

Phenomenology of the Psychedelic Experience

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I HAVE BEEN ASKED to describe briefly the phenomenology of the psychedelic experience. This is more than a little like being asked to clean out the Augean stables with a broom, or to bail out the ocean with a teacup. Moreover, one cannot speak of *the* psychedelic experience, as if that experience were the same for everyone.

The unique personality of the research subject or patient is always the basic determinant of his psychedelic experience. Mind-altering chemicals, such as LSD, activate various mental processes. The specific contents of the altered awareness depend upon the interaction of these processes with all that the person otherwise is, including his set (or preparation) for the experience. The other main determinant is setting, including the persons present and especially those guiding the session. The dosage administered is also important, and thus the experience can be one thing for one person and something vastly different for another.

There are psychological effects of psychedelics which occur repeatedly, though again in different ways in the different experiences of individuals. Even the briefest summation of these effects would have to include the following.

There are changes in visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and kinesthetic perception. There are changes in experiencing time and space and changes in rate and content of thought. The body image may change. Some have hallucinations or see vivid images — eidetic images — with the eyes closed. There is a greatly heightened awareness of color. There may be abrupt and frequent mood and affect changes and heightened suggestibility. Recall or memory may be enhanced. Depersonalization and ego dissolution may occur. There may be dual, multiple and fragmentized consciousness. There is seeming awareness of internal organs and processes of the body. There is often an upsurge of unconscious materials. There is an enhanced awareness of linguistic nuances, an increased sensitivity to nonverbal cues, a sense of capacity to communicate much better by nonverbal means, and feelings of empathy. There is regression and “primitivization”. There is apparently heightened capacity for concentration and magnification of character traits and psychodynamic processes. An apparent nakedness of psychodynamic processes makes evident the interaction of ideation, emotion, and perception with one another and with inferred unconscious processes. There is concern with philosophical, cosmological, and religious questions, and, in general, apprehension of a world that has slipped the chains of normal categorical ordering, leading to an intensified interest in self and world, and also to a range of responses moving from extremes of anxiety to extremes of pleasure. These are not the only effects of the psychedelic drugs, but the listing should suffice to convey some idea of the potency of the drugs and the range of the experiences they afford.

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From the foregoing it is clear that psychedelic experience drastically alters both inward and outward awareness. A vast range of phenomena normally excluded enter into the chemically altered consciousness. It has been suggested that the mind herein is no longer subject to the highly selective censorship or screening usually imposed upon it by the ordinarily dominant mechanisms of the newest (cortical) areas of the brain. Mechanisms much older in evolutionary terms become dominant. Novel perceptions and a wealth of other experiences become possible. These may not serve the usual interests of survival and practical functioning in the day-to-day world, but they can be of great importance for therapy and for the study of the structures of consciousness.

In our book, *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*, my husband, Robert Masters and myself propose on the basis of our research a functional model of the drug-state psyche, with four major levels of consciousness hypothesized by us as corresponding to four major levels of the psyche. We have termed these levels the *Sensory*, the *Recollective-Analytic*, the *Symbolic*, and the *Integral*. On the shallowest, or *Sensory* level of the psychedelic experience the subject may experience, first of all, a great variety of sensory awarenesses, many of which appear to be unique to his usual experiential mode. This appears to have a deconditioning function, freeing the subject from the confines of his ordinary categories and contexts. When he can perceive and think in new, psychedelic ways, then he is ready to go on to the deeper drug-state levels. I might add that, in the unguided session, this *Sensory* level, comparatively shallow, is often the only one the subject ever reaches.

On the second, *Recollective-Analytic* level, the subject turns away from the external world and begins to explore his own "inner space." This is a stage of reflective and analytical, or more highly cognitive self-observation. Memories may come up very freely, and there may be access to materials which are not normally accessible to consciousness. There tends to be a study of one's past, one's problems and one's potentialities, somewhat akin to what would occur in psychoanalytically-oriented psychotherapy.

On the third or *Symbolic* level, which is deeper than the second, and which may require that one first experience the second level, there is the development of a rich symbolism in which one's own life may be seen in terms of a guiding pattern or goal, symbolized as in a myth-making process in such a fashion as to enable the concrete symbol to stand effectively for personal life and its context.

Finally, there is the *Integral* level of the experience, in which the subject feels a kind of subjective "descent" to a level of awareness apprehended as Essence, Ground of Being, or even God. Only a very small percentage of subjects, in our estimation, ever reach this level, where the most profound transformations of the person can occur.

Let me now summarize in more detail some of the characteristic phenomena occurring on each of these levels.

Among the earliest effects of the psychedelic drug experience are the radical changes in sensory perception, very notably vision. All at once, colors and textures may be seen as having a beauty and richness never seen before. Lines, too, are seen with exceptional clarity, and attention fastens on objects or details of objects and

invests them with intensified meaning and emotional charge. A chair, for example, may be seen as Aldous Huxley saw one during his initial mescaline session — as a noumenon or *Ding an Sich* — more essentially real than any chair seen under normal consciousness.

There may be visual distortion as well as the heightened visual acuity. The world may take on a beautiful and magical appearance, or may be seen as an endless chamber of horrors — inhabited by visual terrors so grotesque as to make the imaginings of Hieronymus Bosch seem innocent by comparison.

Spatial relationships are altered and objects may increase or decrease in size, in a whimsical Alice-in-Wonderland way, or sometimes clearly in terms of an intellectual or emotional reaction to the object. There also occurs the discernment, or the imposition of a patterning in nature more intricate, delicate and far more ubiquitous than previously recognized. Witness, for example Alan Watts' perception of this phenomenon as he describes it in *The Joyous Cosmology*:

"I am looking at what I would ordinarily call a confusion of bushes—a tangle of plants and weeds, branches and leaves going every which way. But now that the organizing, relational mind is uppermost I see that what is confusing is not the bushes but my clumsy way of thinking. Every twig is in its proper place, and the tangle has become an arabesque more delicately ordered than the fabulous doodles in the margins of Celtic manuscripts. In this same state of consciousness I have seen a woodland at fall, with the whole multitude of almost bare branches and twigs in silhouette against the sky, not as a confusion, but as the lacework or tracery of an enchanted jeweler. A rotten log bearing rows of fungus and patches of moss became as precious as any work of Cellini—an inwardly luminous construct of jet, amber, jade and ivory, all the porous and spongy disintegrations of the wood seeming to have been carved out with infinite patience and skill. I do not know whether this mode of vision organizes the world in the same way that it organizes the body, or whether it is just that the natural world is organized this way."

If awareness is internalized and focused on the body, there may be an acute sense of humming nerves, coursing blood, heartbeat, or other physiological processes. The rhythms of heartbeat or of breathing may be projected onto objects, world, and universe, until there is a sense of synchronous oneness and harmonious relationship with the cosmic process. As the person breathes, a flower may be observed to breathe with the same frequency and depth. The heartbeat of the cosmos is felt to be heard and, not surprisingly, is the same as one's own.

It is also on the sensory level that the subject first experiences the distortion of time. "So extended was time," writes one subject, "that it seemed to me that I lighted a cigarette, smoked it for hours, looked down and noticed that the cigarette still had its first ash. A few moments were hours, possibly longer, and any one event seemed to take almost no time at all." The distortion of time in the psychedelic state is akin to that experienced in dream, and also possible in hypnosis. It results from a speeding up of mental processes—ideas, images, imagined events—experienced by the subject as a "slowing down" of time. The thoughts do not seem to be coming any faster, and yet vastly more may appear to be thought about in any given amount of clock-measured time. It is of course because of this that "such a lot" seems to happen in the psychedelic session.

On this level synesthesias (cross-sensing) may appear, with the subject claiming

that he is "hearing colors" or "seeing sounds." It is on this level, too, that the eidetic images first emerge. These images, seen with the eyes closed are often the most memorable aspect of the psychedelic experience. They are often extremely vivid, their colors described as being more intense than any ever seen in the external world. They presumably are like the images of dreams, but clearly perceived and remembered because they unfold before an alert, waking consciousness. Very commonly the images are of strange animals, immense and wonderful architectures, supernatural beings and characters out of history, legend and mythology — a profusion of imagery in what seems near-limitless variety. For example, one of our subjects reported this imagery:

"There are snakes, alligators, dragons, beautiful reptiles. They are lying at the bottom of a kind of sea, but I don't think it is water. At the edges of this place where they are there are tigers walking along the shore. Up on the beach all kinds of wild orgies are going on. Lots of sex, people getting drunk, and tigers eating people. Tigers getting drunk on blood and then slaughtering one another."

Another LSD subject, holding a gold cross, reported the following eidetic images, among others:

"I saw Jesus crucified and Peter martyred. I watched the early Christians die in the arena while others moved hurriedly through the Roman back streets spreading Christ's doctrine. I saw Rome fall and the Dark Ages begin and observed as little crossed twigs were tacked up as the only hope in ten thousand wretched hovels. . . . My hand trembled, the cross glimmered, and history became confused. Martin Luther walked arm in arm with Billy Graham, followed by Thomas Aquinas and the armies of the Crusades. Inquisitorial figures leveled bony fingers at demented witches and a great gout of blood poured forth to congeal in a huge clotted cross. Pope John XXIII called out "good cheer" to a burning, grinning Joan of Arc, and Savonarola saluted a red-necked hell-fire and brimstone Texas preacher."

On the sensory level however, the images typically lack continuity, so that they seem more like a flowing sequence of slide projections than a motion picture. Moreover, there is no recognizable associational link between succeeding images. When, rarely, the imagery does have continuity and a kind of story line unfolds, the narrative is experienced as having no personal relevance. It would seem to be pure, gratuitous entertainment—mind at creative play. These images which we have termed *aesthetic* differ considerably from the *purposive* images of deeper level phenomena which I will exemplify for you later on.

The necessity of coming to terms with this sensory-level phenomena deconditions the person of old ways of sensing, thinking, feeling. This creates an openness to new ways of being that permits further development and deepening of the experience. A result can be the breaching of walls that ordinarily separate conscious and unconscious minds. Then consciousness comfortably accepts the emergence of a mass of usually unconscious materials. At this point, many persons turn away from their preoccupation with the external world and their sensory-level experiencing of it. They "descend" to the second, recollective-analytic level, where the exploration is of one's own inner odyssey. The concern is increasingly with self-analysis and personal problems and values. Long-forgotten and also repressed experiences may come up freely and sometimes be vividly relived. Thus, age regression may occur, with the subject "going back in time" to very vividly experience the emotional as well as the

other contents of important forgotten or repressed events (while, however, retaining his link with present time). What up to now have seemed to the subject to be memories of real events may be disclosed as distortions of real events or as wholly imaginary constructions. The subject may discover that he misinterpreted the real event at the time of its occurrence, so that it has been preserved in memory of its invalid form. He may find that he subsequently misremembered an event and then, after that, remembered the misremembered and not the true version. Indeed, with regard to the psychological contents generally, there may now be a novel ability to separate the false from the true, the authentic from the inauthentic, and the essential from the mountainous accumulations of superfluities. Association may be exceptionally free and productive, its speed increased, and its scope greatly extended. Abreactive release of unconscious materials frequently occurs, especially if aimed for in a session predefined as therapeutic. Of course, not all of this occurs in every case, but on the recollective-analytic level these are the characteristic phenomena and some or all occur with variations of duration, intensity, and benefit to the normal subject as well as to the neurotic patient. Needless to say, in the unguided, illicit session, the emergence of these materials can prove too formidable for the subject to handle, with the result that there can occur terrifying and traumatic episodes of psychotomimetic dimensions.

On the third, symbolic level of the psychedelic experience, the development involves basically a movement beyond the particular-personal and toward the personal-universal—a movement toward broadening contexts and more universal formulations. The eidetic images become of major importance of this symbolic level as does the capacity of the subject to feel that he is participating with his body as well as his mind in the events he is imaging. Here, the symbolic images are predominantly historical, legendary, mythical, ritualistic, and archetypal. The subject may experience a profound and rewarding sense of continuity with evolutionary and historic process. He may feel himself to be present at the Roman Games, the building of a pyramid, the storming of the Bastille or the painting of the Sistine Chapel. As the eidetic images unfold, he may witness an incredibly rich portrayal of the beginnings and subsequent development of life upon this earth. At the same time, his body may be experienced as undergoing many metamorphoses, as he “becomes” various of the life forms simultaneously envisioned by him.

Or the person may image rituals in which he participates with all his senses and with profound emotion, so that the rite of passage can have the same effect as an actual rite, significantly advancing him toward maturity. Someone else may image the archetypal figures of fairy tales, legends, or myths, and perhaps discover the broad patterns of his own life as he identifies with Prometheus, Parsifal, Oedipus, Faust, Don Juan, or some other figure. In these mythic symbolic dramas, too, the sense of participation may be complete as the images continue in a meaningful and purposive sequence and the symbols emerge undisguised and relevant to the person's life and problems.

Ideally, the subject's participation in the symbolic dramas will be total, including ideation, affect, sensation and kinesthesia as integrated dynamic constituents of the drama. The dramas also can unfold on a verbal-ideational plane without eidetic imagery, but then there may be lesser response intensity. In the psychedelic theatre of

symbols, the chief function of eidetic images seems to be to enhance imaginary events by drawing into the image-ideation complex the additional factors of affect, sensation, and kinesthetic involvement to charge the experience with its full richness and transformative power. Myth and ritual are traditionally the place of psychological transformation in the cultural history of the race, and in its psychedelic form this potency is also observable.

The final, integral level experiences may follow successful experiencing of the symbolic level. As we have observed them, these are religious and mystical experiences, intensely subjective and private, and once they have begun the guide or therapist no longer has any part to play. The emotional context is extremely powerful, but serene. The subject feels that he has reached the ultimate depth level of consciousness, there to experience the Fundamental Reality, Essence, Ground of Being, or God. The effects are the well-known ones of overwhelming religious conversion, "cosmic consciousness," or "peak experience." As mankind's religious literature abundantly records, the personality can be instantly and profoundly transformed. Subsequent changes in behavior can be extraordinary.

Unfortunately, integral level experiences are rare, even with normal subjects. Possibly, with further research, we might be able to bring them about much more frequently. If we could, we would be able to achieve what some men throughout history have pursued with single-minded dedication — and, achieving, have sometimes been able to alter history's course.

In our work, but seemingly not in the work of some others, only the religious experiences are transformative, effecting a basic change in values from which most of the other benefits seem to flow. Those who have mystical experiences (with "fusion" and loss of self-awareness) on this level are mature, well-developed personalities with little need for change. Their accomplishments already are commensurate with capacities. The mystical experiences are awe-inspiring and beautiful, but tend to confirm the individual's life-pattern. Possibly the most fundamental value changes occur in a religious context because, in our society, religion is the source of basic values for most persons. One goes back to this source, and then new, more mature, and self-actualizing values replace the immature and distorted ones deriving from childish interpretations of and responses to sectarian dogmas. The profound emotion of this level is conducive to learning and seems almost to imprint the person with his insights and experience of harmony with a basic and beneficent substratum of reality.

To conclude, the psychedelic phenomena described are as my husband and I recorded them in several hundred psychedelic sessions and over a combined research period of more than 15 years. I know very well that in unguided sessions, or in what is worse, the misguided sessions, experiences can be impoverished, trivial, psychosis-like, even dangerously traumatic. There are LSD trips that are voyages into hell, and there are some that lead directly to the psychiatric wards. But these I did not, over many years of work, observe at first-hand; and I will leave it to others familiar with such cases to describe them to you.

In our own work, the wealth of phenomena revealed in the psychedelic experience convinced us that chemicals of this type can be tools of great worth, providing the best access yet to the contents and processes of the human mind. Moreover, when a

session is all that it can be, it liberates and sets in motion an entelechy, something that must reside in the depths of every self, a force and a process that not only can restore the sick to health, but can enable the normal individual to achieve a greater maturity, realize potentials, and even discover in large measure who he is and what his existence is about.

It is because these possibilities are real, that I urge continuing, and greatly expanded, multidisciplinary research programs with the psychedelics. And I hope we will not persevere in the non sequitur of irrational attacks upon the psychedelics, and of prohibiting serious work with them, because, quite apart from such work, there is a problem of drug abuse in our society.