

Ego Death & Psychedelics

By John Harrison, Psy.D. (cand)

“You are not an encapsulated bag of skin dragging around a dreary little ego. You are an evolutionary wonder, a trillion cells singing together in a vast chorale, an organism – environment, a symbiosis of cell and soul.”

—Jean Houston



Most of us involved in consciousness research and exploration have had both personal and/or professional episodes that resemble or emulate a temporary ego death (loss of the separate self) or, in the affirmative, have experienced a deep and profound merging with the transcendent other. These experiences, though often unique in their specific content, often share a universality both psychologically and spiritually, with those of our fellow psychonauts and consciousness-explorers. However, what is clear from the breadth and scope of the innumerable writings on ego death is that there is no one, clear definition or explanation either for the concept or the experience.

What is ego death? The definitions are many-sided and affected by context, culture and religious background, age, education, and informed by prior experiences with altered states of consciousness. In the process of writing this piece I sought out several respected colleagues and mentors who have traversed these challenging paths to self-discovery. When I asked consciousness explorer and dream-work facilitator, James Stewart, to define ego death, his response was, “Simply put, it is the dying of the sense of self, of individuality, or of that which I conceive myself to be as perhaps different than what I am. [It is] ...the dying of the conceptualized sense of self. In many ways ego death at its optimum is the fluid flexibility of adjustment to the ongoing expansion into the mystery of consciousness, and at its most challenging, the horrifying experience of attachment and rigidity.”

Recently I queried parapsychologist Stanley Krippner, Ph. D. about the nature of ego death and he responded, “It is a suspension of one’s ordinary reflective awareness... During these periods of time an individual is no

longer aware of themselves as an experiencing agency; instead, one experiences unity with the environment, and/or other people.”

Medicinal chemist and cofounder of the Heffter Institute David Nichols, Ph.D. added, “When the “I” that is inside can talk no more, is gone and cannot form thoughts, but simply is a part of all that is, and is no longer separate.”

Psychedelic researcher and clinical psychology doctoral candidate Alicia Danforth shared an elegant description of ego death, “The analogy that works for me is a jar of marbles. Ego death can be like dumping the marbles out onto a tabletop. Anxiety, even panic arises as the jar tips. The quality of the experience depends on how many marbles there were to begin with, how far they scatter, or if they drop off the edge of the table, and how many the experiencer is able to gather and put back into the jar. I consider interrupting or stopping a difficult session as akin to preventing the journeyer from collecting all of the marbles. Maybe the jar gets bigger, so a few new marbles can fit inside. Maybe the shapes and colors become more satisfying in their new configuration. For the lucky individuals who have the experience in a supportive set and setting, ego death can be like dumping out dull, dusty (or scratched) marbles and replacing them with dazzling new ones!”

Lovely. I am certain that many of us have lost our marbles at one time or another, and one way for us to re-collect them has been to find a method or a conduit for all that energy. Alan Watts said that the intense psychedelic experience can be like “too much current for the wire.” So we meditate, or practice yoga, as a means to handle, or to be in the present with, all of this energy.

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There are many methods and tools to realize this mystical state of mind which, in Zen Buddhist terms is described as a state of no-mind. The mind inherently objectifies thereby creating separation from the one or the Tao. The venerable Rinzai Zen teacher Joshu Sasaki Roshi has stated that, “The greatest sin is the objectification of God” and is really separation from the self.

There are many similarities between the so-called spiritual path to enlightenment and the psychedelic experience of ego death. In his book *History of LSD Therapy*, eminent psychiatrist and pioneering psychedelic researcher Stanislav Grof describes ego death in the context of psychedelic use, “The main objective of psychedelic therapy is to create optimal conditions for the subject to experience the ego death and the subsequent transcendence into the so-called psychedelic peak experience. It is an ecstatic state, characterized by the loss of boundaries between the subject and the objective world, with ensuing feelings of unity with other people, nature, the entire universe and God...in most instances this experience is accompanied by visions of brilliant white or golden light, rainbow spectra or elaborate designs resembling peacock feathers. LSD subjects give various descriptions of this condition ...They speak about cosmic unity, unio mystica, mysterium tremendum, cosmic consciousness, union with God, Atman-Brahman union, Samadhi, satori, moksha, or the harmony of the spheres.”

At the core of this discussion is the debate between a spiritual path or practice vs. the psychedelic option. “Why do you need the drug or medicine?” is a common exhortation from the spiritual camp. “Because it works” comes the response from the psychedelic side! Psychedelic pioneer and spiritual teacher Ram Dass said, “Psychedelics can’t give you a permanent spiritual immersion, but they can give faith about the existence of these other planes and you need faith as a foundation for spiritual practice...so psychedelics can open doors, and if later you want to revisit these spiritual planes, having had such experiences will make it easier.”



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To paraphrase ethnobotanist and psychedelic leprechaun/raconteur Terence McKenna, “You’ve got to eat the whole enchilada.” In other words halfway measures won’t cut it in the quest for the holy grail of transcendence. Terence would question those who would try and realize this state “on the natch” (without psychedelics) and drew a qualitative line between chanting mantras and long deep periods of meditation compared with the occasionally dangerous dancing with the psychedelic cosmic serpent. In a similar vein, McKenna would arch an incredulous eyebrow at recreational or low- dose ingestion of psychedelic medicines with the riposte that, “if you haven’t experienced some terror you haven’t taken enough!”

As a researcher into the efficacy of the root-bark of the Iboga plant in the treatment of addiction, and an occasional explorer into the realms of the unknown—be it through zazen (sitting meditation), high-altitude mountaineering (literal peak-experiences), or through the intentional use of psychedelic medicines—I have come to realize that the sine qua non of ego death or transcendence is the journey itself. One cannot drink the word water! The need for objective, comprehensive, and (well-funded) rigorous science has never been more important, but as psychologist and former director of the Esalen Institute, the late Julian Silverman would say, “GOOD RESEARCH IS ME-SEARCH.” This journey is an unfolding. It is the act of losing oneself in the process of finding oneself. In my own experience this magical merging with the moment has not only been parenthetical and relatively rare, but oh so sweet!

There is so much we do not understand about the ephemeral process of ego death. So, we have asked more questions than we have answered! We have only scratched the surface in these few paragraphs, analogous to stuffing an elephant into my Toyota! Wishing you all Happy Trails and may your search reveal the crystalline mysteries within! •