

Mescaline and Hindu mystical experience

Aldous Huxley experimented with mescaline: *The Doors of Perception*¹ is an account of this experience. In this book Huxley regards the experience induced by mescaline as comparable to, if not identical with, the mystical experience as recorded in three major religious traditions of mankind: Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. He compares his experience with (i) the experience of the beatific vision of the Christian mystics; (ii) the experience of *Sat Cit Ananda* (existence, consciousness, bliss) of the Hindu mystics; and (iii) the experience of *Tathatā* (thusness) of the Buddhist mystics.²

The validity of the first comparison has been examined by R.C. Zaehner.³ This paper subjects the second to a closer examination.

There are several kinds of mystical experience possible in Hinduism,⁴ and even within one broad rubric, say that of Yoga mysticism, it is possible to distinguish between mystical states, as between Savikalpa Samādhi (conditioned mystical state) and Nirvikalpa Samādhi (unconditioned mystical state).⁵ With which of these states, then, is Huxley's experience with mescaline to be compared?

Huxley referred to his experience under mescaline in terms of *Sat Cit Ananda*, which is how the Brahman is referred to in Hinduism. Huxley's experience, therefore, has to be seen as corresponding to the experience of Brahman. The experience of Brahman in Hindu mysticism, however, is seen as possible in two kinds of Samādhi: Savikalpa Samādhi and Nirvikalpa Samādhi. In the former Saguna Brahma (Brahma with attributes) is experienced, in the latter Nirguna Brahma (Brahma without attributes). To which of these two is Huxley's experience to be related? Ambiguity arises from the fact that in Hinduism the expression *Sat Cit Ananda* has been used to designate both Saguna and Nirguna Brahma,⁶ and Huxley himself provides no further clue. There are thus two possibilities for comparison with Huxley's experience: Savikalpa Samādhi and Nirvikalpa Samādhi. This article examines the second of these possibilities.

We have Huxley's statement of his experience under the influence of mescaline.⁷ Do we have a similar statement of the experience of Nirvikalpa Samādhi to compare it with? Fortunately such a first-hand account is available from no less a mystic than Rāmākṛṣṇa Paramhansa.⁸

A comparison of these accounts, directly and in the light of the Hindu scriptures, enables one to identify points of convergence and divergence between the two experiences.

qualitative equivalent of breathing – but of a breathing without returns to a starting point, with no recurrent ebbs but only a repeated flow from beauty to heightened beauty, from deeper to even deeper meaning. Words like 'grace' and 'transfiguration' came to my mind, and this, of course, was what, among other things, they stood for. My eyes traveled from the rose to the carnation, and from the feathery incandescence to the smooth scrolls of sentient amethyst which were the iris. The Beatific Vision, *Sat Chit Ananda*, Being – Awareness – Bliss – for the first time I understood, not on the verbal level, not by inchoate limits or at a distance, but precisely and completely what those prodigious syllables referred to. And then I remembered a passage I had read in one of Suzuki's essays. 'What is the Dharma-Body of the Buddha?' ('The Dharma-Body of the Buddha' is another way of saying Mind, Suchness, the Word, the Godhead.) The question is asked in a Zen monastery by an earnest and bewildered novice. And with the prompt irrelevance of one of the Marx Brothers, the Master answers, 'The hedge at the bottom of the garden.' 'And the man who realizes this truth,' the novice dubiously inquires, 'what, may I ask, is he?' Groucho gives him a whack over the shoulders with his staff and answers, 'A golden-haired lion.'

RĀMAKRṢṆA

'After initiating me the naked one taught me many dicta conveying the conclusion of Vedānta, and asked me to make my mind free of function in all respects and merge in the meditation of the Self. But it so happened with me that when I sat for meditation I could by no means make my mind go beyond the bounds of name and form and cease functioning. The mind withdrew itself easily from all other things but, as soon as it did so, the intimately familiar form of the universal Mother, consisting of the effulgence of pure consciousness, appeared before it as living and moving and made me quite oblivious of the renunciation of names and forms of all descriptions. When I listened to the conclusive dicta and sat for meditation, this happened over and over again. Almost despairing of the attainment of the Nirvikalpa Samādhi, I then opened my eyes and said to the naked one, 'No, it cannot be done; I cannot make the mind free from functioning and force it to dive into the Self.' Scolding me severely, the naked one said very excitedly, 'What, it can't be done?' i.e. what utter defiance! He then looked about in the hut and finding a broken piece of glass took it in his hand and forcibly pierced its needle-like pointed end into my forehead between the eyebrows and said, 'Collect the mind here to this point.' With a firm determination I sat for meditation again and, as soon as the holy form of the divine Mother appeared now before the mind as previously, I looked upon knowledge as a sword and cut it mentally in two with that sword of knowledge. There remained then no function in the mind, which transcended quickly the realm of name and form, making me merge in Samādhi.'

Tota remained waiting for a long time beside the Master who entered into Samādhi in the manner mentioned above. Then coming out of the hut silently, he locked the door up lest some one should enter the hut without his knowledge and disturb him. He took his seat under the Panchavati, not far from the hut and was

days, when Tota did not still hear the Master's call, he was filled with curiosity and astonishment and left his seat to open the door. With a view to knowing the condition of the disciple he entered the hut and saw that the Master was sitting in the same posture in which he had left him and that there was not the slightest motion of the vital force in his body but that his face was calm and serene and full of effulgence ...

Tota applied his mind to the examination of the state of the Master and scrutinized minutely all the signs manifested in the disciple's body. He examined especially whether his heart was beating and whether the slightest breath was coming out of his nostrils. He touched repeatedly the disciple's body which was in a steady posture, like a piece of wood, firm and fixed. But, there was no sign of any change or modification, nor was there any return of normal consciousness. Besides himself with joy and astonishment Tota cried out, '... Is it the Nirvikalpa Samadhi, the ultimate result attained through the path of knowledge spoken of in the Vedanta? ...'

Tota then undertook the process of bringing the disciple back to the consciousness of the external world. ... I was for six months in that state from which ordinary mortals never return. The body lives for twenty-one days only and then falls like a dry leaf from a tree. There was no consciousness at all, of time, of the coming of day or the passing of night. Just as flies enter into the nostrils and the mouth of a dead man, so they entered into mine; but there was no consciousness. The hair became matted on account of the accumulation of dust. Calls of nature were perhaps answered unconsciously. Could the body have lived? It would have succumbed at that time. But a holy man came then. He had a small stick like a ruler in his hand. He recognised my state as soon as he saw it and knew that much of Mother's work was yet to be done through this body; much good would be done to many if only it could be saved. Therefore he would carry food in time, and, by striking this body again and again, would try to bring back consciousness. The moment he saw signs of consciousness appearing he would thrust some food into the mouth. Thus on some days a little food found its way into the stomach and on others it did not. Six months passed that way. Then afterwards the Mother's command was heard, 'Remain in Bhavamukha, for the spiritual enlightenment of the people remain in Bhavamukha.' This was followed by illness, blood-dysentery; there was a wringing pain in the intestines and it was excruciating. It was after continually suffering for six months that the mind gradually came down to the normal body-consciousness; before that it used to go up and reach that Nirvikalpa state ever and anon.

First the convergences:

1 / The Hindu attempt to formulate the Brahman went in several directions. One such attempt was in terms of *Neti Neti* ('Not this,' 'Not this').⁹ The other was in terms of *Sat Cit Ananda*.¹⁰ An alternative version along these lines sums up the Brahman as *Satyam, Śivam, Sundaram* (truth, goodness, beauty).¹¹ Thus now utter beauty is also included as a feature attraction of the Brahman! And a live vibrant encounter with sheer beauty characterized Huxley's experi-

My attention was arrested and I gazed in fascination, not at the pale neurotic heroine or her attendant, not at the victim's hairy head or the vernal landscape in the background, but at the purplish silk of Judith's pleated bodice and long wind-blown skirts.

This was something I had seen before – seen that very morning, between the flowers and the furniture, when I looked down by chance, and went on passionately staring by choice, at my own crossed legs. Those folds in the trousers – what a labyrinth of endlessly significant complexity! And the texture of the grey flannel – how rich, how deeply mysteriously sumptuous! And here they were again, in Botticelli's picture.¹²

2 / In the state of Nirvikalpa Samādhi notions of time and space get phased out. Thus, as mentioned earlier (see note 8), recollecting his experience of Nirvikalpa Samādhi Rāmakṛṣṇa remarked: 'There was no consciousness at all, of time, of the coming of day or the passing of night.' Huxley's experiences seem to lie in the same direction.

'What about spatial relationships?' the investigator inquired, as I was looking at the books.

It was difficult to answer. True, the perspective looked rather odd, and the walls of the room no longer seemed to meet in right angles. But these were not the really important facts. The really important facts were that spatial relationships had ceased to matter very much and that my mind was perceiving the world in terms of other than spatial categories ...

And along with indifference to space there went an even more complete indifference to time.

'There seems to be plenty of it' was all I would answer, when the investigator asked me to say what I felt about time.¹³

3 / In the experience of Nirvikalpa Samādhi there is loss of 'I' consciousness.¹⁴ Mescaline also induced ego-loss.¹⁵

4 / The philosophical position Huxley arrived at as a result of his experiences bears a close resemblance to Advaitic metaphysics which goes with Nirguṇa Brahma.

Reflecting on my experience, I find myself agreeing with the eminent Cambridge philosopher, Dr. C.D. Broad, 'that we should do well to consider much more seriously than we have hitherto been inclined to do the type of theory which Bergson put forward in connection with memory and sense-perception. The suggestion is that the function of the brain and the nervous system and sense organs is in the main *eliminative* and not *productive* ...'¹⁶

Huxley concurs with the suggestion. Somewhat similarly Advaita philosophy holds that the perception of the total reality Brahman is being blocked out by mental impressions.¹⁷

Huxley further suggests that the 'reducing valve' of the brain, which blocks out the totality of the experience, is being replaced by a more efficient valve.

or through hypnosis or by means of drugs.¹⁸ Advaitic Sādhana is somewhat similarly oriented.¹⁹

5 / It is widely held that in Nirvikalpa Samādhi all dualities are abolished, including that between good and evil. All distinctions between subject and object are abolished, including oneself and others. In other words one reaches a plane of amoral existence. Huxley's experiences also seem to have approached this state.

It is clear, therefore, that Huxley's experiences could be seen as like those in Nirvikalpa Samādhi.

In several crucial respects, however, the experience of Nirvikalpa Samādhi seems to differ from the state induced by mescaline.

1 / In the mescaline experiments – as conducted by both Huxley and R.C. Zaehner – the subject was in a condition to carry on fairly coherent dialogue or conversation with 'investigators.' An awareness of other persons is not possible in Nirvikalpa Samādhi.²⁰ Under the influence of mescaline the nature of this awareness seems to undergo a change in some cases, but the awareness persists. In Nirvikalpa Samādhi this awareness is absent.

2 / Despite the apparent phasing out of time and space (see point 2 above) a close examination of Huxley's report shows that under the influence of mescaline some awareness of time and space persists. He categorically states that 'Space was still there,' although he adds that it had 'lost its predominance.' Similarly he became indifferent to time, but time did not disappear. As a matter of fact he thought there was plenty of it.²¹ Thus perceptions of time and space undergo a change under the influence of mescaline but do not disappear. In Nirvikalpa Samādhi there is an absence of the awareness of time and space per se.

3 / The experience under mescaline may be mystical in some sense – as with Huxley;²² but it can also be farcical – as with Zaehner²³ – or even infernal.²⁴ We have only one case of Nirvikalpa Samādhi here to judge by. It appears highly unlikely, however, in view of the fact that the state abrogates the subject-object relationship, that such varieties in experience will be possible in it.

Moreover it appears that 'the one phenomenon common to most mescaline-takers was a pronounced heightening of the sense of colour.'²⁵ If this be so, one is clearly functioning within the world of name and form, of the senses, of *māyā*. Mescaline enables one to see the fabric of *māyā*²⁶ in new colours, textures, and perspectives, but it does not catapult one into the realm of Nirguna Brahma.

NOTES

1 Aldous Huxley *The Doors of Perception* (New York: Harper 1954)

2 Ibid 18-19

3 R.C. Zaehner *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* (New York: Oxford University Press 1967) *passim*

4 S.N. Dasgupta *Hindu Mysticism* (London: Open Court 1927) *passim*

- 6 Eliot Deutsch and J.A.B. van Buitenen, *A Source Book of Advaita Vedanta* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii 1971) 73; T.M.P. Mahadevan *Outlines of Hinduism* (Bombay: Chetana 1960) 147, 165, 203, etc.
- 7 Huxley 18-19
- 8 This remarkable event has been described by both Swami Nikhilananda in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna Vivekananda Center 1942) 29 and Swami Saradananda in *Sri Rāmakrishna the Great Master* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math 1952) 251. We pick up the narrative beginning with Rāmakṛṣṇa's own words (Swami Saradananda 252, 359).
- 9 Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad III.8
- 10 Sadānanda *Vedāntāsara* II.33. 'Upaniṣadic absolutism declares Brahman or Atman beyond predication, and yet predicates it as Sat, Cit, Ananda'; G.C. Pande *Studies in the Origins of Buddhism* (University of Allahabad 1957) 556.
- 11 See A.K. Banerjee *Discourses on Hindu Spiritual Culture* (New Delhi: Chand 1967) 50, 53.
- 12 Huxley 30. Also see 33, etc.
- 13 Huxley 19-20, 21
- 14 Swami Saradananda 384
- 15 This is not only clearly stated in Huxley (22) – but also implied. 'In some cases there may be extrasensory perceptions. Other persons discover a world of visionary beauty. To others again is revealed the glory, the infinite value and meaningfulness of naked existence, of the given, unconceptualized event. In the final stage of egolessness there is an "obscure knowledge" that All is in all – that All is actually each. This is as near. I take it, as a finite mind can ever come to "perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe" ' (26). Also note Zaehner's remark on his own experience with mescaline: 'In Huxley's terminology "self-transcendence" of a sort did take place, but transcendence into a world of farcical meaninglessness' (226).
- 16 Huxley 22
- 17 See Ainslie T. Embree, ed *The Hindu Tradition* (New York: Modern Library 1966) 59.
- 18 Ibid 24
- 19 Compare with Raman Maharṣi's dictum: 'God is between two thoughts!'
- 20 Not only is it impossible to discuss the experience while it is being undergone: it is quite problematical to describe it even after one has come out of it. 'One who has realized the non-dual state becomes silent! Non-dualism is not a matter to be described. As soon as one tries to speak or say anything dualism becomes inevitable. As long as there are thought, imagination, etc., there is also dualism within the mind; non-dual knowledge has not yet been attained. It is only the reality of Brahman, in other words, the Nirguṇa aspect of the divine Mother alone, that has not come out of man's mouth, and thus has not been defiled'; Swami Saradananda 389; the words are Rāmakṛṣṇa's. Unlike mescaline experiences, that of Nirvikalpa Samādhi is completely ineffable (ibid 388).
- 21 Huxley 20-1
- 22 Huxley 18-19
- 23 Zaehner 226
- 24 'Another man, as famous for his kindly temperament as for his great learning, might have expected immediate transport to the Elysian fields. But this did not happen. Certain exterior objects became for him things of vivid, colourful beauty but his inner experiences were slight, though at one moment he did remark with philosophical equanimity, "I should judge myself now to be in the infernal rather than the celestial regions" ' (Zaehner 208).
- 25 Ibid 212
- 26 See Ruth Reyna *The Concept of Maya* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House 1962) for the various senses of that word. Here it is used in the Advaitic sense.