (4). I must stress, however, that the essential part of my realization, the "this," was *not* conceptual. It was only as I tried to verbalize it that I recognized the similarity of my best conceptual attempts and the Kegon formulation.

Once the awareness of reality's infinitely multiple dimensions emerged it remained in the background of the rest of the day's events. On one occasion it became as clear and strong an awareness as at its first emergence. Some of the more obvious visual effects had begun to fade, and I was reflecting on the difficulties of communicating my experience to others. Suddenly the background sense of infinitely complex dimensions interpenetrating each other pervaded all awareness with intense lucidity. Simultaneously there arose the partially verbalized concept, almost heard but with a less quasi-audible characteristic than the earlier words, "Only the complexity of life itself can express this."

In all my subsequent LSD sessions I have had no experiences which have been deeper,

more intense or more inclusive than the realizations associated with "This is what all the Buddhas have lived and died for!" and "Only the complexity of life itself can express this." In my opinion they were of the same nature as *kensho* or *satori*. Unfortunately no Zen teacher was available for me to interview at the time of the experiences. Like earlier less profound realizations from Zen meditation their impact faded as I became lazy in my practice of *zazen*.

A similar fading of insights for LSD subjects seems to be suggested by the findings of a research team at the Medical Center of the University of California at Los Angeles. Dittman, Hayman and Whittlesey report that many subjects including a number of alcoholics claimed great benefit from one LSD session when they were questioned up to a year and a half afterwards. Follow-up reports obtained from alcoholic subjects two to three and a half years after their LSD sessions indicated that most thought they had lost much of what they had gained. In a majority of these cases there had been no intensive therapy for the subjects after their LSD experiences (5). I think that there is a close parallel between what seems to have happened to the UCLA subjects with no intensive follow-up therapy to mature their LSD insights and what happened to my insights as I faltered in *zazen*.

Recently a Zen teacher, Yasutani Roshi, who was visiting the United States, explained that short of the supreme *satori* of a Buddha or a great patriarch the sudden realizations of Zen only clarify the path of Buddhahood. Old habit patterns in perception and action must still be overcome, and one's insights must be matured in everyday life. I think that this point is probably equally valid for insights in the course of ordinary psychotherapy as well as LSD-precipitated insights and the *satori* experiences of Zen: dramatic insights into one's self or one's situation must be appropriated and matured in the course of daily life if they are to continue with clarity or have lasting effects.

Possibly contrary to the opinion set forth in the preceding paragraph, at least with reference to LSD, is the view advanced by Sherwood, Stolaroff and Harman "that an individual can have a single experience which is so profound and impressive that his life experiences in the months and years that follow become a continuing growth process" (6). The statement may be a little misleading if it suggests to the reader that an entirely new experience with not advance preparation has such results. The authors in fact indicate that they carefully select and prepare their subjects or patients for the LSD experience. One suspects that with such preparatory care subjects are chosen who might be expected to have more than average interest in relating any profound experience to their on-going life. The periods of follow-up reports are not specifically identified in the article with the exception of four months in one case which was marked by some relapse (7). One would like to know the situation one, two or more years after the LSD experience and to know what the subjects' attitudes and willful practices had been in the intervening periods.

Let me make my view as clear as possible. I am convinced that a *kensho* or *satori* experience may remove with dramatic suddenness some delusion or delusions of the ego. In the case of a great *satori* like the Buddha's enlightenment it may be that the cure is complete and final as Buddhist doctrine affirms. It may also be that there are cases of less

complete *satori* in which certain aspects of ego delusion are permanently removed by the single dramatic experience by itself. In the vast majority of cases, however, it would seem that *satori* experiences temporarily explode some ego delusion or delusions and offer one the possibility of living with greater freedom. For most it is probably easier to avoid the opportunity than to accept it, yet many do accept in spite of the difficulties. I think that what is true in the case of Zen is probably true in the case of LSD with the modification that what one is potentially freed from may be ego delusions in the Buddhist sense or may be neurotic patterns (or are they the same?).

In the weeks and months after my first experience with LSD I thought that LSD as such did not produce the Zen realization I had. Obviously LSD had played a major role in the realization, but I thought and still tend to think it unlikely that the sort of understanding which emerged would have been there without my prior practice of Zen. I did not insist on the references to Buddha and my deceased Zen teacher which obviously were drawn from my specific cultural past. Rather I have been inclined to think this way by the fact that the most important non-conceptual aspects of the experience seemed to be released or precipitated by my endeavor to meditate. It seemed to me that what LSD did was to loosen old patterns and stereotypes in the mind or psyche. The direction which the relatively freed energy of life or consciousness took seemed to be a function not of the drug but of the person.

I was and still am convinced that LSD can be a most potent aid to Zen practice when used as an adjunct means to *prajna* or insight. I did not then think that LSD could be of much help to the development of *dhyana* or meditation which is needed to conserve insight and mature it.

I was strengthened in my skepticism regarding LSD's value for meditation when I learned of the experience of a friend who is a *roshi* or teacher of Zen. During a visit to the United States he was persuaded to take LSD in an experimental setting. He does not seem to have clearly understood the possible effects of the drug. I think that explanations were greatly hampered by language difficulties. During the session he thought he had been poisoned and generally had a rough experience which left him physically ill as it were and much upset for three days afterwards. Lack of understanding was probably an important factor contributing to the unpleasant results. I have speculated that another factor may have been meditation. Knowing my friend's practice of doing *zazen* whenever he is otherwise unoccupied I am certain that he entered the LSD experience meditating. I have wondered if his meditation suppressed activities which the LSD tended to release with the result that he had a "bad" experience followed by illness.

The results of one of my later LSD sessions seemed to confirm my speculations regarding the *roshi's* experience. In the same experimental setting where I first took LSD I was given 300 gamma of the drug. Immediately after swallowing the pills I began to meditate. I was fairly successful in my concentration. This LSD experience had less interesting effects interiorly and exteriorly than any of my other experiences before or after. It was also marked by a paranoid tendency to be suspicious of the doctor and my environment. I have thought that perhaps the lack of interesting effects and the paranoia were closely connected with a suppressive aspect of my meditation.

I have had to revise if not completely reject my original view of LSD's relation to *dhyana* and the perspective of the two preceding paragraphs may be entirely erroneous. If it has any validity, however, there is clearly an aspect or phase of Zen meditation which is suppressive. Perhaps one could say that the suppressive phase is the crude endeavors of a beginner. Because of subsequent events I am at present inclined to regard my meditation on entering the 300 gamma LSD session as such a crude effort.

About a year after the just-mentioned LSD session I went through my first Zen sesshin (five days, in this case, of intense *zazen* under the guidance of a *roshi*). One outcome of these five days was the refining of my experiential understanding of Zen meditation. I had long known theoretically that in *zazen* one is often advised to concentrate his mind in the lower abdomen. I had previously succeeded in acting on this instruction but never before to the same extent as during *sesshin*. As my mind dwelt for longer periods in the lower abdomen a surprising memory awakened in consciousness. Characteristic of most of my LSD sessions after the first one was a profoundly felt relaxing of the abdomen and the moving of my sensed center of gravity or "beingness" to the lower abdominal region. When one's being is concentrated in this area all sorts of mental and sense phenomena can go on unhindered. Here, then, is a type of meditation which need not suppress the active energies released by LSD. Even without LSD this sort of meditation may release forces and activities of the same order as those freed by the drug.

Towards the end of the *sesshin* my wife experienced *kensho*. She reports that related to this event as well as to meditation during *sesshin* were experiences similar to some of her previous LSD experiences. There was a difference, however, for to her the experiences during *sesshin* were deeper and far more powerful than any of her LSD experiences.

Four days after the *sesshin* ended my wife and I had the opportunity to participate in an LSD session. Prior to the session we meditated together for approximately two hours. The intensity of the *sesshin* was still present in our meditation. When the meditation period was over we dropped the endeavor to concentrate and looked forward to the approaching LSD experience with no particular effort to direct or control thoughts and feelings. Although we were each given only 50 gamma of LSD this session was the deepest and most intense one either of us had ever experienced. The profundity and intensity which had marked the realization "This is what all the Buddhas have lived and died for!" in my first LSD session and which had been present for limited periods in later sessions, this seemingly bottomless profundity characterized several hours of the experience. It was like a continuation of the extreme concentration of *sesshin*, but a concentration inseparable from the most active manifestation of energy imaginable. Throughout the session I was aware of meditation going on in the abdominal region and sort of directing the movements and rhythms of all events yet I did not make any specific efforts to meditate with the reflective mind.

From reading and personal inquiry I have been able to learn of no other LSD subject who reports a relaxing of the abdomen and centering of awareness there. I can conclude only that such a pattern in so many of my LSD sessions is probably traceable to the efforts of many years to do *zazen*. The importance of one's prior interests in determining the direction of LSD experiences has also been confirmed in my case by the religious or philosophi-

cal insights triggered by LSD. The profound intuitive understandings which have erupted during my sessions have not contradicted but tended to confirm my earlier ideas and aspirations regarding religion and life.

In contrast to my case Van Dusen reported that his LSD experiences brought unexpected developments at four points: (1) psychological death followed by eternal life; (2) experience beyond what he had dreamed possible; (3) realization that the individual cannot will the divine but encounters it only in a sort of "not willed willing" or on "the other side of willing"; and (4) "the most bitter lesson of all," that "the One beyond time and space and the One of the commonplace were the same." (8) Every one of these points was familiar to me before my first LSD session not only as concepts but more primarily as intuitive experiences and/or aspirations of my deepest feelings. I was particularly surprised when I read that for Van Dusen realization of the transcendent One as the One of the commonplace was "the most bitter lesson of all." My earliest conscious religious strivings had been motivated by an intuitive awareness and aspiration toward greater realization of just such a unity. Were these pre-LSD intuitions of mine more in accord with "Reality" than Van Dusen's? Did his LSD experiences bring him closer to "Reality"? I would like to think so, but I certainly cannot prove it objectively or logically.

Sherwood, Stolaroff and Harman suggest that in connection with the usage of LSD and similar drugs there "appears to emerge a universal central perception, apparently independent of subjects' previous philosophical or theological inclinations" (9). If they are correct more extensive and intensive research with LSD might do much to provide empirical proof of a primary beingness in some sense conscious which is the mystical or intuitive base and perhaps goal of man's religious aspirations and behavior. That an individual has been exposed to religious or philosophical ideas of this sort prior to an LSD-triggered realization of them does not necessarily make their reality "nothing but" emotionally intensified projections of his cultural past. However, for the scientist — the psychologist and psychologist of religion — it is necessary to rule out this alternative as a probable means of adequately explaining the religious or metaphysical perceptions precipitated by LSD. It would be of great importance to psychology of religion if more experiences like Van Dusen's in which the realizations were against prior expectation or startlingly new could be presented with more details regarding the subject's background, current beliefs and attitudes, etc.

On the other hand, the person who has experienced the sort of thing described by Van Dusen and earlier portions of this article knows that what is involved is of a more basic and universal nature than any culturally learned pattern, though it does not exclude cultural patterns. For such an individual no further proof is needed except the maturation of the realization in his everyday life. This maturation depends entirely upon himself.

REFERENCES

1. Wilson Van Dusen, "LSD and the Enlightenment of Zen." *Psychologia*, IV, 1 (March 1961), p. 15.
2. Oscar Janiger, "The Use of Hallucinogenic Agents in Psychiatry," *The California Clinician*, LV, 7 and 8 (July and August 1959), pp. 222-224, 251-259.
3. Van Dusen, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

4. See, for example, D. T. Suzuki, *The Essence of Buddhism*, Kyoto: Hozokan, 1948, pp. 51-91; or, Sogen Yamakami, *Systems of Buddhist Thought*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1912, pp. 290-295.
5. Keith S. Ditman, M.D., Max Hayman, M.D., and John R. B. Whittlesey, "Nature and Frequency of Claims Following LSD," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disorders*, CXXXIV, 4 (April 1962), pp. 346-352.
6. J. N. Sherwood, M. D., M. J. Stolaroff, and W. W. Harman, Ph. D., "The Psychedelic Experience—a New Concept in Psychotherapy" (an unpublished paper, International Foundation for Advanced Study, Menlo Park, California), p. 1.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
8. Van Dusen, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
9. Sherwood, Stolaroff and Harman, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

MS. received IX 21, 62.

G. Ray Jordan, Jr. Assistant Professor of Religion, University of Southern California, received his A.B. degree at Duke University and his M.A. and Ph. D. degrees at the University of Southern California. He has taken additional graduate work at the Yale Divinity Schools and Claremont Graduate School. He has also done special research in religion and psychology at Trabuco College under the guidance of Gerald Heard and special research in Zen Buddhism under the guidance of Nyogen Senzaki, Buddhist monk and scholar, and Dr. D. T. Suzuki.

Prior to his present appointment he taught the history of philosophy and religion at California Western University. Since 1955 he has been teaching World Religions and Psychology of Religion at the University of Southern California. He is a member of the American Schools of Oriental Research, the Academy of Religion and Mental Health, and the National Association of Biblical Instructors.