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PSYCHEDELICS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING



ROGER WALSH is a psychiatrist on the faculty of the University of California Medical School at Irvine. During the last few years, he has begun to study certain Eastern and transpersonal psychologies and disciplines such as meditation, and these have resulted in repeated challenges to his belief system. More and more, he is appreciating how little he knows and how much there is to learn through direct inner exploration of the mind and human nature and potential, and more and more he is feeling that our collective survival may hinge on this type of learning.

Summary

Barriers to research and publication appear to have resulted in a bias toward selective dissemination of predominantly negative information about the effects of psychedelics. However, it appears that significant numbers of people feel that the psychedelics have made positive contributions to their personal psychological growth. This article summarizes the experiences and conclusions of five individuals who appear to exhibit exceptional levels of psychological well-being and to meet Maslow's criteria of self-actualization, and who are deeply involved in a psychological or consciousness discipline. All five felt that, for psychologically mature individuals, the psychedelics, while not constituting a path to deep awakening by themselves, could facilitate psychological growth when used in the context of an ongoing discipline. Advantages were said to include an opening to new realms of experience and belief, deeper understanding of depth psychologies, religions, and consciousness disciplines, more rapid working through of psychological barriers, and insights that provided guiding visions in subsequent life. Each of the five subjects reported that such experiences had played significant roles in either beginning or deepening his or her own personal and professional growth. Problematic areas included hedonism, overestimation of the importance of specific insights, an inadequate cognitive framework for understanding experiences, and the failure to undertake mental training to voluntarily unveil the capacities revealed.

There have probably been few areas in psychology that have been subject to as much misinformation and sensationalistic reporting by the

media as psychedelic experiences. While preliminary clinical research suggested that they might have considerable research and clinical potential, the popular press preoccupied itself almost entirely with sensationalistic accounts of dangers. This media treatment soon resulted in the cessation of almost all research and a bias at many levels of society toward the dissemination of only negative reports (Clark, 1975; Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1979, in press; Roberts, in press).

However, in recent years there has been a deepening sense that psychedelic drugs have influenced the lives of individual users and society in general more than is usually acknowledged—sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically, and not always negatively (Grinspoon & Bakalar, in press). This has certainly been my own conclusion after nine years of psychiatric clinical and research work. For six of these years, I have been involved in research in areas such as the nature of psychological well-being, humanistic and transpersonal psychology, non-Western psychologies and religions, and the effects of meditation. In addition to research, I have undertaken a personal study of some of the meditative and non-Western traditions and have thus had an opportunity of meeting, studying, and studying with a wide range of people in these and related disciplines.

From these contacts, an interesting pattern began to emerge. As I came to know these people closely, similar stories frequently began to appear: namely, that although they rarely acknowledged it in public, many people had found that psychedelics had played an important role in introducing them to and facilitating their passage through these disciplines. Indeed, this story became so familiar that it began to dawn on me that there might well exist a widespread case of what the social scientists call “plurality ignorance,” a situation in which each individual thinks he or she is the only one doing a particular thing, whereas, in point of fact, it is widespread. In this case, what seemed to be widely unrecognized was that large numbers of people appeared to have derived, at least from their own point of view, significant benefits from psychedelics, a situation markedly at variance with media accounts of their devastating effects.

This suspicion was deepened by an encounter with the editor of a prominent psychiatric journal. In a review of various Western and non-Western psychologies, I reviewed the data on psychedelics and concluded that there appeared to be evidence suggesting that in some cases, people might find them beneficial. The response from the editor was to accept the paper provided I removed any reference to positive effects of psychedelics, since he felt that the journal could not afford to be

associated with such statements. It so happens that I am familiar with this particular editor's work and know that he is a relatively open-minded individual. One can only wonder, therefore, just how much chance of publication any positive statement might have in other places. It appears that we have in our culture, in the scientific and professional literature as well as in the popular press, a bias toward reporting only the negative effects of psychedelics.

How can we get a more balanced picture of the effects of psychedelics, especially when they are used for psychological exploration and growth? One approach suggested by Abraham Maslow (1971) but as yet apparently untried in the area of psychedelics is to ask those people who are exceptionally healthy; to use them as bioassayers. Maslow's technique was to identify those individuals who seemed most healthy to him, those individuals who seemed to be most fully actualizing their potential and whom he therefore called self-actualizers. Maslow listed some thirteen characteristics of such people, such as a deep involvement in work, having peak experiences, possessing a good sense of humor, and so on. Taken together, these characteristics point to an individual of exceptional psychological well-being, a person who might indeed make an extremely valuable subject or biological assay for the effects of psychedelics on psychological health.

This is the approach I intend to use here. While it has several advantages, it is not without its drawbacks and limitations. The concepts and criteria of self-actualization are by no means clear, they are largely lacking in research data and support, and individuals may be chosen subjectively, with all the possible biases that this entails (Heath, in press; Walsh & Vaughan, 1980; Walsh & Shapiro, in press). However, in the absence of good empirical tests of high-level well-being, we are left for the time being with the necessity of using subjective approaches.¹

During the last five years, my research in the areas of the nature of psychological well-being, transpersonal psychology, non-Western psychologies, and meditation has given me the opportunity to meet a number of remarkable people. These include a variety of mental health professionals, advanced meditators, teachers, gurus, and holy people of both East and West, all of whom have devoted a large portion of their lives to mental training and psychological growth in one form or another. I have spent considerable time with some of them, interviewing and being interviewed, receiving instruction on various meditative practices, listening to their talks, and socializing. As might be expected, there is a wide range of personalities and psychological maturity. However, within this sizable population, there is a subgroup of five

people who seem to match Maslow's criteria, are successful and eminent in their disciplines, are Westerners, and whom I have been able to interview in depth.

This subgroup comprises four men and one woman, all within the mid-thirties to fifties age group. All of them have university degrees, three are psychologists, and the other two are highly psychologically sophisticated. Four of them function as teachers, either in psychology or in one of the consciousness disciplines such as meditation or Buddhism. All of them have strong national reputations and most have international reputations, and all of them have published within their respective fields. I chose to include the criterion of professional eminence in order to ensure that the people were competent and could not be dismissed as irresponsible or dropouts.

It was either impossible or inappropriate to test psychometrically three of the five subjects. However, two of the others were given Rorschach tests in another study (Brown & Engler, 1980) and displayed patterns consistent with those found to characterize advanced meditators who have attained at least the early stages of enlightenment. They and one of the other subjects might thus well be called self-transcenders as well as, or instead of, self-actualizers in view of their ability to enter a variety of advanced meditative states at will, and because of Maslow's (1971) suggestion of self-transcendence as a level above self-actualization in the hierarchy of needs.

Let us now turn to the experiences and conclusions of these subjects with respect to the psychedelics.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

It is significant that each of these five people has had multiple psychedelic experiences. All five reported that the psychedelics had been important in their growth processes and that they continued to find them useful in the context of their own ongoing disciplines. On average, they continued to use psychedelics approximately one or two times per year, but all of them had had extended periods without any use whatsoever.

For three subjects, the psychedelic experience was a key factor in their commencing their professional roles and their interest in the consciousness disciplines. One of them received LSD for the first time as part of a legitimate research experiment during the sixties, had a deep religious experience that affirmed and deepened previously dormant

interest and values, and subsequently returned to school to pursue these interests.

As a brief aside, during the last few years I have met three people who were subjects in research studies on LSD during the sixties. All three reported that the experience had had long-lasting and, in their opinions, beneficial effects on their lives. It might therefore be valuable to perform a careful follow-up on subjects of these early studies to determine what long-term effects have resulted.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Based on their personal experiences plus what they had learned from working with thousands of people involved in various psychological and consciousness disciplines, the five suggested the following general principles, advantages, and disadvantages of psychedelics.

All agreed that psychedelics are very powerful tools and that, as with all tools, the effects depend very much upon the person and the skill with which they are used. They felt that there were many people who should not use psychedelics, especially anyone with significant psychological disturbance. However, they agreed that if psychedelics were used skillfully by mature individuals, they can indeed be very helpful psychological growth facilitators. Skillful use was seen as including an appropriate setting, preferably at least initially in the company of a psychologically mature and psychedelically experienced individual. An appropriate mental set and expectations were also seen as important, and it was felt that a preceding period of quiet and meditation are important. Most important of all, however, was thought to be a deep involvement in an ongoing psychological or consciousness discipline aimed at deep mental training.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS

While it was emphasized that there was wide variability both among individuals and from one experience to another, the following were mentioned as possible benefits that may be experienced.

The first was the simple recognition that there exist realms of experience, modes of self, and states of consciousness far beyond the ken of our day-to-day experience or our traditional cultural and psychological models. These experiences were said to lead often to expanded belief

systems. Once it was recognized that there is more to the human potential and range of experience than is commonly known, then people were said to be less dogmatic and more open to as yet unexperienced or undreamed of realms of being. Indeed, one common report was that each experience tended to elicit a deeper realm and more expanded sense of consciousness and self, so that the previously expanded belief system continued to open and expand.

For many people, including all five of the subjects mentioned here as well as many of their students, psychedelic experiences led to an increased interest in depth psychology, religion, spirituality, and consciousness, as well as related disciplines and practices such as meditation. All subjects felt that their psychedelic experiences had enhanced their ability to understand various depth psychologies, religions, and consciousness disciplines. In particular, the esoteric core of the great religions and spiritual traditions could be seen as road maps to higher states of consciousness, and some of the most profound material in these traditions became especially clear and meaningful during psychedelic sessions. Several of the subjects reported that they often put time aside during these sessions to listen to tapes of readings from these traditions and that they found these periods particularly important and meaningful. Such pieces included *Verses on the Faith Mind* by the third Zen patriarch, and *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*. This is compatible with the Eastern claim (Rajneesh, 1975) that

Religion is a learning in which a basic requirement is
First change your consciousness.

Most of the subjects felt that the psychedelic experience could sometimes provide a guiding vision that provided direction and meaning for one's life thereafter. Specifically mentioned were the experiences of self, of different states of consciousness, of intense affects such as love, compassion, or empathy, and the recognition of the possibility of, and need for, a highly trained mind. In three of the five cases, psychedelic experiences were instrumental in commencing some type of mental training/discipline such as meditation.

Three subjects mentioned another potential residual benefit. The individual who has had a deep positive insight may be able to recall that insight or perspective subsequently and use it to guide himself or herself through some situation in which the memory of that insight lends an additional useful perspective even though it is no longer directly available.

There seemed to be unanimous agreement that under appropriate conditions, the psychedelics could facilitate the working through of psychological blocks. In some cases this apparently involved a processing of material that was already existent, or could be worked on in an ordinary state of awareness. In other cases, it was felt that material that could not yet be accessed in an ordinary state could be brought into awareness and processed, in some cases, with dramatic transformations such as death/rebirth experiences and alleviation of symptoms. This has also been observed frequently in clinical studies (Grof, 1975, 1980a, 1980b). However, it should be noted that reviews of the therapeutic effects of psychedelics have been somewhat ambiguous. This may be because it is extremely difficult to detect experimentally significant effects of a single intervention.

For some of the subjects, the occasional use of psychedelics provided a continuously deepening marker of their progress, the psychological work they had done, and what was yet to come. No matter how much mental training and psychological exploration they had done, there always seemed to be further realms and dimensions of experience available that could be especially revealed by the psychedelics. Typically, with each major advance in their mental training, a new realm of psychedelic experience would open to them in a continuous expansion. Particularly likely to emerge were experiences that some months or years later would recur in the context of their mental training discipline, and sometimes after that would arise into awareness spontaneously during daily life. Every person felt that the mind was virtually infinite in its capability to create experience and that psychedelics and their mental discipline suggested that the range of experiences that occurred in daily living represented only a very small slice of a vast, perhaps unlimited, spectrum.

TRAPS AND COMPLICATIONS

Although the subjects reported little in the way of serious problems with the psychedelics, all five felt that, as with any powerful tool, there were a number of potential traps and complications associated with their use. In their view the major protection against such difficulties is the commitment to an ongoing discipline of mental training and the availability of an advanced teacher for consultation about both the psychedelic experiences and the discipline. Not one of the five subjects

saw the psychedelics as constituting in and of themselves a path that could permanently install deep levels of psychological-spiritual growth or true enlightenment. A similar statement was made by a reputedly enlightened Indian teacher, Neem Karoli Baba, after he had tried LSD (Ram Dass, 1974).

Interestingly, the subjects did not regard acute painful reactions such as anxiety attacks or fears of losing control as necessarily bad. Rather, they held that all experiences could be used for learning and that, with appropriate expectations, previous work, and guidance, such reactions could lead to deep and valuable insights. This is contrary to the traditional psychiatric and emergency-room perspectives, which see such reactions as pathological and frequently requiring medication.

Hedonism was mentioned in one form or another as one of the traps associated with psychedelics. Using these chemicals for trivial sensory stimulation was seen not as bad but as unskillful and unfulfilling. It was also noted that, especially with very pleasant experiences, it was possible to become attached to experiences and to mar future trips by inappropriate expectations and manipulative attempts to recreate previous experiences.

Another trap was said to be the tendency to overestimate the profundity and long-term impact of some insights that occasionally were mistaken for profound awakenings. This tendency was seen as decreasing with increased experience of either the psychedelics or a mental training discipline, since it was felt that in-depth exploration of either would reveal a large number of meaningful experiences and insights, each one of which would eventually be seen to add a small piece to the gigantic jigsaw puzzle that is the mind.

An inadequate cognitive framework or context was also mentioned as a limiting factor. In a few cases, extremely deep insights did occur under psychedelics, and at least two cases were reported in which it seemed that there may have been transient enlightenment experiences. This occurred with one of the subjects, and it led to a prolonged period of confusion, which in turn was instrumental in leading to commencing meditation training. This subject subsequently experienced a deep level of enlightenment after several years of intensive practice, but this time found the experience understandable and clearly beneficial.

One subject felt that the main disadvantage of psychedelics was that people tended to underestimate their own personal role in creating the resultant experiences. That is, he felt people sometimes failed to appreciate their own power and saw themselves as passive victims of drug effects rather than as active creators of their own experiences.

One trap that was mentioned for people with limited experience of the psychedelics was the failure to appreciate the enormous range of potential experiences and the tendency to assume that all future sessions would be like the first. A number of people have made pronouncements about the nature of psychedelic experiences after limited exposure and have thus failed to appreciate the extent of individual differences or of differences from one session to another in the same individual. Such an assumption also fails to do justice to the reports by both these subjects and others (see Grof, 1975, 1980a, 1980b) that there occurs a gradually unfolding and deepening sequence of experiences with repeated exposure.

The final trap may be unique to the perspective of these particular subjects, but was regarded by them as perhaps the most serious. This is the failure to undertake some type of mental training to learn to unveil voluntarily, and ultimately to install permanently, at least some of the capacities revealed with the aid of psychedelics. This perspective reflects the nature of the five subjects. Remember that they were all involved in some form of psychological discipline, and that they saw the primary importance of the psychedelics in terms of their capability to facilitate this process.

SUMMARY

I have presented the pros and cons of psychedelics reported by five of the healthiest individuals it has been my privilege to meet in the course of my research and personal investigations of various psychological and consciousness disciplines. In these individuals the psychedelics played an important yet unpublicized role in their life orientations and professions and led them to explore and teach as deeply as they could concerning the nature of mind and psychological well-being. Taken in conjunction with the similar findings these people have noticed in their students and colleagues, and together with other reports (Masters & Houston, 1966; Krippner, 1980; Grinspoon & Bakalar, in press), it is clear that the psychedelics can have long-lasting and meaningful impact, by no means always harmful, on some people. While the five subjects discussed here do not see psychedelics by themselves as constituting a viable pathway to exceptional psychological well-being, they do see them as potentially useful facilitators for some people engaged in mental

training programs in psychological or consciousness disciplines. The experiences and traps associated with psychedelics are not seen as unique, but rather as potentially occurring in any mental training program, though usually less rapidly and intensely. Needless to say, the capacity to handle and benefit from accelerated experience seems to depend on the psychological maturity of the individual and the skill with which the experience is used, and all five subjects took it as self-evident that the psychedelics should not be used indiscriminately, but rather should be respected as the powerful tools that they are.

NOTE

1. I have on occasion given Shostrom's Personal Orientation Inventory (POI) to individuals I suspected exhibited exceptional degrees of psychological maturity, but found that they felt reservations about its ability to tap what they believed to be central dimensions of well-being. The validity of the POI as a measure of self-actualization is, as with so many psychometric measures, less than fully certain (Rizzo & Vinacke, 1975). My own suspicion is that it taps only slightly the transpersonal dimensions and experiences that the subjects in this article reported experiencing.

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