Frontiers of Consciousness Exploration: Perspectives from Psilocybin Research

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  • Therapsil, Victoria
Psilocybin

Found in approximately 200 species of mushrooms on our planet
Successfully synthesized for use in research and medical treatment
Long history of religious and medical use—at least from 5500 BC
Safe physical profile
Psychologically safe for most persons when used in accordance with current knowledge of set and setting
6-hour duration of action
When competently administered, a safe and reliably effective tool in the exploration of human consciousness and psychotherapeutic treatment.
FOUR FUNDAMENTAL UNDERSTANDINGS ON THE PRESENT FRONTIER OF KNOWLEDGE

1. MAJOR PSYCHEDELICS PROVIDE ACCESS TO A VAST SPECTRUM OF DIFFERENT ALTERNATIVE STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS; IT MAKES LITTLE SENSE TO REFER TO “THE PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE”
Basic Varieties of Psychedelic Experiences

- Changes in Sensory Perception; Intriguing, but often meaningless mental imagery

- Panic, Paranoia, Confusion

- Personal Psychodynamic Content (Age-Regression, Confrontation of Guilt, Grief, Anger, Interpersonal Conflicts, Life Traumas and Potential Healing/Resolution)

- Awe-Inspiring Visions and Encounters with Archetypes (Gods & Goddesses, Precious Gemstones, Vast Landscapes, Ancient Civilizations, Vistas of the Cosmos)

- Unitive-Mystical Consciousness (Ego-Death & Rebirth)
Zen Ox-Herding Metaphor

• Searching for the Ox
• Finding the footprints of the Ox
• First sighting of the Ox
• Approaching the Ox
• Dialoguing with the Ox
• Struggling with the Ox
• Taming and Riding the Ox
• Becoming the Ox
• No Ox; No You (Unitive Awareness)
• Riding the Ox back home (to chop wood & carry water in the marketplace)
FOUR FUNDAMENTAL UNDERSTANDINGS ON THE PRESENT FRONTIER OF KNOWLEDGE

1. Major psychedelics provide access to a vast spectrum of different alternative states of consciousness.

2. THERE ARE THREE FACTORS OF CRITICAL IMPORTANCE:
   - A. SUPPORTIVE SET
   - B. SUPPORTIVE SETTING
   - C. APPROPRIATE DOSAGE
SET

• Unconditional Trust
  • Devotion, Interpersonal Grounding

• Choice “Leap of Faith”

• Openness, Honesty, Curiosity

• Courage
  • To Explore, Confront, Suffer, Learn, Receive
  • To Relinquish Control; To allow experiencing beyond the limits of usual cognition and “understanding”
• Aushadi “the most powerful and rapid method of awakening”, using “specific herbs” that “can bring about either partial or full awakening”

• (“not like drugs such as marijuana, LSD & so on”)

“Only with “a guru or qualified guide”

• Satyananda Saraswati, Kundalini Tantra (1984)
SETTING

• Physical/Environmental
  • Safe
  • Confidential
  • Aesthetically Supportive
    • Comfortable Furnishings
    • Skilled Choice of Music

• Interpersonal
  • Empathic, Respectful, Genuine
  • Focused, Non-Anxious, Competent
DOSAGE

• INFLUENCED BY PSYCHOLOGICAL RESISTANCE/CAPACITY TO MANIFEST TRUST, COURAGE AND OPENNESS

• THRESHOLD FOR TRANSCENDENTAL EXPERIENCES

• ENDOGENOUS DMT?
FOUR FUNDAMENTAL UNDERSTANDINGS ON THE PRESENT FRONTIER OF KNOWLEDGE

- 1. Major psychedelics provide access to a vast spectrum of different alternative states of consciousness.
- 2. There are three factors of critical importance: supportive set, supportive setting and appropriate dosage.
- 3. DIFFERENT MAJOR PSYCHEDELIC SUBSTANCES APPEAR TO PROVIDE ACCESS TO A SIMILAR IF NOT IDENTICAL RANGE OF EXPERIENTIAL CONTENT (NOT “IN THE DRUG” BUT “IN THE HUMAN MIND”)
• Particular molecules in specified dosage do not appear to “cause” the experiencing of specific mental content.

• Major psychedelics (Psilocybin, LSD, DMT, DPT, Mescaline) appear to provide access to existing psychological/spiritual processes and knowledge.

• Illustrative hypothesis: No more panthers or anacondas are to be encountered with ayahuasca than with other major psychedelics.
Psychedelics one of many tools/adjuncts in accessing non-ordinary states of consciousness

- Meditative disciplines/Focused attention & breath control
- Sensory isolation and flooding
- Natural childbirth
- Exceptional sexual experiences
- Immersion in artistic performance
- Immersion in athletic feats
- “Spontaneous experiences”; naturally-synthesized DMT?
- (All may entail physiological changes & biochemical processes)
FOUR FUNDAMENTAL UNDERSTANDINGS ON THE PRESENT FRONTIER OF KNOWLEDGE

1. Major psychedelics provide access to a vast spectrum of different alternative states of consciousness.

2. There are three factors of critical importance: supportive set, supportive setting and appropriate dosage.

3. Different major psychedelic substances appear to provide access to a similar, if not identical, range of experiential content.

4. WHEN ADMINISTERED IN ACCORDANCE WITH PRESENT KNOWLEDGE, MEANINGFUL PROCESSES (ENTELECHY) BECOME SAFELY MANIFESTED.
Steppenwolf
This [magic] theatre has as many doors into as many boxes as you please, ten or a hundred or a thousand, and behind each door exactly what you seek awaits you. ... *Steppenwolf*
SUPPORT FOR SAFETY WHEN PSYCHEDELICS ARE COMPETENTLY ADMINISTERED

• Although specific phenomenology cannot be known in advance, it is no longer reasonable to consider the content that becomes manifested in a particular well-conducted psychedelic session as “unpredictable”, “random”, “capricious” or “dangerous.” When interpersonally grounded within a supportive set and setting, the emotions and symbolic processes experienced tend to be intrinsically meaningful and therapeutic, often indicating a creative choreography or entelechy within consciousness.
THREE BASIC ORIENTATIONS IN PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC TREATMENT

• Psycholytic (Focus on Jungian “Personal Unconscious”)

• Psychedelic (Focus on Jungian “Collective Unconscious” and beyond)

• Psychodelytic (Both/And)
• Regression/reliving of traumatic and/or life-supporting memories

• Catharsis/intense expression of fear, chronic sadness, unresolved grief, guilt, or anger; often resolving into experiences of insight, compassion, forgiveness of self & others, laughter, joy, love and inner peace

• New perspectives on interpersonal relationships

• Significant intensification and acceleration of psychodynamic processes
TRANSCENDENTAL FORMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

• VISIONARY/ARCHETYPAL EXPERIENCES

• UNITIVE-MYSTICAL CONSCIOUSNESS
DEFINITIONS OF
VISIONARY/ARCHETYPAL EXPERIENCES AND MYSTICAL CONSCIOUSNESS
Archetypal/Visionary Experiences

• Visionary Art & Architecture
  • Geometric Patterns/Mandalas, Fractals
  • Gothic Arches/Islamic Domes
  • Gemstones and Precious Metals

• Visionary Landscapes
  • Different Historical Periods, Countries, Civilizations

• Visions of Gods & Goddesses
  • The Christ, Buddha & Bodhisattvas, Shiva/Vishnu, Quan Yin/Virgin Mary/Fatima Zahra
Quan Yin
Alex Grey’s “Christ”
THE NATURE
AND DEFINITION OF
MYSTICAL CONSCIOUSNESS
A Definition of Mystical Consciousness

• 1 Unity
• 2 Transcendence of Time & Space
• 3 Intuitive Knowledge
• 4 Sacredness
• 5 Deeply-Felt Positive Mood
• 6 Ineffability & Paradoxicality
Mystical Consciousness

• Called by many names:
  • Major Peak Experiences (Abraham Maslow)
  
  • “Scientific Terms”: Mystical-type Experiences, Non-dual Experiences
  
  • Philosophical Terms: Transcendental Awareness; the Numinous; the Ground of Being; the One; The Ground Luminosity of Pure Awareness; the Void that Contains All Reality; the Nameless
  
  • Cosmic Consciousness (R.M. Bucke)
  
  • Source of the “Perennial Philosophy” (Aldous Huxley)
  
  • Trigger of “Quantum Change” (William Miller)
  
  • Enlightenment, “Waking Up”
Terms for “Mystical Consciousness” in World Religions

**Christianity:** The Beatific Vision

**Islam:** Baqua wa Fana

**Judaism:** Sekhel Mufla

**Taoism:** Wu wei

**Hinduism:** Moksha, Samadhi

**Buddhism:** Nirvana, Celestial Buddha Fields, The Pure Land, Satori
Walter Pahnke
1931-1971
1. Unity
   - Internal Unity
   - External Unity
Walter Houston Clark
1902-1994
• 1. Unity

• 2. Transcendence of Time & Space
• 1. Unity
• 2. Transcendence of Time & Space
• 3. Intuitive Knowledge
William James
1842-1910

The Noetic Quality
Intuitive Knowledge
Common Noetic Insights

The Reality of God (Transcendence)
The Relativity of Time
The Indestructibility of Consciousness (Immortality)
The Spiritual Interconnectedness of Humankind
The Absoluteness of Beauty
The Primacy of Love
The Wisdom and Entelechy of the Psyche
Intensity of Intuitive Validation

“Once you’ve seen, you can’t unsee” (Jeremy Narby)
• 1. Unity
• 2. Transcendence of Time & Space
• 3. Intuitive Knowledge
• 4. Sacredness
• 1. Unity
• 2. Transcendence of Time & Space
• 3. Intuitive Knowledge
• 4. Sacredness
• 5. Deeply-Felt Positive Mood
• 1. Unity
• 2. Transcendence of Time & Space
• 3. Intuitive Knowledge
• 4. Sacredness
• 5. Deeply-Felt Positive Mood
• 6. Ineffability & Paradoxicality
Possible Factors in Ineffability

- Inadequate vocabulary; need for words that don’t exist yet.
- Structure of language itself
- Paradoxical nature of experiences
- Awe: Tyutchev: “A word that’s spoken is a lie.”
- Tao te Ching: “Those who speak do not know; those who know do not speak.”
• 1. Unity
• 2. Transcendence of Time & Space
• 3. Intuitive Knowledge
• 4. Sacredness
• 5. Deeply-Felt Positive Mood
• 6. Ineffability & Paradoxicality
THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS THAT INCLUDE VISIONARY AND MYSTICAL FORMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

- Sigmund Freud/Romain Rolland: “The Oceanic Feeling”
  “something else wrapped in obscurity”

- Carl Jung: “The Transcendent Function”
  “The Collective Unconscious”

- Karl Jaspers: “Transcendence” & “The Unconditioned Imperative”

- Wilfred Bion: “O” & “The Deep and Formless Infinite”
VISIONARY AND MYSTICAL INSIGHTS

• ONTOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE OR DELUSION?

• PRAGMATIC EVALUATION?
  • WILLIAM JAMES “BY THEIR FRUITS YE SHALL KNOW THEM”
WHAT GOOD ARE TRANSCENDENTAL EXPERIENCES?

• NO CERTIFICATION OF SAINTHOOD; NEW KNOWLEDGE AND PERSPECTIVES OFTEN AWAIT FURTHER INTEGRATION
• CHANGES IN SELF-CONCEPT AND SELF-WORTH INCLUDING NEW UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE SELF TO OTHERS AND TO THE UNIVERSE
• ENHANCED SENSE OF BELONGING AND INTERCONNECTEDNESS; LOSS OF ESTRANGEMENT
• CERTAINTY OF ACCEPTANCE, FORGIVENESS AND THE FREEDOM TO CHANGE BEHAVIOR
• ENHANCED AESTHETIC & ECOLOGICAL SENSITIVITY/APPRECIATION
• LOSS OF FEAR OF DEATH
• PURE AWE AT BEAUTY AND THE MIRACLE OF LIFE ITSELF
  (Life as a gift; “One precious human life”)
DATA SUPPORTIVE OF THE UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION OF MYSTICAL CONSCIOUSNESS


FRONTIERS IN PSYCHEDELIC RESEARCH

- **Investigation of efficacy of different styles of psychotherapy that utilize psychedelic substances in the treatment of different forms of psychological distress**

- **Continuing exploration of biochemical, neuro-imaging and other psychophysiological correlates of various alternative states of consciousness**

- **Experiential education for mental health providers and religious leaders**

- **Study of the potential value of psychedelics for healthy persons in terms of psychological/spiritual development and facilitation of creativity**

- **Progress in deciphering the mystery of consciousness**
Abraham Maslow
1908 - 1970
“The view that all mental processes are necessarily physical processes is a metaphysical assumption, not a scientific fact.” (The Universe in a Single Atom)

--Tenzin Gyatzo, The 14th Dalai Lama (Born 1935)
Karl Jaspers
1883-1969

“Man is more than he knows or ever can know about himself.”
Pierre Teilhard de Chardin
1881 - 1955

“We are spiritual beings currently having human experiences”
• Teilhard as Scientist (Paleontologist)
  • The Phenomenon of Man
  • The Future of Man

• Teilhard as Mystic (Jesuit)
  • The Divine Milieu
  • Hymn of the Universe
Illustrative Session Report
54-year old, male cancer patient

• It’s difficult to find a starting point to describe a journey into a timeless realm, one that is outside all physical reality as we know it. . .

• I took the psilocybin capsule, and began to wait to see what would happen. . . . twenty minutes after taking the capsule, the initial effects began with a shift in spatial awareness. . . . Once I moved to lying down on the couch and had the eye shades in place, visual patterns quickly appeared. . . . With the psilocybin effects rapidly expanding, it brought increased physical awareness of my senses. My skin sensitivity, hearing and felt perception of the room expanded tenfold, and I had a mild metallic taste in my mouth. . . . time seemed to slow down. . . .
The effects of the psilocybin began to intensify and my sense of self-awareness expanded, pulling me inward in a swirling vortex of iridescent light. This swirling light formed into precise geometric patterns and shapes, each in exact form that kept repeating into another, forming tunnels that slowly spiraled inward ever smaller. The individual lines of each tunnel were made of perfect clear geodesic like spheres, colored in phosphorescent greens, blues and red hues. Putting my attention on one of these spheres, it was formed by continuous chains of smaller spheres that kept repeating and folding down, ever smaller into more perfect fractals of the same original precise shaped patterns. I followed the swirling lighted chained spheres downward and at the same time outward into an expanding field of timeless existence.
This experience continued to grow and deepen... I soon found the need to keep relaxing more to a much deeper level in different parts of my body... Just when I felt relaxed and moved deeper into the experience, I realized it wasn’t the final level of relaxation... The thought ‘relax’ would occur, and again and the process would repeat all over, sinking deeper within... I repeated this ebb and flow outward and back inward until my conscious awareness of physical reality completely faded and I was adrift in a cosmic sea of unlimited time and space, a vast expanse of eternal oneness, filled with soft colors and a unique sound that defies description.
Once I had entered this timeless realm, my awareness of self remained, yet took on a complete detachment from my physical mind/body connection. It is very difficult to form the experience into words, but it is a point of view of the true self without ego. A state of one’s complete self-awareness or self-realization, what soul consciousness must be but cannot be described. It is a total connection with the universe and complete understanding of the true nature of our existence. It is a state of awareness that is beyond description, profound, yet one has a deep knowingness that it is our true reality. There is a deep connection with this reality, one that you have always known but just needed this moment to remember the eternal truth of this fact.
After remaining immersed in this infinite pool of divine presence with the realization of true self, thoughts began to flow back into my mind. First joy and happiness over flowed me, and I had to share out loud saying “Bill, I remember, I remember now”. Thoughts continued and it brought me to question why we chose to take this form of physical reality to live in. A physical world filled with pain and suffering, that is completely unnecessary if we only awakened to our true self. Our lives are spent exerting enormous time and energy on meaningless activities. We live in a state of illusion that acts as a prison for the true self, for we have forgotten who we actually are. There was a sense of sadness to this fact, but I sensed that this was the form or matrix that can offer lessons too. . . .A wave of compassion flowed outward towards the collective consciousness of humanity, seemingly trapped in the state of obscurity from truth.
• What I am left with is no sense of self importance, just the deep presence of a connectedness between all things. We are all just part of the whole, this reality that makes up our vast universe, which is beyond description and must be experienced to be fully understood.

• To conclude, the exposure to psilocybin is something that needs to be experienced by more people, but only under the right circumstances. The therapeutic and social benefit has enormous potential. But it has to be approached with deep sincerity and a sense of reverence, never for recreational purposes. I believe when you approach the session with sacred intent, profound experiences can happen. It can change your view of life in ways that defy explanation. . . . ....You know that you know.
Here and Now: Immediate Focus

• Continue to design and implement well-crafted research projects.

• Respectfully communicate with professional colleagues, the FDA and EMA, and the culture at large.

• If data support it, facilitate the reclassification of psilocybin off of Schedule 1/Class A.

• Provide for the training and certification of facilitators/researchers to integrate psychedelics into our culture in safe and effective ways.

• Ensure Medicare and other insurance coverage for all persons who may benefit from interventions with psilocybin, notably those with limited financial resources who are struggling with addictions, depression and anxiety.


