



The Fires of Artifice

Introduction by Richard Smoley

Where do psychedelics fit on the spiritual path?

Let's begin with the obvious: We use drugs every day. We use them to kill our pain, wake us up, unwind at parties — even make us feel loved (as chocolate is said to do for some). So why not use drugs to enhance religious experience? If, in William James's famous metaphor, we live in only one small room of the enormous house of our consciousness, why not take some mushrooms or LSD or Ecstasy to open a door or two?

The question makes even more sense if you consider how many cultures have used drugs for this purpose. College students in the '70s were enthralled with the hallucinatory voyages of Carlos Castaneda under the direction of the Yaqui sorcerer don Juan, but look a little further and you'll see Siberian shamans ingesting delirium-inducing *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms, visionaries in the Amazon swallowing a bitter concoction known as ayahuasca, and West African initiates encountering the spirits of their ancestors under the influence of ibogaine root.

The nexus between drugs and spirituality encompasses vast distances of time as well as space: the initiates of the Eleusinian Mysteries in ancient Greece, many now believe, used a potion containing the hallucinogenic fungus ergot (a chemical precursor of LSD) to know "the end of life and its god-sent beginning," as the poet Pindar put it. The Vedic hymns of India, among the oldest religious texts known to mankind, sing the praises of *soma*, a mysterious intoxicant "all-pervading, swift as thought." Even Egypt's Pharaoh Akhenaten, the first monotheist in recorded history, is believed to have used the hallucinogenic mandrake root in his cult of Aten, the all-beneficent sun disk.¹

If the ancients relied on plants to give them visions, our modern pharmacopoeia offers an even wider range of possibilities. Mescaline, the first of these compounds to be discovered, was synthesized from the peyote cactus in

1897. In Germany around 1912, a substance called MDMA was patented by chemists at Merck Pharmaceutical Company, though its capacities as an enhancer of feelings like love and empathy would not be discovered for over 60 years. But the most momentous event in the contemporary history of these chemicals came in 1943, when a Swiss chemist named Albert Hofmann accidentally discovered the mind-altering effects of a compound named LSD-25 that he'd discovered while researching vasoconstrictors.

It was partly Hofmann's discovery, partly the result of the LSD- and mescaline-influenced writings by figures like Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard, but by 1960 these substances had become the darlings of the American intelligentsia. They attracted the attention of figures as diverse as Adelle Davis, the celebrated health-food writer (see Thomas Riedlinger's article in this issue), and the maverick Harvard psychologists Richard Alpert (now known as Ram Dass) and Timothy Leary. Originally called "psychotomimetics" from their supposed ability to produce temporary psychotic states, these drugs later became known as "hallucinogens" and then as "psychedelics," from the Greek words *psyche* and *deloun*, "to show," highlighting their ability to reveal the state of the user's mind.

Up to the mid-'60s, these substances were entirely legal; but the proselytizing of psychedelics, particularly LSD, and the ensuing backlash led to the banning of LSD in 1967 and of mescaline in 1970. Ironically, it was just as LSD hit the list of controlled substances that it made its greatest impact on mainstream culture: anyone who lived through the late '60s can conjure up images like that of a bug-eyed Jackie Gleason freaking out on acid in the cult film *Skiddoo* or the cover of *Mad* magazine with a bearded, long-haired Alfred E. Neuman advising us to "Turn On, Tune Out, Drop Dead" — not to mention an

interminable array of psychedelically-inspired day-glo posters, black lights, and Op Art. Also, many contend, it was psychedelics that opened up Americans to mysticism.

Presently we're going through a wave of nostalgia for that lost age. And as people flock in record numbers to Dead concerts and groove to digitally remastered Led Zeppelin, many are also resuming (or continuing) their search for inner wisdom. So psychedelic use has also risen, and a question reemerges which the '60s, with all their enthusiasms, never fully answered: what value do these drugs have for the spiritual path today?

That's the question this issue attempts to deal with. Because the literature in this field is so enormous, we've concentrated less on conveying what psychedelic experience is like than on whether and how these drugs can be useful to the spiritual search. As always, we've tried to give a wide latitude for different perspectives. (I might also add that if you're curious about psychedelics, please don't contact us asking where you can get them. We don't know and we wouldn't tell you if we did.)

Despite the revolution in neurochemistry that's now taking place, no one still seems to know exactly how psychedelics work. Peter Stafford, in his *Psychedelics Encyclopedia*, says, "Our understanding of how LSD works physiologically and neurologically is still rudimentary, at best speculative."² Nonetheless we still may be able to consider this question from a less rigorous standpoint. Most of what I'm about to say applies principally to LSD, though I think much of it also holds true for other mind-altering drugs.

Let's start with a premise that most people would accept: that the human mind contains both conscious and unconscious dimensions. Given this, there must be some mechanism that keeps these parts of the mind distinct. This mechanism has received many exalted names in spiritual traditions — such as the Sentinel or the Guardian of the Threshold — but we might simply think of it as a kind of aperture that both impedes and occasionally allows material to flow from the unconscious to the conscious and vice versa.

You could also say that in modern man this aperture is too tight. Rituals, meditations, devotional practices that foster an interchange between conscious and unconscious realms have fallen by the wayside in our culture, and if unconscious material does erupt into consciousness, it often does so erratically and destructively. So we may need a device for relaxing the barrier. This is what psychedelics appear to do. As Peter Stafford says, LSD evokes "phenomena that Freud referred to as manifestations of the 'unconscious'."³

Psychedelics do something else too. Stanislav Grof, the Czech psychiatrist who was one of the pioneers of LSD research, says these drugs can lock onto areas of "high affective tension" — or psychic discomfort — and bring them to consciousness. But as any LSD user can testify, the drug can also heighten positive feelings and

images. The ordinary sensation of enjoyment one may have, say, on seeing or smelling a flower may be transformed into an episode of quasi-religious ecstasy. So not only do psychedelics release material from the unconscious, but they tend to inflate the material that does arise. While this isn't always comfortable, it does explain some psychotherapeutic uses of these drugs: inflating areas of psychic discomfort can make it easier to see and deal with them.

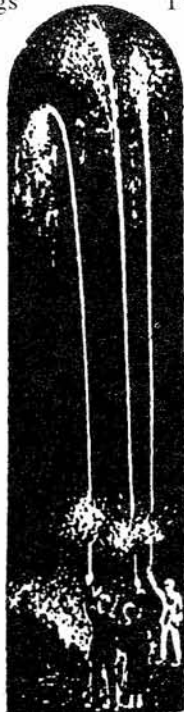
A number of distinguished practitioners have vouched for the value of these materials in medical and psychiatric contexts, and for their value in enhancing creativity, combating addiction to other drugs like alcohol and heroin, and even treating disorders like migraines and psoriasis.⁴

I'm in no position to pass judgment on these issues; I'm strictly trying to address the realm of the spiritual endeavor, which is quite a different matter. After all, psychiatrists have found antidepressants like Prozac to be helpful in treating certain mental disorders, yet nobody would claim that Prozac constitutes a path to spiritual awakening.

Personally I have great respect for psychedelics, tempered with strong reservations about their value for the spiritual path. These objections stem principally from my own experience: I worked with a number of different psychedelics for four and a half years, for an average of four times a year, before deciding to stop. I took care to ensure the proper set and setting and to make sure the materials were of the highest quality. My experience doesn't jibe entirely with traditional objections to psychedelics, though in many ways it does.

Overall I found that most of my experiences were pleasant ones. I experienced "unitive consciousness"; I was given access to what I thought was tremendous wisdom, and religious ideas and texts had much more meaning under the influence of these materials. (I remember once reading the *Gospel of Thomas* while coming down from an acid trip; it was the first and indeed the only time the text seemed to make sense.) Problems did indeed surface; so, sometimes, did some form of integration. If I suffered any harmful side-effects, apart from the usual weariness for a day or so after, I'm not aware of them. And through their use I do feel I've contacted a deeper consciousness than I had before.

So what was the problem? What it all comes down to really is that *most of what I learned from psychedelics wasn't true*. If I gained any glimpses of esoteric truths, I later found them to be trivial and distorted; more importantly, any insights into my own life almost always proved to be disastrous if I carried them out. So what I got out of those experiences turned out mostly to be a hard, cruel, and costly set of lessons in distinguishing reality from illusion. No doubt they were lessons I needed to learn; I'm probably better off for having gone through them. But eventually it started to seem pointless to amplify the illusions in my life — I go around with plenty as it is.



Now in no way do I want to cast aspersions on anyone else's experience; if you saw into the Ground of Being while tripping, well and good. Many have clearly had genuine — and transformative — religious experiences using these materials. But the experiences I had, if they seemed profound, turned out to be quite shallow. For me, psychedelics were the Chinese food of spirituality: once, for example, I had a profound death and rebirth experience after taking LSD, but a week later I was the same old Richard Smoley again.

So what happened? Why did I see what turned out to be false or distorted in my own psyche, and why did I believe it? To move toward an answer to this question, consider this passage:

In the Kabbalah literature, there are warnings even to advanced meditators not to give credence to visions. Even the most impressive visions can be spurious and come from the Other Side. Indeed, acting on the basis of images seen while in a meditative state is considered to be extremely dangerous and detrimental to one's spiritual development. Therefore, when a person experiences images or visions, they should be taken as aesthetic experiences and nothing more. At most, they should be taken as . . . hints of a spiritual experience.⁵

This is taken from a work on Jewish meditation, but similar views could be found in nearly all traditions. And it offers a striking contrast to the psychedelic perspective: meditation aims to elevate one's consciousness to a place beyond images, whereas psychedelics are taken very much for the images (and by images I mean feelings and emotions as well as visual or auditory sensations) they generate. Yet most traditions would characterize these very images as *maya*, "illusion," or "glamour." What is seen as a distraction or a danger in a meditative tradition is precisely what the user of psychedelics seeks out.

Moreover, anyone who has even the most rudimentary consciousness of his or her mind knows one thing: it is an extraordinary collection of the sublime and the pathetic, the divine and the bestial, the deepest truths and the most egregious lies. These coexist in an uneasy jumble in us; the truths and the lies dislike each other, but they have to live together, and it's probably their jostling that causes the psychic discomfort that we carry around from day to day. And if what I've been saying is right, psychedelics unleash this material willy-nilly, and we are left to sort through it.

Such revelations can and do open us up to our own internal riches. But let's go back to the point I made earlier: that psychedelics also tend to inflate psychic material. Inflation is necessarily a distortion: something is made larger or made to appear larger than it really is. This can be useful in therapy, enabling patient and therapist to see a problem more clearly and work it out. But if some inflated idea or image occupies your entire field of view, you believe in it wholly even when it's only a partial truth. Quite possibly that's why people often see God or the Devil when on psychedelics: something that occupies your whole frame of inner vi-

sion will look like God if you like it and will look like the Devil if you don't. In either case your delusions are worse than the ones you began with.

R.E.L. Masters and Jean Houston, in their book *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*, discuss this distortion. Though they say that genuine religious experience is possible with these materials, it is much rarer than claimed:

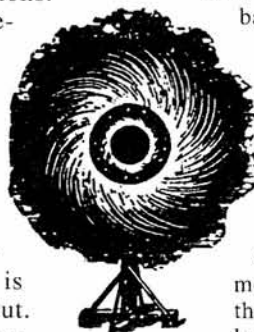
Mystics and religious personalities have repeatedly warned against accepting states of sensory and psychological alteration of visionary phenomena as identical with the depths of the spiritual consciousness. These warnings go unheeded today by many investigators of the psychedelic experience who seem to accept the subject's experiences of heightened empathy and increased sensory awareness as proofs of religious enlightenment. Doubtless some of these experiences are analogues in some way to religious and mystical experiences. But religious analogues are still not religious experiences. At best they are but stages on the way to religious experiences. And a major problem in this research to date is that it has been conducted by persons unfamiliar with the nature and content of the religious experience. . . .

Given this type of misunderstanding, it is no wonder that the psychedelic drugs have resulted in a proliferation of "fun" mystics and armchair pilgrims who loudly claim mystical mandates for experiences that are basically nothing more than routine instances of consciousness alteration. The mandate being falsely and shallowly derived, the subsequent spiritual hubris can be horrendous, the subject announcing to whoever will listen that all mystic themes, all religious concepts, all meanings, and all mysteries are now accessible by virtue of his "cosmic revelation." It is frequent and funny, if also unfortunate, to encounter young members of the Drug Movement who claim to have achieved a personal apotheosis when, in fact, their experience appears to have consisted mainly of depersonalization, dissociation, and similar phenomena. Such individuals seek their beatitude in regular drug-taking, continuing to avoid the fact that their psychedelic "illumination" is not the sign of divine or cosmic approval they suppose it to be, but rather a flight from reality.⁶

This passage also raises the issue of dependency. With most of these materials, there doesn't seem to be much question of addiction in the ordinary sense. While I know of some cases of people taking LSD every day for several months, practically nobody does this, not only because of the fatigue the drug imposes on the body, but because LSD is, as Peter Stafford says, "cross-tolerant with itself — self-limiting, in the sense that if a second dose is taken a day later the effects will be considerably diminished. This tolerance endures significantly for three days and does not fully dissipate for a week. . . . This feature acts as a control on human abuse of the drug."⁷

But let's go back to the idea that psychedelics open the aperture between the unconscious and conscious mind. Does this mean that users will end up dependent on them to perform this function?

I'm not familiar with the clinical literature, but I strongly suspect that for those who are mentally stable, psychedelics



can open up the psyche without fostering dependency. (Many of these people eventually go on to some form of mystical practice.) Less stable individuals, or those who have taken impure materials, may find that the psychic aperture is loosened too much, unleashing a deluge of unconscious material that the ego can't handle. Or they may become lotus-eaters, resorting to the enticements of artificial experience as an escape from ordinary life.

You'll sometimes hear about other dangers of psychedelics, for example, that LSD "punches holes in your aura" or otherwise damages the subtle bodies of which we are said to be composed. To this I can only say I don't know. But one point seems obvious: psychedelics do make one highly sensitive, even vulnerable, to outside influences, to suggestion — hence the strong emphasis on the proper "set and setting." Personally I'd say I've become more sensitive (in this sense of the word) since using psychedelics, but this may only mean I'm becoming more aware of my responses. Or maybe it's just that I'm getting more irritable as I get older.

There is one more piece of evidence that makes it seem unlikely to me that psychedelics could constitute a complete spiritual path. I've known long-time psychedelic users who say, "I don't get anything out of it anymore" or "It has nothing more to teach me." I've never heard anyone say this about meditation or prayer. It implies that, whatever their benefits, psychedelics open up only a lower dimension of the unconscious, the so-called "astral" world. Once that gets emptied out, you have to go on to another line of work.

Taking up another practice raises issues of its own, since we know little about how psychedelics interact with spiritual disciplines. Some teachers warn against them; others seem to find them useful or at least acceptable (see the various viewpoints in "Drugs and the Path" and Kabir Helminski's "Sobriety That Surpasses Intoxication" in this issue). Here the most sensible approach is if you're studying with a particular teacher, get his advice and follow it. If you think he's wrong or doesn't know what he's talking about, why are you bothering with him in the first place? It's like going to the doctor and then throwing away the prescription once you leave the office.

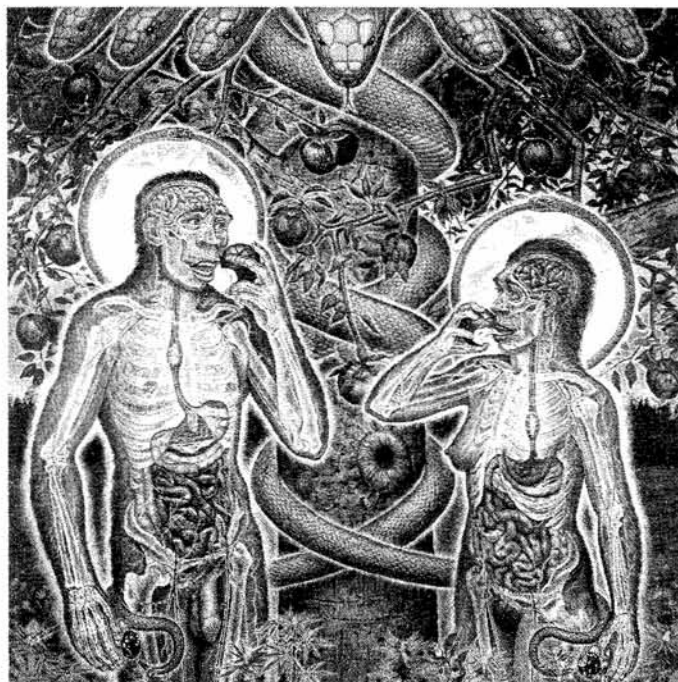
It's true that a number of religious traditions, past and present, have used hallucinogens. But there are big differences between those traditions and the current drug

scene. In the first place, there has generally been much more expert guidance in those cultures than in ours; a shaman in a traditional context is not a person who has taken a weekend workshop, but someone who has followed strenuous spiritual and ascetic practices for as much as 30 years. Furthermore, those cultures support psychedelic explorations with well-established rites and rituals, providing a structure (a "set and setting," if you like) that is itself a safeguard; they not only help seekers open up, but guide very carefully what seekers open up to. That rarely happens in the West. Such a context could evolve here, but until it does, Western users are venturing into undiscovered country. Which means that psychedelics, as you no doubt already know, will appeal most to those intrepid souls who are willing to take the attendant risks — legal, moral, psychological, and spiritual.

At this point you may be wondering if anti-drug warnings are just another case of hierarchs trying to tell us what to believe rather than letting us experience the divine for ourselves. There's a lot of truth to this contention, but it's also true that a traditional (though not necessarily a mainstream) spiritual discipline can provide deep religious experience with a much smaller risk of any complications.

This much said, it's also the case that GNOSIS readers are nothing if not fiercely independent and aren't going to put up with me or anybody else telling them what to do. I

believe the viewpoints in this issue — both pro- and anti-psychedelic — are among the most solid, intelligent, and insightful available today, and I hope the discussion here will stimulate your own reflections on this fraught topic. Esoteric work is all about taking responsibility, and that includes taking the responsibility of deciding how, and with what means, you'll encounter the divine. ■



FOOTNOTES

1. For an account of psychedelics in ancient and modern times, see Terence McKenna, *The Food of the Gods: A Radical History of Plants, Drugs, and Human Evolution* (New York: Bantam, 1992), pp. 97-137, 223-45. I am indebted to Prof. Bradley W. Lenz of the University of Wisconsin for information about mandrake use in ancient Egypt.
2. Peter Stafford, *Psychedelics Encyclopedia*, third edition (Berkeley, Calif.: Ronin Publishing, 1992), p. 71.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., pp. 72-73, 80-81, 83.
5. Aryeh Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide* (New York: Schocken, 1985), p. 61.
6. R.E.L. Masters and Jean Houston, *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience* (New York: Delta, 1966), pp. 258-59.
7. Stafford, p. 68.