

is there a proper place for psychedelics in spiritual practice?

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IT MAY SEEM THAT NOTHING NEW can be said on this topic after Ram Dass and Ralph Metzner. Yet the theme is vast and has many pros and contras as reflected in one of the recent issues of "Gnosis" magazine. (Winter '93, No 26.)

This article is an attempt to look at psychedelics from the point of view of somebody who measures everything by one criteria: will this bring me permanent and stable peace and happiness? Or is it interesting and fascinating but has nothing to do with liberation from suffering? (This attitude might seem narrow but regarding other aspects I refer the reader to a significant body of literature.) I believe that longing for permanent contentment is an unconscious motivation behind all human actions; however, it's amazing how difficult it is to really accept that nothing external can bring us lasting happiness.

Limitations

Maybe it's useful first to point out what psychedelics can not give. Just by taking sacred substances and surrendering to their action, no matter how many times and in what doses, we can not acquire permanent, unshakable in any circumstances wisdom, serenity and inner freedom. You might have profound mystical or religious experience but in the next day or two it's gone. What remains is simply memory of bliss and insights you have had but your actual state of consciousness returns to usual – with its implicit inner conflicts.

There is a big difference between actually experiencing that everything is One and intellectually reminding yourself of this truth. If your present state is that of anxiety due to some stress, recalling a profound psychedelic experience you have had won't bring you back in bliss. It seems like certain qualities such as transcendental insight or unconditional love are state – specific, meaning you naturally have them when you are in expanded state of consciousness, and you inevitably lose them when you return to an ordinary state. From this point of view, the goal of

traditional spiritual practice is not only achieving the altered state but stabilizing or better to say abiding in it.

Of course, all this does not in any way contradict or deny the role of psychedelics as "door - openers" or initial catalysts for many people. It rather calls for realization that chasing after another and another beautiful psychedelic experience leads nowhere, because these experiences are impermanent just as everything else.

Possibilities

So, is there a place for psychedelics in a day-to-day meditation practice of the serious spiritual seeker? Yes, indeed. The first aspect of the purposeful use of sacred substances has to do with the experiential realization that you are not the body. Our materialistic culture, obsessed with the body, gave birth to peculiar phenomena: body-oriented spirituality. It's amazing how many people overlook the simple truth that almost all our suffering originates from identification with the body. For whom are disease, hunger, poverty, fatigue, wars, natural disasters and death? For the body only. However, it's impossible to give up this habitual identification just by reading or hearing the truth, because the ordinary state of consciousness is characterized exactly by "I am body" experience.

Many people may say "Of course, I know that I am not the body!", but this is only intellectual; unless one had a direct experience, the unconscious self-representation is indeed of "I" to be the body, which lives at this address, works on this job, married to this person, etc. The real degree of identification with the body is revealed only through the intensity of fear people have when the body is threatened in disease, physical trauma, or sudden bankruptcy. Of course, all this does not mean that the body itself is the cause of problems. The body should be taken care of. These notions of Advaita Vedanta rather point out that there is no end to suffering unless one experientially realizes that s/he is the boundless ocean of pure consciousness, and the body is just an object equal to all other objects inside this ocean. Psychedelics are invaluable in this matter because in significant doses →

Yes,
indeed.

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they can give a direct experience of conscious existence without the body. Mushrooms, DMT and ketamine in large doses are especially helpful. Repeated out-of-body experiences lead to loosening this deep conscious and unconscious identification with the body. One of the spiritual masters said that genuine spiritual practice has no other goal than experiential discovery of something in us that can not be taken by death.

Self-inquiry

Another aspect where psychedelics can be intentionally used has to do with the practice which Ramana Maharshi proposed as the most direct path: investigating "Who am I?" Sometimes this method is grossly misunderstood as merely intellectual questioning or usual introspection. In fact, it's very intensive practice where the meditator withdraws attention from all objects, external (the world) and internal (thoughts), and reverses awareness on its source. Usually people taking psychedelics learn that the most appropriate mental set and attitude is surrender to the action of the substance. If you don't give up control you are likely to have difficult experience. But again, there is a world of difference between preliminary intellectual set and ability to actually surrender in the process moment-to-moment.

Ramana Maharshi pointed out that another direct path (besides self-inquiry) is total surrender of one's life and world to God. From the meditator's perspective, unreserved surrender places one's mind in the position of detached observer of not only the world but of one's own body, emotions and thoughts, since they also belong to God. But as it is difficult to be totally detached in everyday life, so in psychedelic experience there is always a certain degree of habitual repulsion from the unpleasant and attachment to the pleasant. In many cases what people call surrender to the action of the psychedelic is, in fact, emotional involvement in experience with clinging to bliss and aversion to fear. What matters is not what we experience (because all experiences are impermanent) but how we react to it. From this perspective, psychedelics offer a unique possibility and a chance. When usually solid reality melts and begins to move, when irresistible flow of energies

dissolves perception of the body, when emotions fluctuate from bliss to unbearable fear, when every moment gives birth to the new world of images, it's a chance to realize that all this is happening by itself, beyond your control. So what can you possibly do? Nothing. Just relax and observe, witness.

Attaining the stable inner position of a detached witness of your own emotions and thoughts is in itself a difficult and high achievement. However, there is a stage beyond that. If I can disidentify and observe all these fleeting manifestations, then, who am I? In the ordinary state of consciousness, attention is usually fixed on this or that object (including thoughts); in psychedelic experience, when everything is changing so fast, it's easier to relax mind's habitual grasping and turn awareness on itself. The problem is that we are usually so fascinated or terrified by the experience itself, that we never ask ourselves "Who is that who is aware of all this?"

Challenges

For the determined spiritual practitioner, taking a psychedelic must be a test, a challenge and a possibility. A test: how much of deeply rooted fear, insecurity, negativity do I still have in my subconscious? (For some people sure of their meditative achievements but who had never taken psychedelics it might be rather unpleasant discovery that all these years they were just soothing the surface). Also a test with large doses of mushrooms, DMT or ketamine as a model of death: when death comes, will I be able to surrender painlessly and let go of the body? And when without a body, will I be comfortable facing the unknown in those strange bardo worlds? A challenge: am I able to stay as a detached witness in the midst of the outermost intensity of fear or bliss? And a possibility: to use the fluidity of psychedelic reality to free the attention from the trap of objects and turn awareness on its source. Reversed awareness allows us to realize, at least for a moment, the truth of who we really are: pure formless Consciousness, Existence, Untouched Peace, Emptiness and Fullness... In fact, it's impossible to describe It in words; just try the next time you are tripping to find out who is tripping... •