

High Light: When a Psilocybin Study Leads to Spiritual Realization

A subject in a study of the effects of hallucinogens on brain chemistry recounts her mystical, life-changing experiences under the influence of psilocybin

By Maria Estevez | Tuesday, November 23, 2010 | 3 comments

Editor's Note: Maria Estevez was 62 years old in 2006 when she participated in the second psilocybin study conducted by Roland Griffiths, a co-author of the Scientific American article on hallucinogens. The inspiration she derived from these experiences prompted her to write a yet-unpublished book about how it affected her life both during the study and afterward.

In this excerpt from One Kind of Knowing, quoted with permission, she recounts what occurred during the second and most intense of four experiences with the drug. The deeply spiritual quality of her perception of an inner light reveals how a shift in brain biochemistry can enable us to enter the realm of mystics and visionaries.

Mary and Matt, my guides, sat beside me on the couch at Johns Hopkins Medical Center to look at an art book until the psilocybin took effect. In only about fifteen or twenty minutes I knew I had received an active dose rather than a placebo. "I'm going down," I told them. On went the eye mask, the headphones, the blanket, and the blood pressure cuff, and I began to sink into another world.

The descent seemed even rougher than the previous time, a rattling, lurching, high-speed roller coaster ride straight downhill through tingling geometric shapes and tunnels of textured blackness. The music on the soundtrack exaggerated the eerie atmosphere and kept me wary. Once again the abdominal spasms started up as well. Chemicals washed over me in repeated waves, bringing hot sensations and a bad taste in my mouth. As soon as I managed to get stabilized from one wave, another would follow. The sheer number of these cycles suggested that this was a stronger dose than I'd had the first time.

However, there were significant differences that tempered the experience. Most obviously, of course, I had done this before. Although I found the descent the most challenging part of the journey, with its feelings of assault and helplessness, I recognized landmarks so there was a useful frame of reference. I remembered the feeling of falling and going through tunnels, I remembered the geometrics, and I remembered the music. In fact, the two Brahms pieces I had feared so much before just flew by while I was occupied with the rapid changes, and I didn't have time to be frightened by them. If anything, noticing that part of the soundtrack offered a bit of comfort – "Ah, yes, I know those bad boys!"

I also came upon another impression that I had forgotten from the first session, the sense of emerging into "rooms" or public areas in the blackness. Sometimes I seemed to be on the periphery of a large sphere, many stories tall, with a city-of-the-future feel to it, tiers of terraces around the edge and flying objects like space cars. For all I knew, this could have been a single cell – all sense of proportion was lost. I described this to Mary and Matt for their records.

Despite the strong effects of the psilocybin, I was able to keep in mind my intention to work with what was presented to me. Whenever my consciousness regrouped into my familiar identity, I mentally reiterated, "Tell me where we are going. I am willing to go where you take me." I was determined to remain as nonjudgmental as possible and to offer no resistance, as Dr. Griffiths had advised, even though I was apprehensive.

Before the session began that morning, I had asked various sources of spiritual inspiration, ranging from the Archangel Michael to

Joel Goldsmith, author of *The Infinite Way*, to help me through the experience. Now when I silently called on them to come and be with me, I detected a sense of wry amusement as if they had been watching. "We are already here," they responded wordlessly. "It is you who are in our territory now." I told this to Mary and she too found it surprising. I felt the truth of their message, and it heartened me. This was my first encounter with other intelligence in an altered state.

At last the descent ceased and I reached a point of stability, even though nothing in particular emerged as a next stage. Perhaps an hour or two had passed. Unlike my previous session with psilocybin, my mind was functioning clearly, and I had a mild feeling of suspense. I was deeply immersed in that reality, but mentally alert, when I told Mary I needed to go to the bathroom. I thought if I could just get that simple distraction out of the way, I could devote my full attention to the inner activities.

Mary obligingly took off my headphones and eye mask in preparation for getting me up from the couch. When I tried to sit up, I found myself heavy and dizzy – my mind and emotions were steady, but the body was not as cooperative. The gentle light of the room's lamps glared on my dilated pupils, so I chose to lie down again and cover my eyes with my hand until my eyes adjusted.

After a few minutes, instead of getting accustomed to the level of light, I realized the light was getting brighter and brighter and strangely brighter, until I understood that this light was not in the room, it was inside me. At that moment, it was as if all the cylinders in the lock somehow fell into alignment, the door swung open, and I found my consciousness being flooded with brilliant Light. Without notice or fanfare I had arrived at a transcendental state, and was awestruck at the discovery. I felt a sense of joyous expansion as it opened fully to me, like entering a splendid palace, yet the feeling was completely natural and gentle.

With my eyes closed I was overwhelmed with glorious golden light, suffused with every color, prisms and rainbows everywhere like a shining hologram. The Light itself was alive, a radiant consciousness of ultimate intelligence, perfect integrity, singularity and purity. The Light pervaded everything. It composed everything. Its presence was benevolent, calm, and intense.

It was as if the Light were revealing to me the innermost workings of the universe. Without words, It informed me that It, as the Light, was the source of every physical manifestation and that each had its purpose: "Everything is in my perfect control. With this as Cause, there can be no mistakes." I knew It to be the substance of every particle in the microcosm and the overarching essence of the macrocosm. In that moment I intuitively understood how everything is being created anew each instant from Its emanation. Why, then, could we not see the Light completely composing and permeating all of creation? How could the shining substance of all things be hidden? Later I remembered what the sages have always told us. The only possible answer is that our sense perceptions are an illusion.

Faced with the reality and the glory of the Light, there is nothing to do but gape with the greatest reverence. There are no questions in its Presence, no desires, no resistance. I felt suspended in a clear and peaceful state and enjoyed a weightless sense of free-fall, without time and space, though I remembered that they existed elsewhere. Even my physical surges abated, as if their purpose had been accomplished. Occasionally I still felt a faint muscle spasm, like the echo of receding thunder.

As I was poised there, rapt and transparent, the Light addressed me simply, without words: "Is there anything you want?" The question was direct and forthright, yet it seemed incongruous because my whole identity was already absorbed in that Light. To search for an answer, I had to make a deliberate effort to turn my attention to the world from which I'd come, a world now irrelevant and far away. With a moment's focus I remembered that life on earth required healing and guidance and abundance, and that I had a long list of wishes there. But I felt so distant from that personality, and I didn't want to look away from the Light for even an instant. The question was addressed to the one who stood before It in this exceptional experience, and there could be only one response. I breathed the quietest possible, "No, there is nothing I want."

I didn't know what to do in the presence of this Light. It was asking nothing of me. I was just basking in it and, again, trying to remain open to whatever happened. However, I realized I could observe It and report back to Mary and Matt. I wanted to shout, "It is true! It does exist!" Sometimes in a dream there is a sense that whatever you try to name or record will evaporate, but this experience in the Light remained steady as I tried to describe it, even though I was a little concerned that my sharing it might be sacrilegious and It would withdraw.

The power of the Light could have annihilated me in an instant, but instead It shone only as brightly as my consciousness could bear. The Godhead seemed to be lovingly limiting Its manifestation to what my own self-imposed definitions could perceive. This gave an "interspecies" quality to the experience, like the analogy of the fisherman and the mermaid – an understanding that as long as I maintained a human identity, we could not be joined in ultimate communion. The limitations were plainly mine, but the shared feelings of affection, longing and respect remained. The unspoken promise was that one day I would return with sufficient mastery to lay down my illusions, and the separation would be resolved.

And so, with nothing else to be done, we danced – that is as good a description as any. The Light waxed and waned, perhaps mirroring the processes of the psilocybin. It would shine brightly, then recede, leaving me in repose, peaceful and floating. Then It would return more strongly. It caressed me, holding me in the palm of its hand, so to speak, with exquisite tenderness and compassion. My eyes brimmed with tears of emotion as I was poised in this timeless state.

The Light spoke to me in the language of every human relationship – as if I were a child, a friend, and a lover. It told me It was pleased at my efforts to come and find It, and that It recognized my sincerity. At times the Light was playful, and we carried on nearly in giggles as if we had a secret. I teased Mary saying, "I feel like I'm on a private phone conversation with It, and you can't hear!" The Light and I continued that give-and-take rhythm, like a graceful and spontaneous duet, an intimate exchange.

We visited my cells so the Light could refresh and heal them. With its own sense of identity, the body rejoiced that for these moments the Light that constantly creates and sustains it was visible to the personal consciousness it supports, which I call "me." I was not a participant in this process, although I had to give my consent, because the Light and the cells shared a language my conscious Self did not understand. Matt reminded me the next day that I said I had watched It tapping my cells like a wand on a pod, opening them to reveal the light inside and showing them how to heal themselves. The experience was so convincing that after the session I was disappointed to find that my chronically poor eyesight was not improved....

And so the Light drifted away for longer and longer intervals, and told me It would miss me as we slowly parted. (That may sound simplistic and childlike, but it was my honest impression at the time.) I tried to memorize the details of how It looked and felt so I could hold onto the vision as long as possible, and even then I was wondering how difficult it would be to find It again at any time in my earthly life. But I told Matt and Mary tearfully, "I will always remember that it is possible." God chooses to reveal Himself. Once you have seen this Light, a deep recognition verifies that it is as powerful and moving as all the accounts testify. Even though it cannot be documented or proven, it is a one-hundred-percent convincing experience that so indelibly imprints the psyche that you declare, "Previously I knew it only intellectually, but now I am certain it is real."