

The Interpretation of Psychedelic Experience in Light of the Psychology of Meditation

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Abstract

Various contentions are put forward in this paper. First it is proposed that psychedelics are “*Kundalini* activators.” The nature of the “*Kundalini* phenomenon” is examined as a high level of organismic self-regulation that results from a relative suspension of the ego at the body level. Secondly, it is claimed that psychedelic experiences may be understood in terms of the same processes that are involved in meditation. Thirdly, it is proposed that psychedelics are somewhat more conducive to the *Kundalini* related or Dionysian aspects of meditation (letting-go, God-mindedness and love) than to the Apollonian or yogic aspects and states (of tranquility, mindfulness and non-attachment). Additionally a view is offered that the similarities between meditative and psychedelic experiences do not imply similar consequences for the individual—inasmuch as the former involve the gradual development of a capacity while the latter may be elicited extrinsically and do not necessarily bring about a comparably stable ability. In the fifth place it is argued that the congruence between the meditative and psychedelic domains suggests the appropriateness of training in traditional forms of meditation as a vehicle to navigate psychedelic space. In conformity with the view that the different “inner gestures” of meditation (stilling the mind, letting-go, non-attachment, etc) converge upon the suspension of the ego (in the transpersonal sense of a characterological identity) and make possible the unveiling of Being, it is suggested that both an orientation toward self-annihilation and a concentration on the sense of Being may be just as relevant to psychedelic subjects as to practitioners who follow one or another traditional path.

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In the following pages I will be addressing myself to the theory of psychedelic experience by proposing two complementary models, both of which are suggested by the theory of meditation. My consideration of psychedelic experiences in light of the concepts involved in meditation has appeared before on occasion of the Festschrift for ALBERT HOFMANN (RÄTSCH 1989). Those ideas concerning the psychedelic experience in the light of the experiential realm connected to the Indian *Kundalini* are published here for the first time.

It has been often said that psychedelics do not bring about anything that is not a potentiality of the psyche. Just as the pathologies that may be elicited involve an intensification of long-standing dispositions in the individual, also super-normal states of consciousness that can be elicited correspond to amplifications of ever-present aspects of consciousness. Not only are psychedelic states within the individual’s potential; they are also possible to cultivate intentionally through a variety of psycho-spiritual exercises that may be broadly called “meditation” (when we give this word the broadest meaning of “voluntary control of internal states”). The similarity between states traditionally known to practitioners of meditation in the different spiritual traditions with psychedelic peak-experiences points to the relevance of the psychology of meditation to the psychology of psychedelic states of consciousness. In what follows, I present my reflections on this subject from two different perspectives: that of the “*Kundalini* phenomenon”, which I propose underlies spiritual experience beyond a certain level in a practitioner’s progress; and a dimensional theory of meditation, in which I propose that optimized consciousness may be understood as a multi-faceted phenomenon, with the specific forms of meditation distinguished in terms of three bipolar dimensions of experience.

I end this chapter with some reflections on the way these two theoretical models fit together, and some considerations of the practical application of the understandings that they contain. Drug-elicited states of expanded consciousness may be regarded as the expression of a process of relative “ego-dissolution” that entails an openness to spiritual experience, and I propose that psychedelic experiences which involve the “mystico-mimetic” quality—a high degree of letting-go and a welling up of love—may be interpreted (like the *Kundalini* phenomenon itself) in terms of the “Dionysian” pole of the three dimensions of meditation.

1. *A Kundalini Theory of Psychedelic Experiences "Body Energies "*

I don't like the expression “body energy” very much, nor “bioenergy” – adopted by LOWEN (1978) from REICH and widely popularized in connection with his “bioenergetics”. Yet the phenomenon to which these expressions refer pertains to an unquestionable domain of experience. Whatever is involved in it, whatever its scientific explanation, there is the perception of a “flow” in the body which, though not a part of ordinary awareness, is a frequent phenomenon in the course of body therapies, meditation, and psychedelic experience. There has been a surge of interest in “body energies” in the recent decades, mostly in connection with body work. Though body workers other than the Reichians have observed and spoken about the phenomenon, I think REICH (1927) might very well be regarded a re-discoverer of *Kundalini* in the West. What he called “streamings” is no different from the old phenomenon of *prana* flow, just as his “orgone” corresponds to the old Asian intuition of an energy in which are fused the sexual and the cosmic. Yet not only Reichians, but also polarity therapists and others conceive of an energetic flow in the body. Even body therapists who don't emphasize this issue in the conceptualization of their approach are what one may call “believers” in this regard, and informally talk in these terms. Thus I remember that when I asked IDA ROLF (the originator of Structural Alignment School) “Do you see auras?,” she answered “No, I don't see them, I just touch them.” And GERDA ALEXANDER (1977) (the originator of Eutony) writes only of the tonus appropriate for movement; yet her practical work – consisting in guided awareness – is pervaded by references to a

“subtle energy” and a “contacting” others in a sense that goes beyond ordinary touch sensations.

The only body-worker I know that has explicitly rejected energy-language is MOSHE FELDENKRAIS (1984), who was certainly acquainted with the phenomenon that lies behind this terminology. To him I am indebted for the alternative interpretation that I develop in these pages, though this is not one that he formulated in the context of an in-depth discussion of theory. He did so, rather, in a passing remark in response to what in his opinion, was not only a felt pulsation, but an unquestionably objective vibratory phenomenon in my body that caused a regular ticking sound in the cranio/nasal area. This had been brought about by the Tibetan practice of *Tumo* (the first of the yogas of Naropa, otherwise called the practice of psychic heat). It was associated with a sense of an openness, permeability and pulsation that increasingly extended to new inner territories. This was so distinctively associated with the sense of a flow into bony tissue that I was surprised with FELDENKRAIS' (1985) characterization of it as “a matter of tonus.” The sense of *prana* circulation as a fluctuation in tonus has remained with me over the years, not only as a matter of theoretical interpretation, but something affecting my own observation of an ongoing and ever changing experience. Inspired by the conjunction of personal experience in the realm of the subtle physiology of meditative experiences and its interpretation in terms of a tonus fluctuation (made possible by a suspension of the inhibitory influence chronically mediated by the pyramidal tract), I have since developed a peculiar view of the “*Kundalini* phenomenon,” and will undertake here to share both this *Kundalini* view and an interpretation of psychedelic experiences in light of *Kundalini*.

Let me begin with the most characteristic phenomenon in the sphere of *Kundalini*: the “body energies,” or in a stricter language, the experiences of inner flow in the body. The experience of today’s body-workers is an echo of very old conceptions. A number of spiritual traditions have mapped the flow of these “subtle energies” in the body and emphasized the relation between their unobstructed and balanced flow and the more desirable states of the mind. Particularly detailed in this regard are the Tantric traditions. I speak in plural in reference to the Indian and the Buddhist schools, of which written statements began to appear in India around the seventh century A.D. Despite a number of

doctrinal differences between these schools, they have many aspects in common. These include recognition of: energy centers or *chakras*; subtle pathways or *nadis*; the energy itself or *prana*; the practice of sexual yoga; and at the metaphysical level, the notion of the “*Shiva-Shakti*” or (in Buddhism) the “*Prajna-Upaya*” polarity. In Taoism, too (as may be seen in the book of *The Secret of the Golden Flower* [WILHEIM 1969]) we find a system of spiritual development in which great emphasis is given to the circulation of “light.” Even the Mayans and early Peruvians, I believe, were well acquainted with the “serpentine power.” The early Chavin culture is particularly interesting because of its antiquity (ante-dating Tiahuanaco), its superb art, and the prominence of snakes and jaguars in their iconography – which suggests the use of *ayahuasca* (See ANDRITZKY 1989, vol.1: 124 ff). The visitor to Lima’s Anthropological Museum can see in it a reproduction of a two-meter-tall, knife-like stone carved with the features of a human being with snakes moving between and around the “energy centers” similar in essence to images from the Taoistic or Tantric sources. The cross-cultural agreements and similarities suggest that we are tapping into a universalneurobiological/phenomenological process, as I have elaborated upon in “The *Kundalini* Process and the Tale of the Hero” (keynote address at “The Energies of Transformation,” 1990, Asilomar Center, Monterey, California).

Since it is the Tantric traditions (the latest and most elaborate development of Indian Yoga) that are better documented, it is from these that I will borrow the expression *Kundalini* (literally translated as coiled or serpentine power). I use it not in its original meaning, but as part of the expression “*Kundalini* phenomenon” that I define below. The traditional understanding within Hindu Tantrism is that *Kundalini* is God. More exactly, it is the God within, as distinct from the universal deity, a potentiality for divine consciousness that lies dormant in the human body. In addition to this conception of an indwelling divine presence that is hidden in the human body, the notion of the *Kundalini* involves an association with energy, the lower part of the spine, and its implicit associations of sexuality. The *Kundalini shakti* is understood, also, as a feminine principle, for it is the individual expression of that cosmic energy that is regarded as the feminine principle of the universe: the energy of manifestation, through which the transcendent SHIVA works out his *Maya* or dream-like creation.

I propose that the traditional language of Tantrism, though phenomenologically true and, in consequence, experientially useful, is essentially metaphoric in nature. It is not so much the case that a snake-like power lies at the base of the spine, but that there exists a level of letting-go in the innervation of the perineal region beyond that which is familiar to the average individual. It acts as a sort of trigger or gateway to the phenomenon of “energy circulation” in the body. It is not that an “energy” moves through the body, but rather that peculiar sensations are spontaneously interpreted in this manner. This “energy” doesn’t “flow,” but the experienced flow is of the same nature as the apparent progression of waves on the surface of water. Water doesn’t truly advance, but the up and down movement radiates and conforms to a pattern that creates the illusion of horizontal progression. The “*Kundalini* theory” that I am proposing here as an alternative to the poetic and practical language of tradition is that when the “body armour” is sufficiently relaxed, there is a release of a spontaneous pulsation of muscle tissue that proceeds in coherent waves like the movement of the fins of a fish from head to tail. It is my contention that apparent longitudinal or centrifugal progression of excitement is caused by volleys of firing of neurones coordinated in ways that reflect the structure of the central nervous system. If this hypothesis is correct, it is thus not the case that a spiritual energy moves in the body, but rather that an inner movement in the body occurs in the context of a spiritual state. Furthermore, I believe that the “*Kundalini* phenomenon” is not a particular province of spiritual phenomenology, but a correlate of all spiritual experience, which may or not be in the foreground or even within the sphere of the individual's awareness.

An Interpretation of the Kundalini Phenomenon

Proceeding further with this de-mystification of a subject little understood even by *Kundalini* worshippers (to say nothing of scholars), I would like to describe the “*Kundalini* phenomenon” without appeal to a cosmic entity or even a microcosmic one like *Kundalini shakti*. Phenomenologically speaking, this “*Kundalini* phenomenon” is a multifaceted realm of experience comprising:

1 - numinosity or sacrality,

2 - bliss,

3 - visionary experience,

4 - possession-like experiences and

5 – “*pranic* phenomena” (to borrow GROF’S [1988] expression)

(Examples of all these may be found, for instance, in SWAMI MUKTANANDA’S (1972) autobiographic account *Chitshakti Vilas*.)

Since any of these may stand out for a particular individual at a given time, there are experiences that seem to be purely spiritual, purely blissful, purely visionary, purely the expression of a shift in the ordinary center of action (so that movements or thoughts seem to originate beyond the subject and perhaps in a supraindividual personality), or purely pertaining to the subtle physical domain. In the course of time, however, the same individual who knew blissful experiences may become more visionary, and the essential vision-centered individual may become prana-centered at another stage, since different emphasis is related to the activation of different chakras or (to speak non-traditional language) to the “opening up” of different body segments. The constellation of all these modes of experience is reflected in the content of Tantric practices, where each is intentionally stimulated through: the invocation of deities, mantra, the support of sexual ecstasy, visualization, surrender, and the stimulation of *prana* with breathing and subtle body awareness.

In addition to all these positive or “productive” phenomena, there is a negative and relatively invisible one: the temporary suspension of ego, of which the melting away of the tonus armour is the physical expression. Deep relaxation is to the physical vibratory phenomenon of “*prana* flow” what suspension of the ego is to spiritual, cognitive and emotional experiences. This relaxation may be regarded as a suspension of “body ego” – i.e., the sum total of chronic attitudes in the form of fixed motor dispositions, that Reichians call the “character armor”.

In the traditional view, the arousal and rising of the *Kundalini* is seen as a process that entails various stages, at which the “energy” enters the various “centers” along the body axis. As each of these is pierced (*bheda*), it is said to open as a lotus flower. Rather than conceiving the *chakras* as entities in a subtle or electromagnetic body (as the theosophists have done), we may understand them as the experiential expression of a

deliberate inhibition of habitual (and stress-related) tension in the different innervation segments along the body axis. To the extent that deep relaxation sets-in, productive phenomena (or phenomena of liberation) occur at both physical and psycho-spiritual levels. The opening of a lotus bud is a good description for the subjective sensations of tissue expansion and centrifugally expanding pulsation. Traditional iconography depicting different gods seated upon the various lotuses along the body is an appropriate description for how the melting away of ego and the bursting of prana at the physical level support different qualities of contemplative experience. Relaxation of the different metameric segments of the body may be said to entail at the psychological level different qualities of ego-loss and also different qualities of emptiness. Each of these serves as context for a spiritual experience of a particular “coloring, “ just as each of the orifices of a flute, when opened, brings forth a different sound.

A Single Process Behind Different Teachings and Practices

There are differences between the maps of the subtle body in different traditions. The Taoist system works with three centers or “cauldrons” (*Dan Tien*) in the belly, chest and head; the Hindu system proposes concentration on seven *chakras*; the Sufis operate on three main centers and eight subordinate *chakras*; and Vajrayana Buddhism emphasizes the head, neck and heart triad. Whatever the system, however, there are commonalities. There is in all an acknowledgement of the importance of bringing the energy (and, implicitly, one's attention) to the central axis of the body. There is in all of them the recognition of left-right polarity and a familiarity with the fact that activation of any *chakra* results in the spread of activation to others. Also universal is the reptilian symbolism (dragon rather than snake in Taoism and its “alchemy”), the acknowledgement of the “serpent power’s” healing potential (origin of the association of the *caduceus* to the medical profession), and a recognition that the *Kundalini* realm has its dangers.

I believe that the healing aspect of the *Kundalini* phenomenon - i.e. the phenomenon of deep letting-go in body, feelings and mind – is no different from the healing property of organismic self-regulation, *Kundalini in itself being nothing other than ego loss plus organismic self-regulation*: a suspension of psychophysical control by

the ordinary personality (i.e., control of a part over the whole) and a shift to a state in which the totality of the organism controls itself. Just as at the physical level organismic self-regulation can heal psychosomatic illnesses and manifest as unusual vitality or ability (the “wisdom of the body”), at the feeling level a similar condition of fluidity and contact with the whole of one’s psyche manifests as inwardly guided emotional healing that may entail a re-elaboration of past experience and attitudinal shifts in relationships. At the cognitive level a similar multi-dimensional openness (through suspension of the habit of linear thought) is a source of such intuition as is universally associated with the phenomenon.

While *Kundalini* may be conceived of as a “healing force,” it is paradoxical, being associated with expressions of disease, both psychosomatic and psychotic. (In the intensity of these – after a period of expanded consciousness – lie the dangers traditionally associated to the “serpent power” in tantric esotericism and Sufism.) It is the former that troubled HAKUIN, and what the Japanese call “Zen sickness.” GOPI KRISHNA has given us a detailed account of his incapacitating torment over years in his autobiographic book *Kundalini* (1971). The psychotic complications are not only known among spiritual seekers, for according to many today (e.g., GROF & GROF 1990) it may be useful to interpret many cases of acute psychosis as “*Kundalini* accidents”.

In light of the idea of *Kundalini* as a high level of organismic self-regulation (made possible through a suspension of the ego), I think that we can view the healing and sickening aspects of the process as two facets of a single phenomenon. These two facets may follow upon one another in time as in the classical descent into hell of the shaman before or after his ascent to heaven; or they may alternate as in the frequent succession of fullness and distress in the life of mystics. Just as the process of “falling to rise” is well-known at the spiritual (as in ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS [1958]) and psychological levels (as in RONALD LAING'S [1969] approach to psychotics), that of sickening to heal is familiar in the medical field – and was particularly striking before the advent of antibiotics, when the cure followed a time of crisis in many infectious diseases. In both cases we may say that a wound needs to be exposed before it is treated, a perturbation needs to be uncovered before it is set right. When ego boundaries are lifted, the perturbation made manifest will be greater or lesser according to the individual, and it is

likely to be greater the more artificially or strenuously that the *Kundalini* has been aroused. In some cases the magnitude of healing to be accomplished weighs heavily upon the individual, so that all energies are concentrated upon this newly discovered need, leaving little for survival in ordinary life. For one who is not ready, the liberation of the deeper spontaneity of the mind and organism can lead to great conflict and to misfortune. This has been well known to Sufi schools, which warn about the abuse of ecstatogenic techniques in meditation, and emphasize the perils of “man trying to use what he has not learnt to use.”

Though I have spoken of a “falling to rise” as a healing process that involves emotional or psychosomatic suffering and imbalances, it would be more accurate to describe the unfolding of the *Kundalini* process in time in three stages: expansion – contraction – equilibrium. The stage of “contraction” - i.e. that of spiritual, psychological and physical problems – does not arise at the beginning, but one may say of *Kundalini* what the initiate and educator GEORGE IVANOVITCH GURDJIEFF used to say (as is reported by his disciples) concerning “work on self”: “At the beginning it is roses, roses, roses; later it is thorns, thorns, thorns.” I think that the well known up-and-down pattern of spiritual progress – the “ascent” of the *via purgativa* followed by the plateau of *via illuminativa* and the descending course of a “dark night of the soul” – is intimately connected to the up-and-down sweep of regeneration in the body as the pulsating and liberating activity of *Kundalini* rises to the crown of the head and, after allowing the practitioner a season in heaven it begins its descent to the coccyx, feet and hands. JOSEPH CAMPBELL (1974) has analyzed the parallelism of this descent to the succession of experiences described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. I think his observation is valid: the lower the energy “penetrates,” the less spiritual consciousness seems to become. Yet this is not only a falling to rise but a falling that is a rising in disguise. Its completion is a return to the ordinary mind with a new appreciation and wisdom, the mythical return of the hero to the world in fulfillment.

2. Psychedelics as Elicitors of *Kundalini* Experience

I have elaborated on the nature of *Kundalini* experiences to illustrate why I propose psychedelics trigger them. The demonstration that psychedelics are *Kundalini* activators

will lie in the identification of typical psychedelic experiences within the classical *Kundalini* phenomenon.

Psychedelic substances differ in their psychological effects. I find it useful to classify them in three distinct groups: the LSD-like ones, which might also be called, in accordance with common usage “hallucinogens”; those like MDA (Methylene-dioxy-amphetamine) and MDMA (Methoxy methylene-dioxy-amphetamine), which I proposed calling “feeling enhancers” (currently more referred to as entactogens); and the “fantasy enhancers” or oneirophrenics such as harmaline and ibogaine. Some substances such as THC (Tetra hydro cannabinol) share qualities of two or more of these groups. It can be generally said that the hallucinogens bring about marked cognitive effects; the feeling enhancers are almost purely psychedelics of the emotional life; while the “fantasy enhancers,” despite this label, may be regarded as “belly drugs” in view of their relevance to instinctual life (for their effects are to bring out the “inner animal” in the person). Just as each of the components of *Kundalini* phenomenon is a typical component of psychedelic experience – i.e., sacrality, bliss, visionary experience, pranic phenomena, and possession (as in ALBERT HOFMANN’s memorable accidental experience) – reflection and introspection support the view here proposed that psychedelic action in general is in the nature of an inhibition of the ego and the release of organismic self-regulation. Rather than examining case reports to document “ego-dissolution” and the elicitation of greater spontaneity, which are universally recognized, I will only add that the differences among various psychedelics may be understood in terms of the difference in regard to their respective psychophysiological levels of predominant action. The LSD-like ones, in which the effect on cognition is most typical, elicit phenomena comparable to those associated with the stimulation of the higher *chakras* (sacrality and suspension of conceptual thinking). The instinct-related “fantasy enhancers” may be regarded as lower-*chakra* activators. The feeling enhancers can be called “heart drugs,” not only metaphorically, but also in view of the associated *pranic* phenomena.

The Common Hallucinogens

In the case of LSD-like hallucinogens it is possible to observe all layers of the *Kundalini* phenomenon: the physical streamings (ordinarily dismissed as mere “paraesthesias”), the emotional bliss, the visions and inspiration, and the spiritual content. Even spiral symbolism, cognate with that of the coiled power, may be said to be present, for KLUVER (1966) showed in his classical study of *peyote* that this pattern is one of the “formal constants” in the visions reported. The only reason to distinguish the pharmacologically induced spiritual and physical experience from that which is brought about through meditation and yoga is that the psychedelic experience is usually transient, so that the expression “*Kundalini* awakening” is better reserved for the onset of an ongoing process. It is because of the observation of an ongoing self-propelled and spontaneous psychospiritual evolution that GOPI KRISHNA (1971) has spoken of *Kundalini* as “the evolutionary energy in man.” We need to make a distinction between transitory “*Kundalini* activation” and definitive “*Kundalini* awakening.” Nonetheless, psychedelic experience frequently constitutes a door to a transformative journey of no return, and thus a *Kundalini* awakening.

GROF (1980) has colloquially remarked that the effects of LSD may manifest at the psycho-dynamic or “Freudian” domain, or archetypal Jungian domain and at the transpersonal proper, including the perinatal. We may also note a Reichian domain of pranic phenomena, and even observe specific correlations between pranic states and perinatal states. The “oceanic” womb-like state is one of maximum *pranic* freedom and distinct from the hellish states of *pranic* implosion and the “purgatory” condition of a progressive unblocking of prana that are isomorphic with the progress along the birth canal.

The Fantasy Enhancers

I have already spoken about the *yage or ayahuasca* experience in *Kundalini* terms in an earlier paper (NARANJO 1987), and pointed out that the characteristic animal visions are an expression of a felt proximity with one’s instinctual self. I particularly emphasized there the frequent vision of snakes, tigers and birds of prey, and noted that these are the component elements of the mythical dragon – a universal symbol for the cosmic power within. Though I did propose that these symbolic animals are embodiments of an inner

guidance (and are so interpreted in shamanism), my earlier treatment of the subject focused exclusively on the visionary aspect of the *yage* experience, giving no attention to the almost universally reported sensations of internal flow in the body, i.e. the *pranic* phenomena. To compensate for that lack of emphasis, I want to point to the work of PETER BAUMAN (1986), who reports mostly physical symptoms and few visions in response to the ingestion of these drugs. Similarly MAURER's study (1986) of harmin found "vegetative" and "neurological" symptoms more striking than imagery, to the point of disagreement with the use of the word "hallucinogen" for this substance when used without the addition of DMT (Dimethyl tryptamine). It is also relevant to mention that in smaller dosages both *yage* and *iboga* are used in primitive societies for dancing. When not absorbed in visions, these substances bring about a greater subtlety in coordination, fluidity of movements, improvement of posture and abundance of energy. Unlike the case of LSD-like hallucinogens, subjects under the influence of these drugs are more fully in the body and in a better, self-regulating body state. All-in-all, it may be said that the fantasy enhancers evoke a spiritual experience with little intellectual or emotional content and yet with a peculiarity of its own: a sacralization of instinct, of animality and matter itself.

The Feeling Enhancers

Just as the stimulation of loving feelings and bliss is not a regular feature of the experience brought about by the fantasy enhancers, visions are rare in the case of the feeling enhancers. In neither case do we find the full gamut of manifestations constituting our denotative definition of the *Kundalini* phenomenon. Still it may be said that the experience of MDMA (3 Methoxy- 4,5-methylene dioxy amphetamine) and similar drugs conforms to the connotative definition proposed here: it is an experience of ego-inhibition that is, in turn, the gateway to a condition of intensified organismic self-regulation.

Speaking of ego-inhibition, however, would not be appropriate without pointing out that the word "ego" has been used with different meanings in different circles, and that I am neither using it in the sense of ego psychology since HARTMAN (1985) (i.e. as a function of integration and adaptation), nor in the restricted sense of LSD therapists

among whom the idea of ego-loss is linked to the felt sense of identity loss. I use, rather, “ego” in the common transpersonal sense, equivalent to the traditional one in ancient spiritual schools: the conditioned aspect of the personality (comprising character structure at the cognitive, emotional and conative levels) that stands in the way of a deeper self (or, in today's language, organismic self-regulation).

While the LSD-like psychedelics may be said to dissolve the cognitive ego and the fantasy enhancers inhibit the counter-instinctual aspect of the ego, the feeling enhancers typically seem to melt away the “passional” ego – the emotions of fear, pride, hate, envy, etc. that stand in the way of authentic communication and love. The healing organismic self-regulating process of the feeling enhancers takes place predominantly at the emotional level and in the sphere of the relationships to which emotions are attached. They evoke a process of spontaneous (and perhaps assisted) psychotherapeutic inquiry and life-repair (typically involving the re-elaboration of traumatic events). This is what GROF (1980) has called “psychodynamic” experience in his discussion of the gamut of LSD effects, and is something not present in traditional discussions of *Kundalini*. However, I am inclined to think that it is an integral part of the phenomenon, and responsible for much of the psychological and psychosomatic healing that spiritual practices bring about. The silence concerning it in the traditional discussions reflects the less psychological orientation of ancient Asian cultures.

This discussion would not be complete without some words on THC (tetra-hydrocannabinol), for *Cannabis* may be described as a “wide-spectrum” psychedelic. Its effects cover the whole range of phenomena enumerated – pranic, emotional, visionary and spiritual. Since the dominant one depends largely on the focus of attention, it might be called an all-purpose lubricant of the psyche. It is no wonder that *Cannabis* is not only included in Hindu Tantric ritual but is widely used by “left-handed” practitioners in non-ritual situations. I hope to have conveyed that the “energy flow” phenomenon in psychedelic experiences is not a trivial one, but part of a larger syndrome – the *Kundalini* syndrome described in spiritual traditions. I have also proposed that different substances have the effect of suspending the activity of different domains of ego associated with corresponding areas of “body ego” or tonus armour. I hope, too, that in the process I have contributed to the demystification of *Kundalini* and to showing it as something that

pervades psychospiritual transformation. The “*Kundalini* theory” of psychedelic action that I am offering does not only seek to establish a link between an old concept and a new interest, but is in essence a theory of psychedelic consciousness as an expression of “ego-anesthesia” and the unleashing of “the wisdom of the organism.”

3. A Dimensional View of the Psychedelic Realm

The following pages briefly re-state my explanation of meditation according to a multi-dimensional model, and show the relevance of essential aspects of meditation to understanding psychedelic experience. I propose that the categories of analysis derived from reflecting on traditional spiritual exercises are also applicable to pharmacologically induced states of consciousness, and that my theory of meditation may be extended into a theory of psychedelic experiences.

Not-Doing and Letting-Go

What does all meditation have in common? The usually shared answer in academic circles – since BENSON’s work (1975) – is the “relaxation response.” In the view that I am suggesting here, however, the answer to this question is sixfold rather than single. Let me begin by reiterating this generalized notion and assert that at least one component of meditation (most striking in some forms such as Buddhist *Samatha*) is inner stillness. It is the attitude of effortlessness (*Wu-wei*) and the stilling of the mind (*citti vritti nirodha*, in the extinction of the agitation of the mind) that are here essential; outer stillness and muscular relaxation may be considered as an appropriate support or technical expediency.

Yet just as stillness is most prominent in certain kinds of meditation, something fairly opposite is true of others, and in these practices (which I called “Dionysian”; cf. NARANJO & ORNSTEIN 1972 and NARANJO 1990) we also encounter a generalized quality of meditation beyond its forms: that of letting-go, non-interference, surrender of self-control, and allowing of the spontaneity of the mind. In this model of meditation I refuse these two – not-doing and letting-go – as opposite ends of a single bipolar dimension of meditation, to which I refer as the “stop- go” dimension. Yet stillness and flowing are not the contradictory states that they might seem to be when we regard their conceptual labels. If we attend to experience rather than discursive thought, we observe that they are,

somewhat paradoxically, complementary. Giving the mind free rein, for instance, leads to its eventual pacification, and an attitude of effortlessness leads, not to a dead stillness, but to a dynamic experiential flow. While the two poles may be found in comparative isolation at the beginning steps of meditation, deeper meditative attainment may be best characterized by the convergence of peace and inner freedom, and as a stability without fixity. As in the Zen metaphor, the mind is compared to an empty space that, like the sky, allows birds to fly unimpeded.

This polarity illustrates that letting-go is as relevant to pharmacological expanded states of consciousness as it is to the description of meditation states, only that surrender arises most spontaneously and almost implicitly. The evidently “Dionysian” psychedelic state with all its letting-go – from twitching muscles to feelings, memories and visions – is the expression of non-interference by the everyday mind. The “flowing” aspect of the state – the experiential unfolding popularly likened to a trip – is the other side of an inhibition of habitual inhibition. And just as the suspension of ordinary perceptual schemata and habitual behavioral dispositions is well known to observers of the phenomenon, sometimes the stilling of conceptual mind may be directly observable as well. As HENRY MICHAUX (1974) describes in his essay on *What is ‘Coming to Oneself,’* when the effect of a psychedelic wears off, the individual is “restored to thought.”

While both “ego-suspension” (which may be experienced as impending or actual “ego-death”) and release of spontaneity from customary inhibitions are part of the general psychedelic experience, there are also differences in the states brought about by different classes of psychoactive drugs. While it is the Dionysian aspect that occupies the foreground in the case of the (sympathomimetic) LSD-like psychedelics or hallucinogens, psycho-motor relaxation is relatively more prominent in the case of the (parasympathomimetic) *harmala* alkaloids, of *ibogaine* and *ketamine*. The feeling-enhancing drugs, such as MDA and MDMA, stand between these two groups. In their case a peaceful state of mind typically serves as a background (particularly in the presence of skillful guidance) for a spontaneously unfolding process of self-discovery, as the suspension of habitual defensiveness opens the way to suppressed emotions, unacknowledged perceptions, and repressed memories.

Mindfulness and God-Mindedness

A second bipolar dimension conceptualizing the realm of meditative experience and techniques is characterized in terms of the polarity of “mindfulness” and “God-mindedness.” While in certain practices (such as *Vipassana*) the meditator’s task is concentration on the givens of perception and emotion, in others, attention is focused on symbolic content (mostly conceptual, visual, or auditory) as a means of evocation of the sense of Sacredness that transcends the field of mental contents proper. In these cases the meditator is enjoined to become so totally absorbed in the meditation object (a divine attribute or a *mantram*, for example) that nothing else remains in the field of awareness. There then arises a sense of subject-object fusion – an identification with the contents of creative imagination.

From the point of view of the second dichotomy, both kinds of experience are included among psychedelic states. They include “visionary” states in which, just as in traditional contemplation, there is an identification with imaginative or symbolic content; and states of enhanced awareness of the “here-and-now”. As HUXLEY (1954) stated using WILLIAM BLAKE’s expression, the “doors of perception,” usually clouded by stereotypes and habituation, are open to a greater clarity and complexity. It is common for both states to be superimposed, so that things realistically perceived take on symbolic and numinous over-tones with the subject-object fusion characteristic of visionary experience.

In traditional spiritual methodology, the two complementary techniques of meditation – object focus and attention to the “here-and-now” – merge upon the cultivation of *samadhi*. So too in psychedelic situation it seems that a single quality of consciousness may be manifested in alternate ways, according to the forms of attention. There are differences among the psychedelics in terms of this dimension. The feeling enhancers rarely elicit symbolic representations (spontaneous “meditation objects”), but characteristically facilitate the perception of physical and emotional states, whereas the *harmala* alkaloids and *ibogaine* are mostly “visionary” drugs.

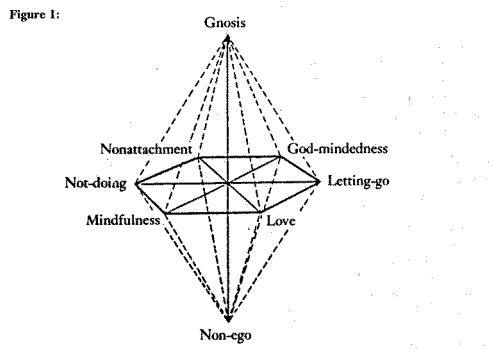
Non-Attachment and Love

The third dimension of the nature of meditation and its variation is an affective one (in contrast to the active and cognitive dimensions just explained). It involves the complementariness of non-attachment and love. While the cultivation of non-attachment is predominant in yoga and in most forms of Buddhist meditation, and that of love is the main characteristic in devotional religions, it is possible to say that both love and non-attachment are interdependent – even when one or the other is in the foreground of experience. Examined from the point of view of this polarity, we may say that it is the experience of love that is emphasized in LSD-like peak experiences, though a non-attached attitude may be said to underlie it and sustain it.

Applying this dimension of meditative experience to psychedelic experiences, it may be said that the expanded states of consciousness induced by LSD-like hallucinogens are different from those typical of the *harmala* alkaloids and *ibogaine*. In the latter, it is frequently cosmic indifference rather than universal love that is the foreground of the peak-experience. Similarly with *ketamine* the non-attached quality predominates, while in the feeling-enhancers, the dominant characteristic is warmth.

I have spoken of not-doing and letting-go, mindfulness and God-mindedness, non-attachment and love as six “inner gestures” that are balanced in the maturity of meditative experiences (see NARANJO 1990, *How to Be*), and have described higher consciousness or meditative depth as a multi-faceted experience in which there is a convergence of peace and surrender, awareness of the here-and-now, numinosity, equanimity, and compassion (see NARANJO 1992). Psychedelic peak-experiences are similar with these different aspects of consciousness present in them, sometimes in isolation, but most commonly in combination, and it would be superfluous to illustrate psychedelic cases of the experiences of love, detachment, intensification of attention to the here-and-now, contemplative experience with symbolic content, the stilling of thought or the facilitation of letting-go, for all these are so characteristic and well known to all acquainted with the field. It is my contention that through the suspension of the conditioned personality and the liberation of the deeper organismic process of self-regulation, both meditation and psychedelic have therapeutic results, as is clear from numerous papers in the medical and psychological journals in the first instance and from both shamanistic and modern psychotherapeutic use in the latter. The underlying

commonality between therapeutic and spiritual practices is a view now generally accepted in transpersonal psychology. (For a general discussion of the issue see NARANJO's *The One Quest*, 1972). A summarization of these thoughts on meditation, which I am proposing to apply to the psychedelic domain, is illustrated in the diagram in Figure 1.



4. Psychedelics and The Dionysian Pole of Meditation

To address the relationship between meditative consciousness and psychedelic experiences, and to illustrate how the *Kundalini* view of psychedelic experience is relevant in terms of the three bipolar dimensions of consciousness, it is necessary to introduce another concept from my earlier formulation of meditation: that of a polarity between the Apollonian (or solar) and the Dionysian (or lunar) aspects of experience. This polarity underlies the three dimensions of the mind, and can be seen as common bridges within its more encompassing field. While the practices of tranquility, non-attachment and bare attention (more prominent in the far East) tend to go together constituting a “yogic complex,” the practices of surrender, love and God-mindedness also tend to go together, constituting a “religious complex” of attitudes. (Just as we may symbolically convey the spirit of the Apollonian way with the image of the arrow, we may evoke the Dionysian approach with the image of the cup.)

The spiritual traditions that focus on the *Kundalini* phenomenon emphasize devotion and surrender, so that the Dionysian aspect of consciousness is the more prominent. But it is more accurate to say that the *Kundalini* traditions constitute

integrative approaches, extensions of classical yoga with both yogic and religious or devotional aspects. The Apollonian and the Dionysian aspects of tantric experience, (embodied in SHIVA and SHAKTI, respectively in the Hindu tradition) are parallel and contrasting disciplines as ideally successive schools. Likewise the tantric way of surrender is an advanced discipline that presupposes experience and success in classical yoga. We may say that the path of austerity and restraint is regarded as preparatory to the success of the path of surrender. Similarly the path of classical yoga, beginning with behavioral, postural and breathing restraints and aiming at the attainment of one-pointedness, permits the individual to “get out of his own way.” This permits pranic phenomena to be unleashed and released enough that, through a permeabilization of the body itself, the mind can soar to its highest levels.

In the case of psychedelic experiences, however, surrender has not been arrived through the voluntary control of the mind, but through alternative, psychopharmacological means. While the six domains outlined in the three-dimensional interpretation of meditation are present, in the case of tantrism it is the dynamic and Dionysian aspect that predominates over the static Apollonian. In traditional spiritual practice it is the Apollonian cultivation of *ekagrata* (development of mental control) that constitutes the ground out of which *Kundalini* manifestations arise, while in the psychedelic experience it would seem that the Dionysian realm is allowed its flow through a sort of ego anesthesia rather than through a deliberate stilling of the mind.

Psychedelics, Nothingness and Being

My intention here is to portray the six elementary “gestures” or ways of meditation as means of suspending (and eventually transcending) the ego (in a traditional rather than psychoanalytic sense of the term). Because psychedelics – through such ego-suspension – remove the veil of obscuration, they constitute gateways to the experience of Being. Psychedelic peak-experiences may also be said to have aspects of something more basic and encompassing; different degrees of “ego-death” (i.e., dissolution of conditional personality) and a break-through to spiritual perception. They are states rather than stages

of consciousness, and yet states that can powerfully influence the individual's growth process.

The apprehension of being, through which everything seems more real and in which the individual feels that "it is enough to be," is the core of religious experience. I believe it is also behind what may be described in merely aesthetic or sensuous terms, and in common psychedelic properties such as a more intense light or color or sharper contours. These may be symbolic translations of a spiritual event that the person is not familiar enough with to describe otherwise. Also, there are states of reaching after being, apparent being-scarcity, and struggling towards intuited spiritual reality that may be assimilated to the traditional concept of purgatory. Psychedelic births may be associated with memories, but I think that it would be a mistake to regard them only that. Images of biological birth, whether memories or fantasies, can also be understood as the symbolic visionary expression of a non-biological, spiritual birth taking place at the moment when veil of egoic obscuration is "torn" away.

Similarly, mystical experiences are found in "nothingness," and experiences of moving toward nothingness (i.e., dying). In the case of an "annihilating illumination" (ANDREWS 1963), it may generally be said (as in Western mysticism) that the birth and Being aspects lie in the foreground. In *harmaline* and *ibogaine* experiences, as in the case of *ketamine*, it is more likely that dying, nothingness, and "cosmic space" will predominate. This is surely related to the fact that the word *ayahuasca*, given to the *Banisteriopsis* drink in Quechua, translates as "vine of death." It may not be a coincidence that subjects who have been administered *ketamine* frequently interpret their experiences as a glimpse of death or a journey into after-death states.

Teachings of the more sophisticated meditation schools, particularly those of Tibetan Buddhism, emphasize that techniques of meditation are only means for attaining an understanding of the nature of our mind. This involves a consciousness beyond its objects, similar to the awareness that an empty mirror might have in itself beyond the images it reflects. This self-apprehension of the ground of consciousness is understood to be the source of the intuitions of both being and of nothingness.

I think that while being and nothingness are closer to psychedelic than everyday awareness, they are still mostly veiled in religious, archetypal, biological, and aesthetic

symbolism. Consequently they are not always clearly apprehended as that “transcendent knowledge” of which spiritual traditions speak. If this is true, then an orientation toward being and emptiness – such as that provided by Buddhist or Sufi discourse – may constitute a valuable context and preparatory “set” for psychedelic experiences. For just as birth and death experiences are central to psychedelic phenomenology, Being and Nothingness may be regarded as the core of its spiritual philosophy or “theology.”

5. Conclusions

To summarize the practical implications of the theory of psychedelic experience suggested by the theory of meditation, I want to first point out that understanding psychedelic experience as a transient activation of the *Kundalini* or as the elicitation of states comparable to those brought about through traditional meditative disciplines does not mean that meditation and psychedelic experiences are identical in nature. For inasmuch as chemically induced states are artificial rather than intended, their repeated experience does not necessarily entail the development of an ability on the part of the person to bring them about. While it is clear that the pedagogy of the spiritual traditions makes it possible for serious practitioners to undergo a transformation of consciousness, the transformation of consciousness through psychedelics alone is more questionable. The example of shamans does not serve to document the transformation of consciousness through psychedelics, since the life of shamanism involves much more than the ingestion of psychedelic substances.

It is my personal view that psychedelics should remain initiatory experiences, agents of mobilization at an impasse, or means of facilitation at choice moments in a person’s life, but never a diet. Consequently, I believe that those with an inclination to spiritual advancement are well advised to engage in spiritual learning and practice, so that their meditation is not circumscribed to occasions of psychedelic use. Furthermore, just as in tantrism, a good grounding in *tapas* (austerity) and in the practice of concentration is regarded both a preparation and a safeguard. I think that an individual’s ability to use psychedelics well may be optimized through similar preparation.

It has been part of the wisdom of shamanism that the use of psychedelics occurs in the context of an austere way in which sacrifices, and “the path of the warrior” are

central characteristics. Through emphasis in discipline, courage and the development of the will, I think that the wisdom of the past has sought to counteract the dangers of regression. I think this old spiritual pedagogy provides good recommendations for the new-shamanism in our therapeutic culture.

To finish, I would like to remark that though I believe meditation methods are highly suitable to a mind “lubricated” by psychedelics, I do not consider the “spiritual” states elicited by psychedelics as necessarily those of greatest spiritual significance in a person’s life. Despite the intrinsic value of psychedelic states and the lesson they provide in opening the mind to wider domains than those of everyday consciousness, despite the great inspiration that has come to many from psychedelic mystical experiences, and even despite those instances in which a single visit to “psychedelic paradise” has changed a person’s life profoundly and for the better, it may well be that it is the visit to “hells” and “purgatories” that are more transformative in the end. Through the healing that takes place in the course of these painful journeys, the person’s receptivity to spiritual experiences increases in a stable and reliable manner. I have wanted to say this so as not to give the impression (through the choice of my subject matter) that I think of the mystico-mimetic domain as the most important psychedelic domain nor that I am personally more interested in it. Just as spiritual greed is not conducive to the best spiritual results, I think that there has arisen a sort of “hedonistic spirituality” among psychedelic users which leads to incomplete assimilation of psychedelic experiences and indirectly to abuse. Correspondingly, among those who find themselves in the position of assisting others in their psychedelic experiences, it would be best not to be biased in the invitation to pursue peak-experiences, and to have the ability to guide others through the psychodynamic and interpersonal mazes as well as in heavenly flights. In this, too, I think, we may do well to stay close to the inspiration of shamans.

I am convinced that drug problems are mostly the consequence of misuse. This, in turn, has been a function of the tension between the psychedelic potential and the lack of a cultural channel for its implementation. I want to end by offering my opinion on how to achieve the mobilization of the positive potential of psychedelics throughout the world. This would be greatly assisted through the creation of a national or international training center for specialists, a center that would bring together the wisdom of present-day

therapists, spiritual teachers, shamans and psychedelic guides, and further the transmission of their knowledge and experience to the coming generation.

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