CHAPTER 10

THE RELIGIOUS USE OF PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCES IN SHAMANISM AND THE QUESTION OF THE VALUE AND VALIDITY OF SUCH EXPERIENCES

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Over thousands of years, shamans discovered a wide variety of psychological, physiological, and chemical aids to modify consciousness, and melded them into an effective psychospiritual technology. The techniques were relatively simple and probably first discovered accidentally, such as when the tribe faced hunger, fatigue, and dehydration, or accidentally ate psychedelic plants. Because of their valuable effects, these techniques were likely remembered and repeated. Thus shamans discovered and transmitted across hundreds of generations humankind's first "technology of transcendence," through which poured the sacred visions that inspired and sustained humankind for thousands and even tens of thousands of years (Harner, 2013; Walsh, 2007).

One important element of this technology was the ritual use of psychedelics. The religious significance of psychedelics was long overlooked by anthropologists, in part because of lack of personal experience. For example, Michael Harner reports that only after ingesting yage did he appreciate its impact on the tribal world view and shamanic practices.

> For several hours after drinking the brew, I found myself, although awake, in a world literally beyond my wildest dreams . . . transported into a trance where the supernatural seemed natural, I realized that anthropologists including myself, had profoundly underestimated the importance of the drug in affecting native ideology (Harner, 1973, p. 16–17).

THE VARIETY OF PSYCHEDELICS USED BY SHAMANS

Shamans employ a wide range of drugs. Some 100 different plant agents have been identified, and archeological records suggest that drug use may extend back over at least 3,000 years (Furst, 1987). Siberian and Latin American shamans have most often employed psychedelics. In Siberia, the preferred substance has been the mushroom *Amanita muscaria* or Fly Agaric, which may be the much-praised *soma* of early Indian religion and a drug of European legends (Stafford, 1992). If so, then its religious and cultural impact has been remarkable.

Curiously, this red mushroom speckled with white is familiar to Western children from drawings in fairy tales. It also appears in Disney's movie *Snow White.* It is also famous for being able to inebriate several people with one dose, since it passes unchanged into the users' urine, which Russian peasants would happily line up to drink (Stafford, 1992).

Among the many chemicals used in Latin America, two of the most powerful and often used psychedelics are peyote and yage. Peyote is a distasteful cactus that can make users nauseous, and Indians describe it as "a hard road." The great American philosopher William James, who had powerful experiences with nitrous oxide, was sick for 24 hours after eating a single piece. He concluded that he would take the peyote visions on faith rather than personal experience. For those able to keep it down, the effects are much like those of its major active component, mescaline.

Interestingly, the gastrointestinal upset that occurs and the vomiting that results are often experienced as valuable. Users report that the nausea may be a psychosomatic expression of psychological conflict and that vomiting results in a sense of catharsis and psychological and spiritual purification.

Yage, or ayahuasca as it is also known, is an equally nausea-producing psychedelic made from an Amazonian "visionary vine" called banasteriopsis. Yage is chemically complex, but the most important psychoactive ingredient may be harmaline (Stafford, 1992). Of course, shamans attribute the effects, not to chemicals, but to the spirit that dwells within the plant.

Yage elicits strong visual experiences. Users describe long sequences of dreamlike visions that appear in a spiritually significant progression. Yage is famous for provoking specific images: jungle scenes and visions of dangerous creatures such as tigers, snakes, and naked women (Stafford, 1992). Several Westerners including Michael Harner have marveled at the power of the imagery and its consistency with native reports (Harner, 1973). Of course, some of this consistent imagery may reflect expectations and the jungle setting.

Yage is shamanically interesting because of claims for its healing and telepathic effects. In South America, it is known as "the great medicine," which

can reveal remedies or produce healing by interceding with the spirits. In contrast to Western pharmacological practices, yage is thought to be curative whether the patient or healer swallows it (Dobkin de Rios, 1972).

Yage is also famous for its supposed clairvoyant powers. Native reports abound of yage empowered journeys and extrasensory perception. One anthropologist reported that "on the day following one Ahayuasca party, six of nine men informed me of seeing the death of my chai, my mother's father. This occurred a few days before I was informed by radio of his death" (Stafford, 1992).

Recent studies suggest that Nepalese shamans make extensive use of psychedelics, including over 20 kinds of psychoactive mushrooms. Apparently, previous ethnographers overlooked these drugs because they are used secretively (Müller-Ebeling, Rätsch, & Shahi, 2002). If so, anthropologists may have underestimated the use of psychedelics by shamans in general and also by other religious practitioners.

In traditional cultures that treat psychedelics as sacraments, addictive or hedonistic misuse is rarely a problem. However, with the encroachment of civilization, these traditional drugs are now being displaced in many areas by tobacco and alcohol, which are less psychedelic and far more addictive. Andrew Weil lamented that in some places alcoholism is replacing the ceremonial use of sacred drugs (Weil, 1981).

CAN PSYCHEDELICS INDUCE "GENUINE" RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES?

In the West, the religious significance of drug experiences has been much debated (Roberts, 2013), and psychedelic use in shamanism has led some people to dismiss the tradition. Even Mircaea Eliade (1964), who wrote the classic text on shamanism, regarded drug use as a degenerative form of the tradition.

And yet the question—one of the most important of all concerning these drugs—still remains: Can psychedelics induce genuine mystical experiences? Stanislav Grof, the world's most experienced psychedelic researcher, concluded that "after 30 years of discussion, the question of whether LSD and other psychedelics can induce genuine spiritual experiences is still open" (Grof, 2001).

Both research and theory now suggest an answer to this question. That answer is a very qualified "yes." Yes, psychedelics can induce genuine mystical experiences, but only *some* times, in *some* people, under *some* circumstances. To evaluate this conclusion, let's examine the arguments used against it, recent research, and a theory that may make sense of the research.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE VALIDITY OF DRUG-INDUCED RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

Five major arguments have been advanced against the idea that drug experiences can be truly religious or mystical, most famously by Huston Smith (1964, 2000).

1. Some drug experiences are clearly anything but mystical and beneficial.
2. The experiences induced by drugs may actually be different from those of genuine mystics.
3. Theologians argue that mystical rapture is a gift of God that is not subject to human control.
4. The fourth argument is that drug-induced experiences are too quick and easy and could therefore hardly be identical to those hard-won by years of contemplative discipline.
5. The aftereffects of drug-induced experiences may be different, less beneficial, and less long-lasting than those of contemplatives.

There are possible answers to each of these concerns. Let's consider them in sequence.

1. There is no doubt whatsoever that some, in fact most, drug experiences are anything but mystical. According to Huston Smith,

   > There are, of course, innumerable drug experiences that have no religious features; they can be sensual as readily as spiritual, trivial as readily as transforming, capricious as readily as sacramental. If there is one point about which every student agrees, it is that there is no such thing as the drug experience per se. . . . This of course proves that not all drug experiences are religious; it does not prove that no drug experiences are religious." (Smith, 1964, p. 520, 523)

2. Are drug and natural mystical states experientially the same? Smith concludes that "descriptively drug experiences cannot be distinguished from their natural religious counterparts" (Smith, 1964, p. 523). In philosophical terms, drug and natural mystical experiences can be phenomenologically (experientially) indistinguishable.

The most dramatic experiment affirming this was the Harvard Good Friday study, also known as "the miracle of Marsh Chapel." In this study, divinity students and professors were placed in a religious setting—Harvard University's Marsh Chapel during a Good Friday service—and given either the psychedelic psilocybin or a placebo. Several psilocybin subjects reported "mystical experiences," which researchers could not distinguish from those of mystics throughout the centuries (Doblin, 1991).

Perhaps the people best equipped to decide whether drug and contemplatively induced mystical experiences might be the same are those who have had both. Such people are obviously few and far between. However, several spiritual teachers and scholars concluded from their personal experience that they can be identical (Walsh, 1982; Walsh & Grob, 2005).

3. The third argument—that mystical experience is a gift from God that could never be brought under human control—will only seem plausible to people who hold very specific theological beliefs. It would hardly be regarded as valid by religions such as Buddhism, for example, that do not believe in an all-powerful creator God. Nor, presumably, would it appeal to those theists who believe more in the power of good works than of grace.
4. The complaint that drug experiences are too easy to be genuine is readily understandable. After all, it hardly seems fair that a contemplative should labor for décades for a sip of what the drug user may effortlessly swim in for hours. However, unfair or not, if the states are experientially identical, then the fact that they are due to different causes may be irrelevant. Technically, this is called "the principle of causal indifference" (Stace, 1988). Simply stated, this means that subjectively identical experiences can be produced by multiple causes.
5. The final argument against the equivalence of drug and natural mystical states is that they can have different long-term effects. Specifically, drug experiences may result in less enduring, beneficial transformations of personality and behavior. Once again Huston Smith put the case eloquently: "Drugs appear to induce religious experiences: it is less evident that they can produce religious lives" (Smith, 1964, p. 528–529).

THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDINGS

So it seems that drug and natural mystical experiences can be subjectively similar or even identical, yet still differ in their aftereffects. But still the debate continues over whether psychedelically induced mystical experiences are "really genuine."

One reason the debate continues unabated is that there has been no theory of mystical states that could resolve it. What is needed is a theory accounting for the induction of similar or identical states by such different means as LSD and meditation, followed by possible different aftereffects.

Charles Tart's (2001) systems model of consciousness is helpful here. Tart suggests that any one state of consciousness is the result of the interaction of many psychological and neural processes, such as perception, attention, emotions, and identity. If any one process is changed sufficiently, it may shift the entire mind–brain system and state of consciousness. For example, a yogi

might focus unwaveringly on the breath, a Christian contemplative might cultivate the love of God, or a Sufi might recite the name of Allah (*dhikr*) (Walsh, 1999). Yet despite their different practices, all might eventually be rewarded with mystical experiences, though not necessarily identical ones.

Whether different traditions can induce identical internal breakthroughs and in what ways they may differ is a long and complex debate. For arguments that the experiences of different traditions are necessarily different see Katz (1983). For arguments that they can overlap see Forman (1990), Walsh and Vaughan (1993), and Wilber (2000). Clearly there are multiple kinds of religiously induced mystical experiences, just as there are multiple kinds of psychedelic experiences. Fortunately we don't need to go into these complexities to investigate whether some psychedelic experiences may overlap some mystical experiences.

A specific altered state may be reached in several ways via altering different processes. For example, states of calm may be reached by reducing muscle tension, visualizing restful scenery, repeating a pacifying thought, focusing attention on the breath, or taking a tranquilizer. In each case the brain–mind process used is different, but the resulting state is similar, a convergence, which systems theorists call "equifinality."

A similar phenomenon may occur with mystical states. Different techniques might affect different brain–mind processes, yet still result in a similar altered state. A contemplative might finally experience mystical unity only after years of cultivating qualities such as concentration, love, and compassion. Yet, a psychedelic might affect chemical and neural processes so powerfully as to temporarily induce a similar state.

Tart's theory of consciousness may therefore provide an explanation for the finding that "chemical mysticism" and natural mysticism can be experientially identical. But what of the claim for differing long-term effects? This claim is also compatible with the theory. But first we need to consider whether the claim that the long-term effects of chemical mysticism are less beneficial and enduring is actually true.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Contrary to common arguments, psychedelic mysticism *can* sometimes have an enduring and beneficial impact. For example, Huston Smith (2000) described just such an impact on himself, as did the psychologist Frances Vaughan (1983), while Sherana Harriett Frances (2001) portrayed hers in a series of exquisite drawings.

Research studies also suggest possible long-term benefits. Significant numbers of Buddhist retreatants were drawn to spiritual practice following psychedelics (Tart, 1991). Likewise, the Harvard Good Friday subjects, when

interviewed more than 20 years later, reported that their psilocybin experience had contributed to their spiritual lives (Doblin, 1991).

But even if the drugs did have relatively little long-term benefit, is this so surprising? Or is it so different from other powerful experiences? After all, the stabilization of transient experiences and insights into enduring change is one of the great challenges facing all transformative disciplines. Psychoanalysts say, "insight is not enough," while clinical psychologists speak of breakthroughs and regressions, and of the "problem of generalization," that is, the problem of getting insights on the couch to generalize to daily life. Likewise, learning theorists describe "spontaneous recovery" whereby newly learned behaviors fade and old patterns revive (Masters, Burish, Hollon, & Rim, 1987). It is true that powerful experiences can *sometimes* induce dramatic, enduring "quantum change" (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001). Yet, most people suffer from "false hope syndrome" and underestimate just how hard it is to change ingrained habits (Polivy & Herman, 2002).

The same is true of religious disciplines. Profound experiences can *sometimes* effect enduring changes, but all too often these fade unless stabilized by further practice, as Phillip Kapleau made clear for Zen:

> Even the Buddha continued to sit. Without *joriki*, the particular power developed through *zazen* [seated meditation], the vision of oneness attained in enlightenment in time becomes clouded and eventually fades into a pleasant memory instead of remaining an omnipresent reality shaping our daily life. To be able to live in accordance with what the mind's eye has revealed through *satori* requires, like the purification of character and the development of personality, a ripening period of *zazen*. (Smith, 2000, p. 31)

A single spiritual experience is certainly no guarantee of a spiritual life or an ethical lifestyle (Barnard & Kripal, 2002; Novak, 1989). However, long-term practice and multiple experiences can have a cumulative impact (Vaughan, 2000; Walsh, 1999). Major long-term change usually requires long-term practice (Leonard & Murphy, 1995; Mahoney, 1991).

So the limited long-term effects of psychedelic mystical experiences are far from unique. Rather, they reflect one of the central problems of psychological and spiritual growth: the "problem of stabilization" (Walsh, 2001). But let's assume the critics' position. Let's assume for the moment that chemical mysticism is less transformative than contemplative mysticism, as well it might be. Why might this be so?

Both psychological and social factors may be involved. Psychedelic users may have dramatic experiences, perhaps the most dramatic of their entire life. However, a single experience, no matter how powerful, may be insufficient to permanently overcome decades of mental and neural habits. A shaman or

contemplative, on the other hand, may spend decades deliberately working to retrain habits along more spiritual lines. Thus, when the breakthrough finally occurs, it visits a mind already prepared for it. The shaman probably has a belief system to interpret the experience, a tradition that values it, a discipline to cultivate it, a social group to support it, and an ethic to guide it. As Louis Pasteur said, "chance favors the prepared mind." The contemplative's mind may be prepared, but there is no guarantee that a drug user's is.

Therefore, different long-term effects of chemical and contemplative experiences could occur, even if the original experiences are identical. Consequently, none of the five common arguments against psychedelic experiences being genuinely mystical seem to hold.

CONCLUSION

In summary, it seems that some drugs can induce genuine mystical experiences in some people on some occasions. However, they may be more likely to do so, and more likely to produce enduring benefits when used as part of a long-term spiritual practice. This is exactly how shamans use psychedelics, and therefore it is not surprising that shamans have employed them in diverse cultures for thousands of years to aid their spiritual insight and healing work.

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