

Psychedelic Rites of Passage

by Ram Dass

“In thinking about psychedelics, the first thing to understand is that there is a whole range of substances which share that name, and that they are of very different strengths. Some are mild; most marijuana, for example, falls in that category. Mild psychedelics open up the possibilities, but they don’t override the personality. Stronger psychedelics, on the other hand—things like mescaline, or psilocybin, or LSD—are likely to override our existing thought patterns in a very powerful way. If we aren’t prepared for that, it can get pretty hairy. If we don’t have a sufficiently deep jnana (wisdom) practice, some understanding of what’s happening to us, we freak when the entire structure of our existence starts to fall away. That’s why it’s important to do some reading and studying and contemplating in advance, so we’ll have some foothold in the experiences as they start to happen to us.”

— From “The Yoga of Psychedelics,” in *Paths to God: Living the Bhagavad Gita* by Ram Dass, Harmony Press, October 2004.

WE ARE LIVING IN A DEPRIVED SOCIETY, as far as spiritual rituals are concerned. We suffer from a shortage of rites of passage—or at any rate a shortage of meaningful rites of passage. It’s true that we get married and we get buried, we have our baptisms and our first communions and our bar mitzvahs, but sometimes they don’t seem to touch our hearts very deeply. In the worst cases, they’re just episodes we go through mechanically, by rote.

I remember my own bar mitzvah. I learned my Torah part, and I read it pretty well. I got lots of gifts—a thick stack of checks, and a lifetime supply of fountain pens. But that was about it. The inner meaning of the ritual never came alive for me, it was never imbued with living spirit. And I don’t think I was alone in that; I think that’s been a common enough experience among us. Maybe we “did” the rituals, but it was strictly pro forma.

If we have only the most superficial of ossified religious rituals, it is because these rites of passage no longer provide direct contact with the numinous. This is where psychedelics can help. But sadly, a first psychedelic experience is much more likely to happen at a noisy party somewhere than in a sacred setting filled with reminders of spirit. And that’s a big missed opportunity, for us as a society.

While I would never encourage anyone to use psychedelic substances, especially in our current political climate, the fact of the matter is that a certain percentage of our young people (and of our older people, too) are going to experiment. And I would like to see that experiment unfold for them in the most positive sort of way, under conditions that minimize the risk of a “bad trip” and that maximize the spiritual potential of the experience.

So what would a proper initiatory psychedelic experience look like? As we learned early in the game, back when Tim Leary and I first began our experiments in consciousness-alteration, a psychedelic trip is largely conditioned by two factors: setting and set.

What we call the setting is the physical environment for the experience: the room where the trip takes place, the objects the room contains, the sounds that are heard. Personally, I like to surround myself with pictures of holy beings and wise beings, beings like Maharajji and Anandamayi Ma, like Christ and Hanuman. It’s different for each of us—maybe for some of us it will be just a rock to remind us of Gaia and the interconnectedness of life. The setting for a trip should surround us with whoever and whatever best represents for us the wisdom and love and beauty of the universe.

The other factor, the set, is our interior environment. Whatever is going on in our mind and emotions as we enter the psychedelic experience is going to color what follows, but to rearrange the set takes a little more preparation than rearranging the furniture in the room. We need to think in advance about what kinds of practices we might want to undertake in approaching a psychedelic rite of passage—perhaps fasting, perhaps meditating, perhaps reading certain holy books. Maybe we will want to formulate a question or a prayer or an intention that we will carry with us. We can do whatever feels right to each of us, but it’s a good idea to allow some time in advance for internal preparation.

It’s extremely useful, especially with a first experience, to have someone on hand who is experienced, someone quiet and calm, someone with whom you feel loving and safe. Music is helpful, too—music that you love and can surrender into, something that is familiar and comfortable.

Those would seem to be good ground rules for creating a psychedelic rite of passage. Now what if a group of people were to build a community based on something like that? What would it be like to live in a society that included an

initiatory psychedelic experience? That's what Aldous Huxley explored in his novel, *Island*. At a certain age, the young people on Huxley's island would begin preparing for the psychedelic journey they would be taking; they would begin learning a series of exercises that would lead them into new terrains of awareness. Adults who emerged from that journey would be prepared to take their place in the society and to play their role from a much deeper level of their being.

There's not much of that kind of preparation available here, at least not in the majority culture that most of us inhabit. Such rituals do exist among some of the First World peoples. The peyote-using tribes, for example, have all-night ceremonies in which the sacred cactus is communally ingested and the trip is guided by an experienced "road-man." The shaman in Mexico who first turned on Timothy Leary with her magic mushrooms offered them with ritual. But that's not available to most of us.

I did recently witness a very gentle, loving, profound ceremony created by some friends of mine for a young man who was about to use marijuana for the first time. An elder of the family group prepared the pipe, and dedicated it to Lord Shiva. Then he lit it, and handed it to the young man. The young man raised the pipe to his forehead and chanted, "Bom, Shivaya!" before inhaling. The pipe was passed around the circle, and before taking a hit of the sacred herb each member of the group acknowledged the young man and welcomed him to the company of grown-ups. Don't you think that he experienced something in that ceremony? Don't you think he will have a deeper respect for the substance, and use it more wisely, than if he'd had that first experience in the corner of a parking lot somewhere?

Back in the 1960s, Tim and Ralph Metzner and I wrote a book called *The Psychedelic Experience*. It was based on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which Aldous Huxley had recently introduced to us, and it used the Tibetan manual as the framework for guiding a psychedelic journey of death and rebirth. The parallels between the descriptions in the *Book of the Dead* and the experiences of an LSD trip are quite astounding, and the book served its purpose.

We could use more books like that, books that offer a context for the psychedelic voyage and the psychedelic vision. We could use more rites of passage, whether or not they involve psychedelics, because in a very deep way, young people are yearning for something—for a symbol, a marker stone, a mythic context—that acknowledges the significance and the sacredness of the passage they are making. We owe it to them to develop rites of passage that match the stretch of their spirits. We owe it to ourselves to introduce them to the society of adults from the space of unity and love that psychedelics open within us. •

MAPS' CONTRIBUTION...

The MAPS Rites of Passage Project is our attempt to collect the stories of those families who have tried to build their own rituals, rites, and relationships with psychedelics and marijuana. Rather than waiting for young people to experiment with these substances haphazardly, some parents have chosen to offer their own guidance and experience. In other families, young people have introduced these substances to open-minded parents, creating a new kind of bond. By sharing these stories, we hope to document a variety of ways that families have tackled this issue.

If you have a rite of passage you'd like to share, please let us know! We're looking for one- to two-page stories, ideally with accounts written by each person present. For more information, check out www.maps.org/ritesofpassage or contact brandy@maps.org.