

Mindstates 2005: Building Bridges between Transcendence and Technology, Spirituality and Science



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The setting of Mindstates VI in the city of San Francisco, legendary as it is for hippies and the North American psychedelic community, seemed appropriate for what was described to me as the largest psychedelic community gathering in the United States” and provided a potent background for my introduction to the premier psychedelia conference of North America. Taking an early morning walk through Golden Gate Park on the third and final day of the conference, I found myself wondering, “Where are all the hippies? This is San Francisco!” I reflected on Susan Blackmore’s presentation given two days earlier on her controversial theories about memes, or genetic cultural transmitters, and realized I was clearly looking for the stereotypical memes of the American 1960s counterculture being expressed by colorful or unusual clothing; no shoes/no clothing; long, unusual, or no hair; eye-catching makeup, tattoos, jewelry, piercings; having a musical instrument; feeding animals; doing something illegal; acting unusual, wandering, meditating; artistic performance; friendly behavior; and/or drug use.

I didn’t find such meme representation at Golden Gate Park, but it was abundant at the Palace of Fine Arts, a grand and amazing space dominated by elegant fountains and pillars. Inside the conference space was an explosion of the features I had looked for at the park. Available in this space was colorful art, many kinds of music, books on a wide array of subjects, jade pipes and statues, herbal medicines, a chill-out space with pillows, and vendors offering information on their projects: Erowid, the Center for Cognitive Liberty and Ethics, NORML, DanceSafe, and of course, MAPS. The environment was festive and stimulating, like a tropical marketplace, a space both public and welcoming while intimate and dense.

On Friday, Mindstates organizer Jon Hanna kicked off the event with a commencement address to the several hundred attendees, giving thanks to everyone involved in making the Mindstates vision a reality. The vibe was distinctly casual, as Hanna introduced the first presenter, Susan Blackmore, as a “friend who made me question the existence of God.” Jokingly, he added, “I used to [believe in God], but now I’m agnostic.” Hanna, perhaps also jokingly,

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expressed the sentiment that a person can’t be a scientist and believe in God. This was the first glimmer I got regarding the schism between those leaning toward either objective scientific or subjective spiritual approaches to studying and celebrating psychedelics.

Blackmore described memes as “technologies of transcendence,” saying that, “Drugs, rituals, chanting, dancing, and other means of achieving altered states are all memes. The states they can induce are not.” Basically, according to Blackmore, a person can copy the technology, but can’t copy the transcendent experience induced by the technology; smoking a spliff is a meme, being high is not a meme. Blackmore described meditation as meme-weeding, concluding, “transcendence (enlightenment) is not a meme, but we can use meme-devouring memes, like meditation, to clear the way for thought.”

The question-and-answer session with Sasha Shulgin, Ph.D. and wife Ann Shulgin that followed later in the day continued the casual, friendly atmosphere. These psychedelic elders drew a crowd that asked very specific questions regarding the effects of combining different drugs and the positive and negative effects of drugs, with much interest devoted to 2CB and research chemicals. The main advice they offered in regards to experimentation was to start small and be patient. Ann remarked, “...It’s not the drug giving you the experience, it’s your own psyche. The drugs give you different keys to various doors within.”

Apparently for many of the Mindstates participants, one of the most beloved of keys is magic mushrooms, as there was a whole panel dedicated to fungi. Harvard Divinity School graduate Tom Riedlinger gave a talk entitled “*La Noche Asombrado: Gordon Wasson’s Night of Awe*,” describing the experiences of the first documented European-Americans to take sacred mushrooms in Mexico, Gordon Wasson and his buddy Allen Richardson. Wasson had publicized his experience of participating in a *valada* (ritual)

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facilitated by now-legendary *curandera* Maria Sabina, in a 1957 *Life Magazine* article.

Going way further back than the 1950s, Dr. Mike Crowley gave an in-depth analysis of the “Secret Drugs of Buddhism.” Crowley cited much evidence in Buddhist and Hindu iconography of mushroom use by the early founders of these religions; for example, Ushnishasitapatra is a Buddhist goddess whose name literally means “crown bump, white parasol lady” and artistic depictions of her remarkably similar appearance to an *amanita* mushroom.

Moving gracefully from the disciplines of religion to that of psychiatry, Dr. Charles Grob shared with the audience his psychotherapy research with psilocybin in terminal cancer patients. He discussed the work of psychedelic therapy pioneers, both scientists and shamans, saying, “It’s important to value and respect what prehistoric ancestors and indigenous people did to incorporate psychedelics in a healing set and setting to optimize safety.”

Grob noted that Western allopathic medicine has failed to heal alcoholism, still only offering the Alcoholics Anonymous-style 12-step program, whereas psychedelics like ibogaine, LSD, and ayahuasca actually treat the disease through activating psychospiritual epiphany and mystical breakthrough.

Anthropologist Linda Rosa Corazon also talked about *curandera* Maria Sabina and her use of mushrooms as sacraments. Corazon’s contribution presented contemporary psychedelic psychotherapy as a modern form of ancient shamanism. She discussed the persecution of advocates of psychedelic psychotherapy in the United States and most of the world, and also shared her experiences in cultures where modern shamanistic practices are tolerated, such as Mexico, where she leads shamanic tours. While Linda expressed that she feels psychedelic psychotherapy should be called “spiritual healing” (citing such spiritual work with psychedelics by the Native American Church and Santo Daime church), she clearly voiced support for scientific inquiry into such spiritual healing, praising MAPS for pursuing ways to open psychedelic psychotherapy clinics.

On Saturday, the conference started with “Designer Minds,” a highly technical talk given by Ramez Naam about the power of technology (such as psychedelics) to alter the human body and mind.

Next came an artistic expression from Crystal & Spore, a group of young men and women from the rainforest

in British Columbia, entitled “Ecstatic Evolution: Dance Music Culture and Transcendent Technology.” One of the speakers introduced the presentation by inviting, “If this was a warehouse, I’d say get up and dance, but since you’re sitting, enjoy the ride.” He described what was to follow as a, “shamanic dance of polyshamanism-synergy.” Lights were lowered in the auditorium and two dreadlocked female dancers performed on stage to the music and visual presentation on a huge screen. Two men read poetry and talked about the work of Crystal & Spore: building sustainable visionary culture based on co-evolution through electronic dance parties and artistic expression. At the end of the presentation, the audience was asked, “What kind of culture are YOU building?”

Sunday’s talks demonstrated that the world the people of Mindstates are building is one where psychedelic research, therapy, medicine, and sacramental use are legal and safe. Frank Echenhoffer, Ph.D. described his study on how the EEG brain scans of frequent ayahuasca drinkers (twelve international individuals in Brazil who participate with the Uniao de Vegetal church) under the influence of the brew compared to their brain scans while not under the influence. Echenhoffer found that all changes in brain waves indicated increased alertness and enhanced neural and cognitive complexity. He explained how this was the first study of its kind, offering both optimal scientific and experiential setting, making the scientists into psychedelic facilitators as well. Much energy and thought was put into making the participants in the study comfortable, trying several different kinds of brain caps for the scans, putting aluminum foil on the windows of the space where the study was held in order to deflect heat, and providing the usual accessories of an ayahuasca ritual, a rattle and a bucket. Echenhoffer described how the brainwaves studied through the EEG study indicate that an ayahuasca experience is similar to a lucid dream.

The harm reduction panel reflected a strong current in the psychedelic community focused on promoting holistic wellness with the use of psychedelics. Dr. Julie Holland, in her talk “Medical Ecstasy: A Harm Reduction Model for MDMA Use” gave an excellent presentation on the safety of MDMA in psychotherapeutic settings and talked about some of the MAPS-supported international research.

Sandra Karpetas of the Iboga Therapy House in Vancouver, British Columbia, talked about providing safe

spaces for psychedelic experiences in her presentation about the CosmiKiva and Burning Man Sanctuary projects. She described these sanctuaries the project seeks to create as psychedelic crossroads—offering art, water, snacks, info, toys, and a team of facilitators for people experiencing difficult or overwhelming psychedelic experiences at festivals and other events. Durk Pearson and Sandy Shaw concluded the harm reduction panel with “Dodging the Bullets with Protective Nutrients,” which was, like many of the presentations, dominated by an involved question-and-answer session where the audience learned how to protect their health with vitamins and otherwise enhance the benefits and decrease the harms of psychedelic use.

Along with Erowid, the MAPS website was mentioned in many presentations as the foremost resource for information on psychedelia. Scientific research sponsored and supported by MAPS was cited frequently. MAPS President Rick Doblin got a standing ovation after his presentation, “Psychedelic Psychotherapy Research and the Psychedelic Community.” MAPS’ vision of “Science over Politics” meshed beautifully with the Mindstates theme of “Technology and Transcendence.” In this forum, Doblin explained the ultimate MAPS vision as the creation of a network of legal psychedelic psychotherapy clinics. Doblin stated that culturally-reintegrated use of psychedelics would lead toward increased tolerance for human diversity and basic coexistence, and ultimately toward human survival. “There is hope but not a lot of time,” said Doblin. Doblin’s presentation ended with an active and urgent question-and-answer session, oriented toward the practical questions of how the legal psychedelic psychotherapy clinics would be funded, who would be qualified to run them, and how legalization could work.

I left the Mindstates conference and San Francisco full of confidence that the psychedelic community can change the world in a positive way. It was clear that in spite of our ideological diversity, we all share a common vision of a world where culturally-sanctioned healing with psychedelics can exist. Such a concrete and specific goal provides a much-needed light at the end of the tunnel in a culture where larger, more abstract goals such as world peace often bring us together. Mindstates was a crossroads between spirituality and psychology, medicine and healing, a place with a fair share of skeptics as well as a fair share of neo-shamans, but a place where we could all agree to work on one tangible goal.

At Mindstates VI, it became apparent that representatives of the psychedelic community that were present were acting as midwives for a new era, one in which cultural reintegration of psychedelic use will be possible. In this new era, psychedelic drugs and sacraments that the U.S. government fears, such as ayahuasca and iboga, offer promise as powerful medicines in healing drug addiction. In this new era, harm reduction and psychotherapeutic uses are promoted over irresponsible and haphazard use of psychedelics. In this new era, scientists, skeptics, spiritual mystics, artists, and other psychonauts are networking on an international level. And in this new era, scientific research will inform public policy on health issues. I came away from this conference with the distinct impression that what we, the psychedelic community represented at Mindstates, know scientifically and subjectively is exciting; the mystery of what we don’t know is even more exciting. MAPS continues to lead in the exploration of the mystery that is the frontier of consciousness.

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