



Peyote is a ceremonial sacrament of the Native American Church used for prayer and direct communion with the Spirit world.

Molecular Mysticism:

The Role of Psychoactive Substances in Shamanic Transformations of Consciousness

by Ralph Metzner, Ph.D.

There is a question that has troubled me, and no doubt others, since the heyday of psychedelic research in the 1960s, when many groups and individuals were concerned with the problems of assimilating new and powerful mind-altering substances into Western society. The question, simply stated, was this: "Why did American Indians succeed in integrating the use of peyote into their culture, including its legal use as a sacrament to this day, when those interested in pursuing consciousness research with drugs in the dominant White culture succeeded only in having the entire field made taboo to research, and any use of the substances a criminal offense punishable by imprisonment?"¹ Since the Native American subculture is much

older and ecologically more sophisticated than the European White culture which attempted to absorb or eliminate it, and since many sensitive individuals have long argued that we should be learning from the Indians, not exterminating them, the examination of this question could lead to some highly interesting conclusions.

The answer to this ethnopsychological puzzle became clear to me only after I started observing and participating in a number of other American Indian ceremonies, such as the healing circle, the sweat lodge, or the spirit dance, that did not involve the use of peyote or other psychoactive substances. I noted what many ethnologists have reported that these ceremonies were simultaneously religious,

medicinal, and psychotherapeutic. The sweat lodge, like the peyote ritual, is regarded as a sacred ceremony, as a form of worship of the Creator; they are also both seen and practiced as a form of physical healing, and they are performed for solving personal and collective psychological problems. Thus it was natural, for those tribes that took up peyote, to add this medium to the others they were already familiar with, as a ceremony that expressed and reinforced the integration of body, mind and spirit.

In the dominant White society, by contrast, medicine, psychology and religious spirituality are separated by seemingly insurmountable paradigm differences. The medical, psychological and religious professions consid-



Datura has been used shamanically by several California tribes, and may have inspired some Chumash rock-art images.

ered the phenomenon of psychedelic drugs and were frightened by the unpredictable transformations of perception and worldview that they seemed to trigger. Thus, the dominant society's reaction was fear, followed by prohibition, even of further research. None of the three established professions wanted these consciousness-expanding instruments; and neither did they want anyone else to have them of their own free choice. The implicit assumption is that people are too ignorant and gullible to be able to make reasoned, informed choices as to how to treat their illnesses, solve their psychological problems, or practice their religions.

The fragmented condition of our society is mirrored back to us through these reactions. For the Native Americans on the other hand, healing, worship and problem-solving are all subsumed in the one way, which is the traditional way, the way of the Great Spirit, the way of the Earth Mother. The integrative understanding given in the peyote visions is not feared, but accepted and respected. Here the

implicit assumption is that all people have the capability, indeed the task, to attune themselves to higher spiritual sources of knowledge and healing, and the purpose of ceremony, with or without medicinal substances, is regarded as a facilitating of such attunement

Psychedelics as Sacrament or Recreation

Several observers, for example Andrew Weil,² have pointed out the historical pattern that as Western colonial society adopted psychoactive plant or food substances from native cultures, their use of such psychoactive materials devolved from sacramental to recreational. Tobacco was regarded as a sacred power plant by Indians of North, Central and South America,³ and is still so regarded by Native Americans, even though in the White Western culture, and in countries influenced by this dominant culture, cigarette smoking is obviously recreational, and has even become a major public health problem. The coca plant, as grown and used by the Andean

Indian tribes, was treated as a divinity, Mama Coca, and valued for its health-maintaining properties, while cocaine on the other hand is purely a recreational drug and its indiscriminate use also causes numerous health problems. In this, and other instances, desecralization of the plant-drug has been accompanied by criminalization

Coffee is another example. Apparently first discovered and used by Islamic Sufis who valued its stimulant properties for long nights of prayer and meditation, it became a fashionable recreational drink in European society in the 17th century, and was even banned for a while as being too dangerous.⁴ Even cannabis, the epitome of the recreational "high", is used by some sects of Hindu Tantrism as an amplifier of visualization and meditation.

Since sacramental healing plants have been so rapidly and completely desecralized while being adopted by the West's increasingly materialistic culture, it should not be surprising that the newly discovered synthetic psychoactive drugs have generally been very quickly categorized as either recrea-

tional or "narcotic", or both. Concomitantly, as the indiscriminate, excessive, non-sacramental use of psychoactive plants and newly synthesized analogs spread, so did patterns of abuse and dependence. Predictably, established society reacts with prohibitions, which in turn lead to organized crime activities. This is so in spite of the fact that many of the original discoverers of the new synthetic psychedelics, people such as Albert Hofmann and Alexander Shulgin, are individuals of deep spiritual integrity. Neither their efforts, nor the efforts of philosophers such as Aldous Huxley and psychologists such as Timothy Leary to advocate a sacred and respectful attitude towards these substances, were able to prevent such profanation from taking place.

The recently discovered phenethylamine psychedelic MDMA provides an instructive example of this phenomenon. Two patterns of use seem to have become established during the Seventies: some psychotherapists and spiritually inclined individuals began to explore its possible applications as a therapeutic adjuvant and as an amplifier of spiritual practice, while another, much larger group of individuals, began using it for recreational purposes, as a social "high" comparable in some respects to cocaine. The irresponsible and widespread use in this second category by increasing numbers of people understandably made the medical and law-enforcement authorities nervous, and the predictable reaction occurred. MDMA was classified as a Schedule I drug in the United States, which puts it in the same group as heroin, cannabis and LSD, making it a criminal offense to manufacture, use or sell the drug, and sending a clearly understood off-limits signal to pharmaceutical and medical researchers.

When Hofmann returned to Mazatec shamaness Maria Sabina with synthetic psilocybin in order to obtain her assessment of how close the synthesized ingredient was to the natural product, the "magic mushroom", he was appropriately acknowledging the primacy of the botanical over the synthetic. The argument could be made, and has been made, that perhaps for



The shamanic use of psychedelic mushrooms by Mesoamerican curanderos (healers) has been documented extensively by R. Gordon Wasson and others.

each of the important synthetic psychedelics, there is some natural, but unknown plant that has the same ingredients—and that this plant is our connection to the largely lost knowledge of indigenous cultures. Perhaps it should be our research strategy to find the botanical "host" for the psychedelics emerging from the laboratory. In the case of LSD, research on the use of morning glory seeds in ancient Mexico and baby woodrose in Hawaii, each of which contain LSD analogs, might allow us to discover a shamanic complex which has coevolved with this molecule. If Wasson, Hofmann and Ruck are correct in their proposal that an LSD-like, ergot-derived beverage was used in Greece as the initiatory sacrament at Eleusis, the implications are profound.⁵ Using Rupert Sheldrake's theory of morphogenetic fields,⁶ one could suppose that by re-growing or re-hybridizing this particular plant, we might then be able to "tune in" to and reactivate the morphogenetic field of the Eleusinian mysteries, considered by some the ancient world's most awe-inspiring mystical ritual.

Sheldrake's hypothesis of formative causation postulates that the behavior of any entity—inorganic, organic, crystalline, cosmic, plant, animal, human,

social—is a function of the frequency of past occurrences of this behavior. Thus, the laws of nature can really be considered habits. The growth of any form (e.g. embryonic) is determined by form-generating (morphogenetic) fields, which shape the developing organism the way similar organisms have been shaped before. These fields are not energy-fields and they extend across time as well as space by a kind of "morphic resonance". Memory, whether personal or collective, conscious or unconscious, is thus equivalent to morphic resonance. Sheldrake writes that "my hypothesis is that societies have social and cultural morphic fields which embrace and organize all that resides within them." He describes rituals as involving morphic resonance with ancestors. Shamanic cultures always emphasize that rituals must be performed in exactly the same way as they were done before, by the ancestors. "The conservatism of ritual would create exactly the right conditions for morphic resonance to occur between those performing the ritual now and all those who performed it previously."⁷ Thus, by using the same plant substance in the same way as it was used at Eleusis, we would be tuning in to the experiences of our ances-

T. White



T. White

The ceremonial use of peyote is at the heart of the shamanic rituals, art and life of the Huichol Indians of the Mexican Sierra Madres.

tors who participated in the Mysteries.

There is no inherent reason why sacramental use, and recreational use of a substance in moderation, could not co-exist. In fact, among Native Americans, tobacco often does play this dual role: after a Sacred Pipe ritual with tobacco or other herbs, participants may smoke cigarettes to relax. We know the sacramental use of wine in the Catholic communion rite; and we certainly know the recreational use of wine. We are able to keep the two contexts separate, and we are also able to recognize when recreational use becomes dependence and abuse. Similar sophistication could be developed with regard to psychoactive plant products. There could be recognized sacramental and therapeutic applications; and certain patterns of use might develop that were more playful, exploratory, hedonistic—but which could be contained within a reasonable and acceptable social framework that minimizes harm.

The "abuse" of a drug, in such a

relatively enlightened system, would not refer to who uses it, or where it originated, or whether doctors or other authorities condone it, but would rather depend on the behavioral consequences in the drug user. Someone becomes recognized as an alcoholic, that is, an abuser of alcohol, when his or her interpersonal and social relationships are noticeably impaired. There should be no difficulty in establishing similar abuse criteria for other psychoactive drugs.

Psychedelics as Gnostic Catalysts

In 1968, in a paper entitled "On the Evolutionary Significance of Psychedelics" and published in *Main Currents of Modern Thought*, I suggested that the findings of LSD research in the areas of psychology, religion and the arts could be looked at in the context of the evolution of consciousness. "If LSD expands consciousness and if, as is widely believed, further evolution will take the form of an increase in consciousness,

then can we not regard LSD as a possible evolutionary instrument? ... Here is a device which, by altering the chemical composition of the cerebro-sensory information processing medium, temporarily inactivates the screening programs—the genetic and cultural filters which dominate in a completely unnoticed way our usual perceptions of the world."⁸ From the perspective of almost twenty years reflection, I now propose to extend and amplify this statement in two ways: (1) the evolution of consciousness is a transformational process that consists primarily in gaining insight and understanding, or *gnosis*; and (2) the acceleration of this process by molecular catalysts is not only a consequence of new technologies, but is also an integral component of traditional systems of transformation, including shamanism, alchemy and yoga.

In psychedelic research, the "set-and-setting hypothesis", which was first formulated by Timothy Leary in the early 60s, has become accepted by most workers in the field. The theory states that the content of a psychedelic experience is a function of the set (intention, attitude, personality, mood) and the setting (interpersonal, social and environmental); and that the drug functions as a kind of trigger, catalyst or non-specific amplifier or sensitizer. This hypothesis can be applied to the understanding of any altered state of consciousness when we recognize that other kinds of stimuli can be triggers: for example, hypnotic induction, meditation techniques, *mantra*, sound or music, breathing, sensory isolation, movement, sex, natural landscapes, near-death experiences, and the like. Generalizing the set-and-setting hypothesis in this way helps us to understand psychoactive drugs as one class of triggers within a whole range of possible catalysts of altered states.⁹

An important clarification results from keeping in mind the distinction between a state (of consciousness) and a psychological trait, and between state changes and trait changes. For example, psychologists distinguish between state-anxiety and trait-anxiety. William James, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, discussed this que-



T. White

Timothy Leary, an early champion of LSD, emphasized that the content of a psychedelic experience is influenced by the setting (social, environmental, etc.) and the mind-set (intention, personality, mood, etc.) under which it is taken.

tion in terms of whether a religious or conversion experience would necessarily lead to more "saintliness", more enlightened traits. This distinction is crucial to the assessment of the value or significance of drug-induced altered states. Only by attending to both the state-changes (visions, insights, feelings) and the longterm consequences, or behavioral or trait changes, can a comprehensive understanding of these phenomena be obtained.

Having an insight is not the same as being able to apply that insight. There is no inherent connection between a mystical experience of oneness and the expression or manifestation of that oneness in the affairs of everyday life. This point is perhaps obvious, yet it is frequently overlooked by those who argue that, on principle, a drug cannot induce a genuine mystical experience or play any role in spiritual life. The internal factors of "set", including

preparation, expectation and intention, are the determinants of whether a given experience is authentically religious; and equally, intention is crucial to the question of whether an altered state results in any lasting personality changes. Intention is like a kind of bridge from the ordinary or consensus reality state to the state of heightened consciousness; and it can also provide a bridge from that heightened state back to ordinary reality.

This model allows us to understand why the same drug(s) might be claimed by some to lead to nirvana or religious vision, and for others (for example someone like mass-murderer Charles Manson) could lead to the most perverse and sadistic violence. The drug is only a tool, a catalyst to attain certain altered states which, in turn, are dependent on the intention(s) of the user. Further, even when the drug-induced state is benign and ex-

pansive, whether or not it leads to long-lasting positive changes is also a matter of intention or mind-set

The drug indeed seems to reveal or release something that is *in* the person; which is the factor implied in the term "psychedelic": mind manifesting. In my opinion the term "entheogen", sometimes applied to mind-altering drugs, is an unfortunate choice because it suggests the "god within", or divine principle, is somehow "generated" in these states. My experiences have led me to the opposite conclusion: the god within is the generator, the source of life-energy, awakening and healing power. For someone whose conscious intention is a psychospiritual transformation, the psychedelic *can* be a catalyst that reveals and releases insight or knowledge from higher aspects of our being. Thus is, I believe, what is meant by *gnosis*—sacred knowledge, insight concerning the



The shamanic use of ayahuasca and other psychoactive plants by some Amazonian tribes has been documented extensively by anthropologists.

fundamental spiritual realities of the universe in general, and one's individual destiny in particular.

The potential of psychedelic drugs to act as catalysts for the sake of attaining gnosis, or direct, ongoing awareness of divine reality, even if only in a small number of people, would seem to be of the utmost significance. Traditionally, the number of individuals who have had mystical experiences has been very small, and the number of those who have been able to make practical applications of such experiences has probably been even smaller. Thus the discovery of psychedelics, in facilitating such experiences and processes, might be regarded as one very important factor in a general spiritual awakening of collective human consciousness. Other factors might be the revolutionary paradigm shifts in the physical and biological sciences, the burgeoning of interest in Eastern philosophies, shamanism, and spiritual disciplines, and also the growing awareness of the multicultural oneness of the human family brought about by the global communications networks.

Psychedelics in Traditional Systems of Transformation

In my earlier writings I emphasized the newness of psychedelic drugs, the unimaginable potentials to be realized by their constructive application; and I

thought of them as first products of a new technology, oriented towards the human spirit. While I still believe that these potentials exist, and that synthetic psychedelics have a role to play in consciousness research and perhaps consciousness evolution, my views have changed under the influence of the discoveries and writings of cultural anthropologists and ethnobotanists who have pointed to the role of mind-altering and visionary botanicals in cultures across the world, past and present.

One cannot read the works of R. Gordon Wasson on the Mesoamerican mushroom cults, or the work of Richard E. Schultes on the profusion of hallucinogens in the Americas, or the cross-cultural work of such authors as Michael Harner, Joan Halifax, Peter Furst and Marlene Dobkin de Rios, or the cross-culturally oriented medical and psychiatric researchers such as Andrew Weil, Claudio Naranjo and Stanislav Grof, or more personal accounts such as the writings of Carlos Castaneda, or Florinda Donner, or the McKenna brothers, or Bruce Lamb's biography of Manuel Cordova without getting a strong sense of the pervasiveness of the quest for visions, insights and non-ordinary states of consciousness; and further, the sense that psychoactive plants are used in many, but by no means all of the shamanic cultures that pursue such states.¹⁰ Thus I

have been led to a view closer to that of aboriginal cultures, a view of humanity in a relationship of co-consciousness, communication and cooperation with the animal kingdom, the plant kingdom and the mineral world. In such a worldview, the ingestion of hallucinogenic plant preparations in order to obtain knowledge—for healing, for prophecy, for communication with spirits, for anticipation of danger, or for understanding the universe—appears as one of the oldest and most highly treasured traditions.

Various shamanic cultures around the world know a wide variety of means for entering non-ordinary realities. Michael Harner has pointed out that "auditory driving" with prolonged drumming is perhaps as equally widespread a technology for entering shamanic states as hallucinogens. In some cultures, the rhythmic hyperventilation produced through certain kinds of chanting may be another form of altered state trigger. Animal spirits become guides and allies in shamanic initiation rites. Plant spirits can become "helpers" also, even when the plant is not taken internally by either doctor or patient. Tobacco smoke is used as a purifier, as well as a support to prayer. Crystals are used to focus energy for seeing and healing. There is attunement, through prayer and meditation, with deities and spirits of the land, the four directions, the elements, the Creator Spirit. Through many different means, there is the seeking of knowledge from other states, other worlds—knowledge that is used to improve the way we live in this world through healing, problem-solving, etc. The use of hallucinogenic plants, when it occurs, is part of an integrated complex of interrelationships between Nature, Spirit and human consciousness.

Thus it seems to me that the lessons we are to learn from these consciousness-expanding plants and drugs have to do not only with our recognition of other dimensions of the human psyche, but with a radically different worldview—a worldview that has been maintained in the beliefs, practices and rituals of shamanic cultures, and almost totally forgotten or suppressed

by 20th century materialist culture. There is of course a certain delightful irony in the fact that it has taken a material substance to awaken the sleeping consciousness of so many of our contemporaries to the reality of non-material energies, forms and spirits.

Conclusions

It appears incontrovertible that hallucinogens played some role, of unknown extent, in the transformative traditions of shamanism, and if we regard psychotherapy as one of the modern descendants of these traditions, then a similar, if limited, application of hallucinogens could be made in various aspects of psychotherapy. This has in fact already occurred, as the various studies of psychedelics in alcoholism, terminal cancer, obsessional neurosis, depression and other conditions testify.¹¹ It seems likely that these kinds of applications of psychedelics, as adjuncts to psychotherapy, will continue—if not with LSD and other Schedule I drugs, then with other, newer, perhaps safer psychedelics.

What appears unlikely to me is that this kind of controlled psychiatric application will ever be enough to satisfy the inclinations and needs of those individuals who wish to explore psychedelics in their most ancient role—as tools for seeking visionary states and hidden forms of knowledge. The fact that serious use of hallucinogens outside of the psychiatric framework continues despite severe social and legal sanctions suggests that this is a kind of individual freedom that will not be easy to abolish. It also suggests that there is a strong need, in certain people, to re-establish their connections with ancient traditions of knowledge in which visionary states of consciousness and exploration of other realities, with or without hallucinogens, were the central concern.

It may be that such a path will always be pursued by only a very limited number of individuals, much as ancient shamanic initiations and practices were usually pursued by only a few individuals in each society. I find it a hopeful sign that some, however few,



T. White

Archaeological evidence suggests the use of psychedelics in ancient Peru.

are willing to explore how to re-connect with these sources of knowledge, some of which are lost; because, like many others, I feel that our materialist-technological society, with its fragmented worldview, has largely lost its way and can ill afford to ignore any potential aids to greater knowledge of the human mind. The ecologically balanced and humanistically integrated framework of understanding that the ancient traditions preserved surely has much to offer us.

Furthermore, it is very clear that the visions and insights of the individuals who pursue these paths are visions and insights for the present and the future, not just of historical or anthropological interest. This has always been the pattern: the individual seeks a vision to understand his or her place, or destiny, as a member of the community. The knowledge derived from altered states has been, can be, and needs to be applied to the solution of the staggering problems that confront our species; for, in the words of the *The Bible*, "where there is no vision, the people perish."

Footnotes

1. The use of peyote spread from Mexico to the North American Indian tribes in the latter half of the 19th century, and has found acceptance as a sacrament in the ceremonies of the Native American Church. It is recognized as one kind of religious ritual that some of the tribes practice, as well as being acknowledged by sociologists for its role as an antidote for alcohol abuse.

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