

Using Psychedelics Wisely

By Myron J. Stolaroff

A veteran researcher explains how psychedelics can be used to give beneficial results

MY WIFE JEAN AND I had driven several miles up the mountain to an elevation of 6000 feet a few miles south of Mount Whitney in California. We were about to meet Franklin Merrell-Wolff, author of the book *Pathways through to Space*, an impressively articulate and detailed description of a person entering a state of enlightenment and savoring it over several months.

When we were ushered into his private office, we found ourselves before an outstanding personage who radiated a marvelous glow. When we had talked for a few minutes and I felt sufficiently at home, I spoke of our research work, telling him that we had spent three and a half years administering LSD, sometimes in conjunction with mescaline, to 350 research subjects and had published our findings in medical journals.

“My oh my!” he said, looking at us with consternation. “I hope you haven’t used these drugs yourselves.”

We admitted that we had. He continued, “According to X” (here he mentioned an Indian sage whose name I do not remember), “it will take you seven incarnations to recover from the damage of taking such substances!”

Naturally I was upset, but I didn’t think of the appropriate reply until we were driving back down the hill: “Never underestimate the grace of God!”

There is no question that psychedelic substances are remarkable graces. The farther one can reach into the vastness to be explored, the more one realizes how powerful these materials are. There seems to be no end to the levels of awareness that can be realized by those who use them to explore their psyches with integrity and courage.

The great value in these chemicals is that, in some way still not scientifically explained, they dissolve the boundaries to the unconscious mind. They give us access to our repressed and forgotten material, to the Shadow that C.G. Jung so effectively dealt with, to the archetypes of humanity, to an enormous range of levels of thought, and to the wellspring of creativity and mystical experience that Jung called the collective unconscious.

At the heart of the unconscious is what many experience as the source of life itself, and which some call God. Those who have experienced this describe it as a wondrous, ineffable source of light and energy that infuses all of creation, embracing all wisdom and radiating a vast, unending, and ever-constant love. Immersion in this is the essence of the mystical experience and produces what the great mystics have described as the state of unity or oneness. Such union is the culmination of all seeking, all desire; it is the most cherished of all experiences of which man is capable.

Not all who ingest these substances can count on such revelations. In fact, psychedelics are powerful agents and can be misused. It must be remembered that they help reveal the unconscious, and most of us have made its contents unconscious for very specific reasons. We may not welcome the appearance of repressed, painful feelings, or of evidence that our values and lifestyles might be considerably improved. Nor is it always easy to accept

the spaciousness of our being, our immense potential, and the responsibility that these entail. We may also refuse to believe that we are entitled to so much beauty and joy without paying any price other than being ourselves!

To assure a rewarding outcome, let's look at some factors that should be taken into consideration when using these materials. I must add here that in no way am I encouraging the use of illegal substances. I do hope, however, that greater understanding of these materials will help restore an intelligent policy that will make further research possible. Here are some things that will help ensure beneficial results:

SET AND SETTING

Set and setting have been widely recognized as the two most important factors in undertaking a psychedelic experience. Of these, set has the greatest influence.

As the drug opens the door to the unconscious, huge spectrums of possibilities of experience present themselves. Just how one steers through this vast maze depends mostly upon set. Set includes the contents of the personal unconscious, which is essentially the record of all one's life experience. It also includes one's walls of conditioning, which determine the freedom with which one can move through various vistas. Another important aspect of set consists of one's values, attitudes, and aspirations. These will influence the direction of attention and determine how one will deal with the psychic material encountered.

In fact, one can learn a great deal by accepting and reconciling oneself with uncomfortable material. Resisting this discomfort, on the other hand, can greatly intensify the level of pain, leading to disturbing, unsatisfactory experiences, or even psychotic attempts at escape. This latter dynamic is largely responsible for the medical profession's view of these materials as psychotomimetic. On the other hand, surrender, acceptance, gratitude, and appreciation can result in continual opening, expansion, and fulfillment.

Setting, or the environment in which the experience takes place, can also greatly influence the experience, since subjects are often very suggestible under psychedelics. Inspiring ritual, a beautiful natural setting, stimulating artwork, and interesting objects to examine can focus one's attention on rewarding areas. Most important of all is an experienced, compassionate guide who is very familiar with the process. His mere presence establishes a stable energy field that helps the subject remain centered. The guide can be very helpful should the subject get stuck in uncomfortable places, and can ask intelligent questions that will help resolve difficulties, as well as suggesting fruitful directions of exploration that the subject might have otherwise overlooked. The user will also find that simply sharing what is happening with an understanding listener will produce greater clarity and comfort. Finally, a good companion knows that the best guide is one's own inner being, which should not be interfered with unless help is genuinely needed and sought.

MOTIVATION

This is extremely important. Those who earnestly seek knowledge and deeply appreciate life in all its forms will do well. Yet certain characteristics of psychedelics make them very popular for recreational use. The most attractive of these is their great enhancement of sensual responses, which offer heightened perception, amplification of beauty and meaning, and intensified sensual gratification. Psychedelics can also generate a great sense of

closeness among participants, especially in a group setting. While I am convinced that one of the great cosmic commands is “Enjoy,” there are traps in using these substances purely for recreation. The first is that a person seeking the delights of the senses may find himself overwhelmed by the eruption of repressed unconscious material without knowing how to deal with it. Another danger is that constant pleasure-seeking without giving anything back to life can distort the personality and ultimately produce more discomfort. The safe, sure way to rewarding outcomes with psychedelics is through intelligent, well-informed use.

HONESTY

For the serious spiritual seeker, or for that matter anyone seeking knowledge, the single most important characteristic is honesty. This means the courage to look at whatever is presented by the deep mind, the ability to admit one’s shortcomings when they become apparent, and the determination to change one’s behavior in line with the truth one has experienced.

ONGOING DISCIPLINE

Experts in the field now generally agree that it is wise to conduct psychedelic explorations within the framework of a spiritual discipline or growth program that will continually call attention to fundamental values and goals. A good discipline will outline a body of ethics for personal behavior that will support the changes required. Good ethics will also help us stay clear about our objectives, and will keep the door open to increasing depths of experience. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that the more we are prepared to pass on to others whatever spiritual largess we have accumulated, the more we will be given.

For myself, I found training in Tibetan Buddhist meditation a potent adjunct to psychedelic exploration. In learning to hold my mind empty, I became aware that other levels of reality would more readily manifest. It was only in absolute stillness, accompanied by a special, highly developed quality of listening, that many subtle but extremely valuable nuances of reality appeared. While I achieved this to some extent in ordinary practice, I found this effect to be greatly amplified while under the influence of a psychedelic substance. This in turn intensified my daily meditation practice.

PSYCHEDELICS AS WAY-SHOWERS

The role of psychedelics is often misunderstood. Many feel that having had wonderful experiences, they now have the answers and are somehow changed. And no doubt in many respects they are. But users often overlook the fact that there are usually heavy walls of conditioning and ignorance separating the surface mind from the core of our being. It is a blessing that psychedelics can set aside these barriers and give access to our real Self. But unless one is committed to the changes indicated, old habits of personality can rapidly reestablish themselves.

At this point many feel that repeating the experience will maintain the exalted state. It may, but most often real change requires hard work and dedicated effort. Unfortunately this is not always clear during the experience itself; it has merely pointed the way and

shown what is possible. If we like what we see, it is now up to us to bring about the changes indicated.

There is a grace period following profound psychedelic experiences when changes can be rapidly made. At this time one is infused with the wonder and power of the new information. Moreover—and this is an area where some valuable research can be done—the drug experience releases a great deal of bodily and psychic armoring that is tied to our neuroses. This rejuvenation is quite noticeable after a good psychedelic experience, when, without the dragging weight of physical habit patterns, behavior can be more readily changed.

On the other hand, if you make no effort to change, old habits rapidly reassert themselves, and you find yourself sliding back into your previous state. In fact, it can be worse than before, because now you know that things can be better and are disappointed to find yourself mucking around in the same old garbage.

Another factor makes this process even more uncomfortable. A lot of the energy formerly tied up in repressed material is now released. This energy may be used quite fruitfully to expand the boundaries of your being to the new dimensions you have experienced. But if you return to old patterns of behavior, you now have more energy to reinforce them, making life more difficult. For this reason, these experiences must not be taken lightly, but with serious intent.

DEALING WITH THE SHADOW

As Jung indicated, the Shadow holds all the material that we have pushed aside so we can hide from ourselves. Unfortunately, it also contains much of our energy, and as long as it is unconscious, it exerts a powerful influence on our behavior without our knowing it. Furthermore, Shadow material is responsible for most of the difficulties humans create in the world. We project our Shadow onto others, believe those others to be the source of our difficulties, and seek refuge from them rather than taking responsibility in our own hands. Consequently we must resolve Shadow material if we are to develop. If this were accomplished on a widespread basis, it would be a major benefit for the world.

Jung describes human development as the process of “making the unconscious conscious.” Psychedelics, particularly in low doses, can be an extremely effective tool in this process. The bulk of my experience is with the phenethylamine compounds, which remained legal longer than the standard psychedelics such as LSD, mescaline, and psilocybin. Whereas a full dose of a phenethylamine like 2C-T-2 or 2C-T-7 might be 20 milligrams, a low dose would be ten or twelve milligrams, or roughly equivalent to 25-50 micrograms of LSD.

The most infallible guide to Shadow material is our uncomfortable feelings. Many do not like to use low doses because these feelings come to the surface. Rather than experience them, they use larger doses to transcend them. But these uncomfortable feelings are precisely what we must resolve to free ourselves from the Shadow, gain strength and energy, and function more comfortably and competently in the world. By using smaller amounts and being willing to focus our full attention on whatever feelings arise and breathe through them, we find that these feelings eventually dissolve, often with fresh insight and understanding of our personal dynamics. The release of such material permits an expansion of awareness and energy. If we work persistently to clear away repressed areas, we can enter the same sublime states that are available with larger

doses—with an important additional gain. Having resolved our uncomfortable feelings, we are in a much better position to maintain a high state of clarity and functioning in day-to-day life.

I would also like to add a word about frequency: Individuals vary greatly in their frequency of use of these materials. Some are satisfied with an overwhelming experience which they feel is good for a lifetime. Others wish to renew their acquaintance with these areas once or twice a year. Still others are interested in frequent explorations to continually push their knowledge forward. Regardless of the frequency, it is wise to make sure that the previous experience has been well integrated before embarking on the next one. Early in one's contact with these substances, where there is a wealth of new experience, this may take several months. As one becomes more experienced, the integration time grows shorter, and the interval between trials may be shortened.

Many stop the use of psychedelics when they feel they have learned what they wished. But often it is likely that they halt because they have hit a deeply repressed, painful area that is heavily defended. The issue goes beyond purely personal material, however. One is unlikely to reach full realization without awareness, not merely of one's own pain and suffering, but of that of all mankind. This may help explain the Dark Night of the Soul, which is the final barrier to mystical union described by Evelyn Underhill in her classic book *Mysticism*. Since we are one, we must not only confront the personal Shadow, but the Shadow of all humanity. We can do this more readily when we discover the ample love that is available to dissolve all Shadow material.

FREEING CONSTRICTED AREAS

There is another way in which psychedelics can serve the serious seeker. It often happens that those pursuing rigorous spiritual disciplines achieve elevated states by pushing aside or walling off certain aspects of behavior. With honest use, psychedelics will not permit such areas to remain hidden, but will insist upon their surfacing. One then experiences the great relief of being in touch with all aspects of one's being. The joy and thrill of being totally alive come from having complete access to all of one's feelings.

THE TRAINED USER

There appears to be a cosmic law that says that giving our complete attention to an object, image, or idea with constancy, patience, and acceptance will allow its different attributes to unfold. Psychedelics greatly accelerate this process. To operate most effectively, the observer must have developed the ability to hold his mind steady so he can watch the process develop. Large doses can push one so hard that it is most difficult to do this. Therefore the best results are achieved by a "trained user"—a person who has learned to manage high doses of psychedelics, or who has learned to hold his mind steady enough to observe his inner process competently. As a user clears up his "inner stuff," he gains more freedom in directing his experience. At this stage, higher doses can be profitably used to penetrate deeper into the nature of Reality.

Interestingly, this concept of the trained user does not appear in the literature. But it is precisely the trained user who can best take advantage of the unfathomed range of wisdom and understanding contained in the far reaches of the mind. There seems to be no limit to the dimensions of understanding that can be experienced by the explorer who has the courage, integrity, and skill to navigate them. With integrity, and with the

support of appropriate disciplines and friends, one can bring back a great deal for the betterment of oneself and mankind.

Are psychedelics necessary? Can't these same explorations be conducted by those who have mastered the skills of meditation? No doubt they can—with an enormous investment of time and effort. But it is unlikely that many Westerners will be willing to make such a commitment. For Western seekers, whose spiritual practice must usually be integrated with making a living, the proper use of psychedelics can considerably accelerate the process. However, it is not a path for everyone. Choice should be based on full knowledge of the factors involved.

Psychedelics are not a shortcut, as it is of little value to sidetrack important experiences. If enlightenment requires resolution of unconscious material (and my personal experience indicates that it does), those who aspire to such achievement must carefully consider the pace and intensity with which they are willing to encounter this vast range of dynamics. The psychedelic path, while much more intense than many other disciplines, is in a sense easier because it often provides an earlier and more profound contact with the numinous. Such contact inspires commitment and opens the door to more grace in surmounting uncomfortable material.

If our commitment is truly to the well-being and happiness of all sentient beings, then it is reasonable to study all useful tools for accomplishing these ends. Psychedelics, used with good motivation, skill, and integrity, can contribute much toward easing the pain and suffering of the world while giving access to wisdom and compassion for spiritual development.

The author has worked for many years in the field of psychedelic research. Between 1960 and 1970 he headed the International Foundation for Advanced Study, a research group conducting clinical studies with LSD and mescaline.

Suggested Reading

- [1] Adamson, S. *Through the Gateway of the Heart*. San Francisco: Four Trees Publications, 1985.
- [2] Blumenthal, Michael. *LSD at Mid-Life*, in *New Age Journal*, May/June 1992, pp. 81-83, 142-47.
- [3] Eisner, Bruce. *Ecstasy: The MDMA Story*. Berkeley, CA.: Ronin Publishing, 1989.
- [4] Grof, Stanislav. *LSD Psychotherapy*. Pomona, Calif.: Hunter House, 1980.
- [5] Rättsch, C., ed. *Gateway to Inner Space*. Bridport, Devonshire: Prism Press, 1989. See especially the chapter *Purification, Death, and Rebirth* by Tom Pinkson.
- [6] Shulgin, Ann and Alexander. *PIHKAL: A Chemical Love Story*. Berkeley, Calif.: Transform Press, 1991.
- [7] Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism*. New York: E.P Dutton, 1961.
- [8] Weil, Andrew. *The Natural Mind*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.

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