

Psychedelics, Spirituality, and Transformation

by Phil Wolfson



THE CALIFORNIA BALLOT INITIATIVE FOR PARTIAL MARIJUANA LEGALIZATION (Proposition 19) may have been defeated for the moment, but nevertheless more than four million voters said “yes” to it. Between the recent reduction in California’s penalties for use—now reduced to a fine for possession of under an ounce of marijuana—and the burgeoning medical marijuana industry, clearly the times are a-changin’. There are many hundreds of thousands of certified medical marijuana users in California, and twelve other states now have some reduction in marijuana criminalization as well. With scientific research into the clinical effects of psychedelics also burgeoning and a growing number of papers indicating benefit for various psychiatric conditions (post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, terminal illnesses, and drug addiction), thereby bolstering historic claims for clinical utility, and with the horrific costs of failed prohibition more and more obvious to the public, decriminalization—if not legalization—has become more of a possibility. With this as background, it is imperative to undertake a public reevaluation of where we are with respect to psychedelic use, its risks, and its potential to support personal, spiritual, and cultural transformation.

The History: Ancient and Modern

PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCE-INDUCED ALTERATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS IS AGES OLD, THE specific history dependent on humans’ particular geographic location and corresponding native plant habitats. The remarkable discovery, perpetuation, refinement of use, and sacralization of psychoactive substances in early and stone age cultures testifies to the timeless human interest in transcending “ordinary” historical and cultural realities.

Marijuana use dates at least to 4000 years BCE—the earliest cultivated plant remains known having been dated to that time. Humans and marijuana have co-evolved, influencing each other reciprocally in terms of cultivation and culture.

The use of mushrooms and other psychoactive plants in Mesoamerica is undoubtedly thousands of years old and was ineradicable despite the deliberate murder of practitioners by the Inquisition and genocidal suppression of indigenous cultures by the European colonizers.

In fact, Europe was desperately poor in psychedelics, these being limited to the toxic tropane alkaloids contained in mandrake, henbane, and poisonous nightshades such as *datura* (popularly known as thorn-apple, jimson weed, or devil’s trumpet). European consciousness developed its particular distortions in concert with the addictive and easily manufactured toxin known as ethanol, which is of limited value for mental and spiritual transformation.

Phil Wolfson, MD, is a practicing psychiatrist/psychotherapist in the Bay Area. He is the author of the forthcoming Noe—A Father/Son Song of Love, Life, Sickness and Death.

Most remarkable is the Amazonian creation of *ayahuasca* (yage), the admixture of two separate plants that had to be bundled to create the remarkable oral dimethyltryptamine-based experience that was practiced as divination and personal transformation by native shamans. Ayahuasca use has recently spread to North America, culminating in the U.S. Supreme Court's recognition of the União do Vegetal with *hoasca* as an acceptable sacrament and indispensable part of the União do Vegetal Church's ceremonial life, much as peyote is legal for the Native American Church.

Prohibition has often arisen in tandem with use, and has tended to serve elites who, hiding behind moral authoritarianism, attempt to regulate the "mind" in order to control dissidence. On the other side, use of substances for social control has its own history. For example, the Opium Wars were aimed at securing British capitalist interests in China and sedating the Chinese and, as many have argued, the pestilence of heroin use in the ghettos of the United States was fomented by the CIA in the 1960s and '70s. Prohibition and criminalization—and, in our times, the "war on drugs" internationalized by the United States—distort the discussion of psychoactive substance use and criminalize the exploration of mind-altering drugs, as if this were an activity to be controlled by the state. That demonization makes for both propagandistic deception and overstated advocacy.

The best course has always been to provide information and education. Suppression can result in destruction of entire countries—Afghanistan, Honduras, Colombia, etc.—because "money" is the most powerful hard drug of our times and attracts so many passionate adherents globally who are fixated on the accumulation of capital and, much like hardcore drug addicts, care little for the havoc their addiction wreaks.

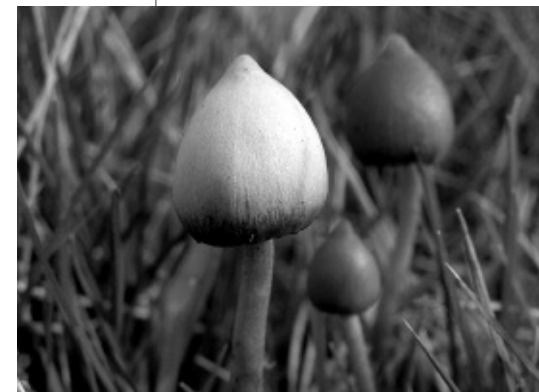
The Essential Safety of Psychedelics

OUR EPOCH IS UNIQUE FOR THE MASS USE OF PSYCHEDELIC SUBSTANCES DESPITE oppressive prohibition. This makes it crucial to understand why so many people defy drug laws and police to experience psychedelic effects. If the "war on drugs" is a lost cause despite the billions spent and the hordes of bureaucrats and enforcement agents who make their living off of it, why does the individual consumer still persist in driving the demand in the face of draconian penalties?

The addictive potential of substances such as cocaine, meth, the various opiates, and others are likely the driving force behind their consumption, but this is not the case for all drugs. The demand for psychedelic substances such as LSD, psilocybin, dimethyltryptamine (DMT), and mescaline—and their relatives, the empathogens (MDMA, 2-CB, etc.)—is not dependent on users getting hooked.

Psychedelics are relatively safe substances, especially as compared to alcohol, cocaine, meth, and other drugs. Rates of acute psychosis and incidents of physical harm are scant. Casualties do occur though, so a concern for safety and an understanding of risks (and the types of use that increase risks) is a must. For example, at the height of the Rave period of mass use of ecstasy in the U.K. between 1988 and 1997, when tens of millions of doses were consumed, often in tandem with other substances and under difficult conditions in which masses of people danced together in crowded hot spaces resulting in dehydration, the total number of deaths upon which the media became fastened amounted to 50-100. These deaths were certainly needless and stopped occurring for the most part when the causes were defined and appropriate preventive measures taken. For the United States the figure has been about one death per million users, and these figures generally reflect mixed substance abuse, with ecstasy being one component. Contrast this with alcohol-related deaths in the same period in the U.K., which amounted to 625 deaths per million users annually—yet there is an acceptance of that carnage. Such contradictions seem irreconcilably irrational, yet they occur because corporate interests have wielded their power to ensure that alcohol promotion and the alcohol-related catastrophe remain completely acceptable.

To be absolutely clear, deaths due to drugs are tragic, regrettable, and potentially preventable. Substances carry their own particular toxicities, but humans invent the circumstances that



Psychedelics like (from top) psilocybin, peyote, and ayahuasca (made in part from this Banisteriopsis caapi vine), are all relatively safe substances, especially as compared to alcohol, cocaine, meth, and other drugs. The author writes of their potential to liberate human consciousness.



CREATIVE COMMONS:
BEAUTIFULCATAYA AND ANITA963

European culture was cautious about psychedelics, as the continent's native varieties were mostly toxic, like mandrake (bottom) and henbane, with effects similar to jimsonweed (top), a plant in the datura family.

Suggested Reading

- A lovely, illustrated history of mind-altering drug use: *High Society* by Mike Jay Park (Street Press, 2010).
- More on the sixties, the CIA, LSD, etc.: *Acid Dreams* by Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain (Grove Press, 1985) and *Storming Heaven—LSD and the American Dream* by Jay Stevens (Grove Press, 1987).
- A glorious mytho-poetic encyclopedia of psychoactive substances: the *Pharmako* trilogy by Dale Pendell (North Atlantic Books, updated editions 2010).
- For the current state of psychedelic science, policy, and controversy, subscribe to the journal from MAPS—the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Substances (www.maps.org).

harm, like jam-packed clubs. Alcohol is the most significant gateway drug to other intoxicants, yet the official focus has been on marijuana, which seems more likely to serve as a gateway to safer and less addictive drugs like psychedelics, in those cases when it serves as a gateway at all.

The Possibility of Transformation

TO RETURN TO THE QUESTION OF THE ALLURE OF PSYCHEDELICS, THE MOST POTENT explanation is that they offer the possibility of a transformation of consciousness. That may occur as an intimate acute experience or a form-shaking permanent alteration—it is a spectrum of effect that has incalculable personal and social consequences. The introduction of psychedelic substance use to masses of people in the sixties was part and parcel of the immense cultural change that occurred. Liberation from the suppressive, repressive yoke of McCarthyism that had penetrated darkly into the family culture of the late '40s and '50s was in part due to the mind expansion made possible by psychedelic use, which blew up restrictive mental fetters and fear of the personal imagination. This was transmuted reciprocally to and from new cultural and political formations. If the entire New Left didn't succumb to rigid and dogmatic Leninism, it was to a great extent protected from that by personal mind-expanding experiences that escaped control by all ideologies and false consciousness. But it is not a perfect record, and psychedelics were also used to corrupt and control humans. Consider, from opposite perspectives, the final catastrophic period of the Weather Underground (and its mind-numbing use of psychedelics, which facilitated a cultish, delusional, and destructive view of what made for revolution) and, at the other destructive extreme, the sinister dealings of the CIA, which has had a compulsive interest in using psychedelics adversely to extract information or to create group and personal confusion, and even madness.

Some aficionados of the pure psychedelic experience argue that the unmitigated experience itself is sufficient to deliver transformation. And there are others, such as me, who find that the transformative influence of the psychedelic experience makes a quantum leap when integrated with spiritual practice such as Buddhist contemplation or when integrated with liberating psychotherapy. Unsupported psychedelic experience is unpredictably transformative. Integrations from the spirit side with ordinary lived reality are easier if we recognize that psychedelic transformation is but one element in our efforts to free ourselves from the corporate materialist culture. That is not a simple or straightforward task.

The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience

TO CONVEY THE VARIETIES OF PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE IS TO EXPERIENCE THE ONLY partially descriptive capacity of words. Without intending to reify, or circumscribe, I will present a taxonomy of experience that reflects my personal history and observations over forty-seven years, since I and a small group of new friends just commencing medical school in New York City dropped acid (LSD). With this I am attempting to convey the psychedelic allure and am using "states" rather than some hierarchical notion based on "levels"—all such states have value for transformation.

The Mundane State: Conventional allure flows from curiosity, a desire to change oneself, the temptation of forbidden fruit, and emulation of others.

The Personal/Psychotherapeutic State: In 1964, I was a young, awkward, and self-conscious male, repressed and having just finished a psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapeutic experience that had helped me to alleviate some of the pain of my hypercritical feuding parents that I had introjected. I was beginning to find my own voice and guidance. In the flash dance of a few hours, my inner structure rocked and shifted. LSD and I met, and I passed through great fear to feel my self-hate alleviated and my imagination freed to inform a creative new consciousness. Art came (*continued on page 86*)

POETRY

Snowbound

The boxwood hedge that stood against the wall
 Lies split beneath a cataract of snow,
 With branches wrenched as wide as it was tall.
 Maybe it's really broken, I don't know.
 And snow has sealed the garden like a tomb,
 Fusing, effacing whatever's still below
 The wind-eroded peaks. And the living room
 Is darkened with a drift against the door.
 Finally I decide to use a broom
 To try to clear the sides of the compressor,
 And see, poking out, face frozen in the blowing,
 That even where snow caps the electric meter
 And a scaly beard of icicles is growing,
 The numbers move; the power must be flowing.

— David Danoff

PSYCHEDELICS
(continued from page 12)

alive, as did everyday experience. After I came down from the LSD trip, I was deliberately determined to hold onto that freedom—a determination informed by a structural psychological awareness that had been obtained in the intensity of my earlier psychotherapy experience. My subsequent introduction to marijuana freed me of physical and sexual awkwardness, turned me onto intimate discourse, facilitated a heightened closeness in my friendships, and furthered my sense of being a creative person. This was not completely linear. There were ups and downs, and the process took place with absorption in the growing Movement, which came with a sense of being in a community of progressive people worldwide. Psychedelic use in that formative period increased my self-confidence and sensuality. It did not prevent me from making all manner of errors in personal and political life, but I was much better at discernment, moving

on, kindness, and forgiveness.

Psychedelic use invariably affects the personal/psychological matrix. Starting a journey forces an encounter with fear—of the unknown, of the lurking dangers believed hidden in one's own mind, of coming back altered. In the encounter the first period is generally absorbed with the personal: relationships, guilt, love, longing, grief, attachments, and self-concepts. This encounter opens the way to examination, release, and change, to reframing and heightened awareness of self and the others. A bad trip—usually in an uncomfortable setting under stressful circumstances—can result in fear, paranoia, and a recoil from the opened space that is perceived as threatening. Some folks never use psychedelics again. Occasionally too young people and some others—I know personally of several twelve- and thirteen-year-olds—experience damaging mental effects that may last far too long. *Set* (the mind's orientation) and *setting* (the circumstances of use) always affect the quality of significant psychedelic experiences.

Conscious preparation, good location, and the presence of supportive friends make for better experiences and outcomes.

The Empathic State: Generally any psychedelic experience may heighten empathy and empathic awareness. This awareness can manifest as love and affection; as the ability to see another's point of view and put oneself in the other person's shoes; as deep respect and regard; as elimination of barriers that separate; as communion with nature; or as a transcendent feeling of warmth for all things. In the eighties, the potency of ecstasy (MDMA) was recognized as a means—a tool—for heightening the quality of communication between people and for fairly reliably producing a state of warmth, affection, and nonsexual sensuality. Many therapists, including myself, introduced MDMA psychotherapy within couple, family, and group contexts. Because the experience was fairly replicable, generally positive, and without much in the way of distortion and hallucination, a new name was coined for a cluster of substances for which MDMA was the exemplar: “empathogens.” Those of us who saw MDMA's potential for positive impact were able to demonstrate its medical utility before the Drug Enforcement Administration's own administrative law judge. The agency went against its own judge's finding, which would have placed MDMA in an accessible Schedule II classification, and placed it in the highly criminalized and inaccessible Schedule I group of substances that included other banned psychedelics and heroin. In the years that followed the 1986 ruling, MDMA use soared, and the “rave” phenomenon began to attract huge numbers of people—again a testimony to the power of the substance to facilitate loving, intimate, sensual experience. MDMA's appeal continues to be based on the facilitation of a state of communion and community larger than the personal self's usual strictures allow. MDMA consciousness can be learned and generated without the drug as part of an expansive, loving, daily life. Much of the concern about brain damage due to serotonin depletion was based on phony research that was retracted from the literature when it was exposed. Hundreds of millions of doses have been consumed in

the past few decades, notwithstanding the recent twenty-four years of prohibition, and yet my informal census of other therapists and friends who were there from the start fails to reveal names and numbers of any individuals with brains damaged by MDMA.

The Egotytic State: For the most part, the psychedelic experience exerts a damper on egotism and egocentrality. A sense of smallness and particulate being in the universe may be a fundamental part of the experience: I am truly an insignificance. A reduced sense of attachment to material goods, a sense of being awestruck with life and the psychic ground, a spaciousness of mind, a situating of the self as but a speck in the cosmos, and a sense of ease at being free of self-inflated importance may compose much of the trip. For some, this can be difficult and disorienting as a loss of the centrality of self and a confusion as to how to manifest and reintegrate. For most this state provides a welcome relief from the tension of being a particular totalization in the personal world and the competitive, demanding outer life.

The Transcendent Transpersonal State: Stripped of ego, personal psychology, and investments, the psychedelic traveler enters the ground state from which thought, feeling, form, and formlessness emanate. It is as if the source of mind becomes the mind experience itself. This is certainly not restricted to psychedelic states. In the unadorned meditative experience, this too is highlighted for periods of time. An apocryphal story from those who travel in both the spiritual and psychedelic realms is that the great guru drops a bazillion micrograms of LSD and stays beaming and untouched the entire trip; he is already so spiritually elevated in his nature that the drug is not altering or transformative—he is the ground state itself. Ram Dass, among others, is fond of this tale. I have my doubts. In the psychedelic state the flux, the movement, of stimulated consciousness is what is experienced at a heightened level of manifestation. Some psychedelic experiences are difficult to recall and are difficult ones in which to maintain an observational awareness. However, most experiences include intense observational awareness. Dose is a

factor—generally, the more you take, the greater awareness tends to diminish. It is my view that psychedelics tend to make more available for experience and scrutiny—by amplifying the phenomena coming into being—what Tibetans refer to as *Dzogchen* or primordial awareness as it is commonly translated, the *sunyata* state in Sanskrit, and in the less developed Western explication, the state of awe. By learning to reside in a nondualistic state of mind, by choosing to enter that state, and by having experiences that create faith in the goodness of that state, spaciousness, creativity, and compassion arise from nonattachment, from living in the flow, from not grasping at every object that comes to mind and attracts our attention.

Within the Transcendent Transpersonal State, a multiplicity of experiences and views will arise. They are generally not pre-programmable, but they have some degree of specificity depending on the substance ingested (different substances tend to produce a quality of experience specific to those substances) and to the user's state of mind. I will mention a few by description that I class as "Vistas." This is certainly not meant to be exhaustive.

- **The Sensual Universe Vista:** Traveling through space as on a rocket ship, or being that rocket ship, I encounter extraordinary forms and shapes. Neon-colored blazing fractal worlds open. Forms emerge: animals, beings from other galaxies, lovers, and forgotten friends. I morph to meet them, and my morphing morphs. I am eaten and eat, am absorbed and absorb. Sexual encounters may occur. Love spills everywhere. Or fear brings on its own forms and monsters. Psychological themes come from my everyday life and are given forms, often allowing for a working through of trapped emotional energies. There is a sense of great exploration and great bliss, and at other times of the terror of being alive and vulnerable.

- **The Entheogenic Vista:** A personal experience of god(s), or a relationship to the personally held notion of god that deepens, may occur. A sense of traveling in the starry cosmos freed from all

constraint may occur, of being part of a perceived universe. Buddhists are told that they have, as do all sentient beings, "Buddha Nature." In the psychedelic realm, I became the Buddha and felt that meaning and that responsibility. I moved about as the Buddha. I have tried to maintain that sense of awesome responsibility in my usual unenhanced state, to varying depth and effect—it is difficult. At other times, there can be the sense of the devil within, of the play of evil and the hunter/murderer, which we also contain and constrain. In mind traveling, there is no risk in exploring this aspect of us, knowing and accepting what we are capable of and explicitly reject.

- **The Connection Vista:** The experience of connection and interdependency gives rise to feelings of gratitude, love, humility, and desire to benefit others. Our personal lifeline extends backward through a near infinite unbroken number of progenitors to the unformed stuff of the great earthly soup from which the first life forms emerge and forward to the future, as well. I have felt myself to be, much as a mushroom sprouts from the great mycelial mass, its myriad threads stretching underground in all directions, sprouting beings who as their time ends return to the rich mulch while new sprouts—humans—emerge. There is a sense of vibrant biological immortality. Or in contrast, a sense of the human mass as itself a cancer, having all of those characteristics—unrestrained expansionism, proliferation in all directions, and lack of concern for others' needs and requirements—and eating everything in its path, out of control. There is also the sense of group mind, the experience of sensation outside the confines of the personal body/mind, in resonance with the others with whom one is traveling as a new assemblage in which the mind is intrapersonal.

- **The Cartesian Vista:** I am the source of all that I experience. I create it. The outside realm—all of it—is a manifestation of my mind. This passes before me as I scan all of my creations, from scientific

texts to great vistas to my friends and my partner. I am the author of life and death. Moving about within this perspective, I am able to revise what exists and what will be, for a time, until I am drawn back to the usual perspective of subject and object. This Cartesian experience, while one of false consciousness, increases the sensitivity to the difficulty of being by nature an interpreter removed from direct experience with only a mediated awareness of the external, and a personal awareness of the interior. While in this inflated state, I am god and master of the universe, prophet, seer, and enlightened being. And then there is the crash, and hopefully great humility.

Integration

IN THE POST PSYCHEDELIC CONDITION, integration is the key to maintaining transformation. Integration is a function of intentionality—conscious and unconscious. Integration occurs both without effort—as a redesign of the central processor of our minds—and voluntarily as a deliberate effort to understand, find meaning, and as rectification—of our behavior towards others and towards ourselves. The psychedelic experience in and of itself may be transformative of our consciousness, but support for change by deliberate and disciplined absorption in the myriad spiritual/emotional/psychological/activist opportunities for increasing clarity and breadth most probably results in a more long-term and positive transformation of self. The human mind while extraordinarily plastic, adaptable, and mutable is also built with a great rubber band that returns us to our dominant character. This serves both as preserver of the integrity of the self and as a block to transformation—holding onto deluded Self.

Grounding in the world of the interior and the external world—finding balance—is a prerequisite for successful psychonautical voyaging and for a mind expansion that is in essence kind, creative, and that loosens the spell of the propaganda-filled social world we inhabit that tells us what to think and feel and especially what to desire and purchase. ■