

## A Psychedelic Experience - Fact or Fantasy?

Written by Alan W. Watts

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**Alan Watts**

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Since at least 1500 B.C. men have, from time to time, held the view that our normal vision of the world is a hallucination—a dream, a figment of the mind, or, to use the Hindu word which means both art and illusion, a *maya*. The implication is that, if this is so, life need never be taken seriously. It is a fantasy, a play, a drama to be enjoyed. It does not really

*matter*

, for one day (perhaps in the moment of death) the illusion will dissolve, and each one of us will awaken to discover that he himself is

*what*

there is and

*all*

that there is—the very root and ground of the universe, or the ultimate and eternal space in which things and events come and go.

This is not simply an idea which someone "thought up," like science fiction or a philosophical theory. It is the attempt to express an experience in which consciousness itself, the basic sensation of being "I," undergoes a remarkable change. We do not know much about these experiences. They are relatively common, and arise in every part of the world. They occur to both children and adults. They may last for a few seconds and come once in a lifetime, or they may happen repeatedly and constitute a permanent change of consciousness. With baffling impartiality they may descend upon those who never heard of them, as upon those who have spent years trying to cultivate them by some type of discipline. They have been regarded, equally, as a disease of consciousness with symptoms everywhere the same, like measles, and as a vision of higher reality such as comes in moments of scientific or psychological insight. They may turn people into monsters and megalomaniacs, or transform them into saints and sages. While there is no sure way of inducing these experiences, a favorable atmosphere may be created by intense concentration, by fasting, by sensory deprivation, by hyper-oxygenation, by prolonged emotional stress, by profound relaxation, or by the use of certain drugs.

Experiences of this kind underlie some of the great world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism in particular, and, to a much lesser extent, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As expressed in the doctrines of these religions, they purport to be an account of "the way things are" and therefore invite comparison with descriptions of the universe and of man given by physicists and biologists. They contradict common sense so violently and are accompanied with such a powerful sense of authenticity and reality (*more* real than reality is a common description) that men have always wondered whether they are divine revelations or insidious delusions.

This problem becomes all the more urgent now that the general public has become aware that experiences of this type are available, with relative ease, through the use of such chemicals as

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---

the so-called psychedelic drugs—LSD-25, mescaline, psilocybin, hashish, and marijuana, to name only the better known. The reality status of the modes of consciousness induced by these chemicals becomes, then, a matter of most serious concern for the guardians of our mental health, for psychiatrists and psychologists, philosophers and ministers, for every scientific investigator of the nature of consciousness, and, above all, for a large section of the general public curious and eager to get "the experience" for reasons of all kinds.

A proper study of the question runs, at the very beginning, into two obstacles. The first is that we know very little indeed about the structure and chemistry of the brain. We do not know enough of the ways in which it gleans information about the outside world and about itself to know whether these chemicals help it (as lenses help the eyes) or confuse it. The second is that the nature and use of these chemicals is surrounded with an immense semantic fog, whose density is increased by people who ought to know better. I mean psychiatrists.

What we know, positively and scientifically, about psychedelic chemicals is that they bring about certain alterations of sense perception, of emotional level and tone, of identity feeling, of the interpretation of sense data, and of the sensations of time and space. The nature of these alterations depends on three variables: the chemical itself (type and dosage), the psycho-physiological state of the subject, and the social and aesthetic context of the experiment. Their physiological side effects are minimal, though there are conditions (e.g., disease of the liver) in which some of them may be harmful. They are not physiologically habit-forming in the same way as alcohol and tobacco, though some individuals may come to depend upon them for other (i.e., "neurotic") reasons. Their results are not easily predictable since they depend so largely upon such imponderables as the setting, and the attitudes and expectations of both the supervisor and the subject. The (enormous) scientific literature on the subject indicates that a majority of people have pleasant reactions, a largish minority have unpleasant but instructive and helpful reactions, while a very small minority have psychotic reactions lasting from hours to months. It has never been definitely established that they have led directly to a suicide. (I am referring specifically here to LSD-25, mescaline, the mushroom derivative psilocybin, and the various forms of *cannabis*, such as hashish and marijuana.)

Thus what we know for certain implies that these chemicals cannot be used without caution. But this applies equally to antibiotics, whiskey, household ammonia, the automobile, the kitchen knife, electricity, and matches. No worthwhile life can be lived without risks, despite current American superstitions to the contrary—as that passing laws can prevent people from being immoral and that technological power can be made foolproof. The question is therefore whether the risks involved in using these chemicals are worthwhile, and it seems to me that what is worthwhile should be judged not only in terms of useful known edge or therapeutic effect, but also in terms of simple pleasure. (I have heard addiction to music described in just the same vocabulary as addiction to drugs.) If it turns out that psychedelics offer valid ways of exploring man's "inner world," the hidden ways of the mind and brain, we should surely admit that new knowledge of this inmost frontier may be worth quite serious risks. Psychoses and compulsive delusions are, after all, no more dangerous than the Indians and the mountain ranges that stood in the way of the first settlers of the American West.

Psychiatrists often wonder why colleagues in other branches of medicine and specialists in other fields of science do not take them quite seriously. A typical reason may be found in their haste to define the nature and effects of these chemicals in terms which are simply prejudicial, and which boil down to nothing more than gobbledygook with an authoritative rumble. For example, the chemicals in question are commonly classified as "hallucinogenics" or

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---

"psychotomimetics." The first word means that they generate hallucinations, and the second that their effects resemble, or mimic, certain forms of psychosis or insanity. Only rarely do they give the impression of events in the external world which are not actually happening (i.e., hallucinations) and the ten-year-old notion that they induce "model psychoses" such as temporary schizophrenia has long been abandoned by those who are still in active research. But even if these findings were to be contested, the words "hallucination" and "psychosis" are loaded: they designate *bad* states of mind, whereas a clean scientific language should say only that these chemicals induce different and unusual states of mind.

It is almost a standard joke that psychiatry has pejorative or "put-down" words for every human emotion, as "euphoric" for happy, "fixated" for interested, and "compulsive" for determined. The discussion of psychedelic chemicals, both in the scientific literature and the public press, is thoroughly swamped with question-begging language of this kind in articles that purport to be impartial and authoritative. Right from the start the very word "drug," when used in this connection, evokes the socially reprehensible image of people who are "drugged" or "doped"—glassy-eyed, staggering, or recumbent wrecks of humanity, withdrawn from reality into a diabolical paradise of bizarre or lascivious dreams. The image of the Fu Manchu opium den, with screaming meemies at the end of the line.

Thus it is most common to find the action of psychedelics called "toxic" (i.e., poisonous), and the sensory and emotional changes induced referred to as "distortions," "delusive mechanisms," "dissociations," and "regressions," or as "loss of ego structure" and "abnormal perception of body image." This is the language of pathology. Used without explicit qualification, it implies that a consciousness so changed is sick. Likewise, when—in the context of a scientific article—the writer reports, "Subjects experienced religious exaltation, and some described sensations of being one with God," and leaves it at that, the implication is plainly that they went crazy. For in our own culture, to feel that you are God is insanity almost by definition. But, in Hindu culture, when someone says, "I have just found out that I am God," they say, "Congratulations! You at last got the point." Obviously, the word "God" does not mean the same thing in both cultures. Yet psychiatrists toss off such utterly damning remarks without scruple, and feel free to use their diagnostic jargon of mental pathology for states of consciousness which many of them have never even bothered to experience. For they expect to get accurate information about these states from subjects untrained in scientific description, fearing that if they themselves entered into any new mode of consciousness it would impair their scientific objectivity. This is pure scholasticism, as when the theologians said to Galileo, "We will not look through your telescope because we already know how the universe is ordered. If your telescope were to show us anything different, it would be an instrument of the devil."

Similarly, so many practitioners of the inexact sciences (e.g., psychology, anthropology, sociology) let it be known most clearly that they already know what reality is, and therefore what sanity is. For these poor drudges reality is the world of non-party: it is the reduction of the physical universe to the most banal and desiccated terms conceivable, in accordance with the great Western myth that all nature outside the human skin is a stupid and unfeeling mechanism. There is a sort of "official psychiatry" of the army, state mental hospital, and of what, in California, they call "correctional facility" (i.e., prison), which defends this impoverished reality with a strange passion.

To come, then, to any effective evaluation of these chemicals and the changed states of consciousness and perception which they induce, we must begin with a highly detailed and accurate description of what they do, both from the standpoint of the subject and of the neutral

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---

observer, despite the fact that in experiments of this kind it becomes startlingly obvious that the observer cannot be neutral, and that the posture of "objectivity" is itself one of the determinants of the outcome. As the physicist well knows, to observe a process is to change it. But the importance of careful description is that it may help us to understand the kind or level of reality upon which these changes in consciousness are taking place.

For undoubtedly they are happening. The dancing, kaleidoscopic arabesques which appear before closed eyes are surely an observation of *some* reality, though not, perhaps, in the physical world outside the skin. But are they rearranged memories? Structures in the nervous system? Archetypes of the collective unconscious? Electronic patterns such as often dance on the TV screen? What, too, are the fern-like structures which are so often seen—the infinitude of branches upon branches upon branches, or analogous shapes? Are these a glimpse of some kind of analytical process in the brain, similar to the wiring patterns in a computer? We really have no idea, but the more carefully observers can record verbal descriptions and visual pictures of these phenomena, the more likely that neurologists or physicists or even mathematicians will turn up the physical processes to which they correspond. The point is that these visions are not mere imagination, as if there had ever been anything mere about imagination. The human mind does not just perversely invent utterly useless images out of nowhere at all. Every image tells us something about the mind or the brain or the organism in which it is found.

The effects of the psychedelics vary so much from person to person and from situation to situation that it is well nigh impossible to say with any exactitude that they create certain particular and invariable changes of consciousness. I would not go so far as to say that the chemical effects are simply featureless, providing no more than a vivid mirror to reflect the fantasies and unconscious dispositions of the individuals involved. For there are certain types of change which are usual enough to be considered characteristic of psychedelics: the sense of slowed or arrested time, and the alteration of "ego boundary"—that is, of the sensation of one's own identity.

The feeling that time has relaxed its pace may, to some extent, be the result of having set aside the better part of a day just to observe one's own consciousness, and to watch for interesting changes in one's perception of such ordinary things as reflected sunlight on the floor, the grain in wood, the texture of linen, or the sound of voices across the street. My own experience has never been of a distortion of these perceptions, as in looking at oneself in a concave mirror. It is rather that every perception becomes—to use a metaphor—more resonant. The chemical seems to provide consciousness with a sounding box, or its equivalent, for all the senses, so that sight, touch, taste, smell, and imagination are intensified like the voice of someone singing in the bathtub.

The change of ego boundary sometimes begins from this very resonance of the senses. The intensification and "deepening" of color, sound and texture lends them a peculiar transparency. One seems to be aware of them more than ever as vibration, electronic and luminous. As this feeling develops it appears that these vibrations are continuous with one's own consciousness and that the external world is in some odd way inside the mindbrain. It appears, too, with overwhelming obviousness, that the inside and the outside do not exclude one another and are not actually separate. They go together; they imply one another, like front and back, in such a way that they become polarized. As, therefore, the poles of a magnet are the extremities of a single body, it appears that the inside and the outside, the subject and the object, the self and the world, the voluntary and the involuntary, are the poles of a single process which is my real

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---

and hitherto unknown self. This new self has no location. It is not something like a traditional soul, using the body as a temporary house. To ask *where* it is, is like asking where the universe is. Things in space have a where, but the thing that space is in doesn't need to be anywhere. It is simply what there is, just plain basic isness!

How easily, then, an unsophisticated person might exclaim, "I have just discovered that I am God!" Yet if, during such an experience, one retains any critical faculties at all, it will be clear that anyone else in the same state of consciousness will also be God. It will be clear, too, that the "God" in question is not the God of popular theology, the Master Technician who controls, creates, and understands everything in the universe. Were it so, a person in this state should be able to give correct answers to all questions of fact. He would know the exact height of Mount Whitney in millimeters. On the other hand, this awareness of a deeper and universal self would correspond exactly with that other type of God which mystics have called the "divine ground" of the universe, a sort of intelligent and superconscious space containing the whole cosmos as a mirror contains images... though the analogy fails in so far as it suggests something immense: we cannot picture sizelessness.

Anyone moving into completely unfamiliar territory may at first misunderstand and misinterpret what he sees, as is so evident from the first impressions of visitors to foreign lands where patterns of culture differ radically from their own. When Europeans depicted their first impressions of China, they made the roofs of houses exaggeratedly curly and people's eyes slanted at least 45 degrees from the horizontal. Contrariwise, the Japanese saw all Europeans as red-haired, sunken-eyed goblins with immensely long noses. But the unfamiliarities of foreign cultures are nothing to those of one's own inner workings. What is there in the experience of clear blue sky to suggest the structure of the optical nerves? Comparably, what is there in the sound of a human voice on the radio to suggest the formations of tubes and transistors? I raise this question because it is obvious that any chemically induced alteration of the nervous system must draw the attention of that system to itself. I am not normally aware that the sensation of blue sky is a state of the eyes and brain, but if I see wandering spots that are neither birds nor flying saucers, I know that these are an abnormality within the optical system itself. In other words, I am enabled, by virtue of this abnormality, to become conscious of one of the instruments of consciousness. But this is most unfamiliar territory.

Ordinarily, we remain quite unaware of the fact that the whole field of vision with its vast multiplicity of colors and shapes is a state of affairs inside our heads. Only eyes within a nervous system within a whole biological organism can translate the particles and/or waves of the physical world into light, color, and form, just as only the skin of a drum can make a moving hand go "Boom!" Psychedelics induce subtle alterations of perception which make the nervous system aware of itself, and the individual suddenly and unaccustomedly becomes conscious of the external world as a state of his own body. He may even go so far as to feel a confusion between what other people and things are doing, on the one hand, and his own volition, on the other. The particular feeling, or "cue," attached to thoughts and actions normally understood to be voluntary may then be attached to what is ordinarily classified as involuntary. (Similarly, in *de ja vu*

or "hasn't-this-happened-before?" experiences, perceptions of the immediate here and now come through with the cue or signal usually attached to memories.)

Under such circumstances the naive observer might well take these impressions so literally as to feel that the universe and his own body are *in fact* one and the same, that he is willing everything that happens, and that he is indeed the God of populartheology. If that were all, the

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---

psychedelics might certainly be dismissed as hallucinogens. We might conclude that they merely confuse the "wiring" of the nervous system in such a way that volition or "I-am-doing-this" signals get mixed up with messages about the external world.

Yet the problem cannot be set aside so simply. Let us suppose that a biologist wants to make a very detailed and accurate description of the behavior of some particular organism, perhaps of a sea bird feeding on the beach. He will be unable to describe the behavior of the bird without also describing the behavior of the water, of the sandworms or shellfish which the bird is eating, of seasonal changes of tide, temperature, and weather, all of which go together with the behavior of the bird. He cannot describe the behavior of the organism without also describing the behavior of its environment. We used to attribute this to the fact that organisms are always reacting to things that happen in their environments, and are even determined by their environments in all that they do. But this is to speak as if things were a collection of perfectly separate billiard balls banging against one another. Today, however, the scientist tends more and more to speak of the behavior of the organism and the behavior of the environment as the behavior of a single "field," somewhat awkwardly named the "organism/environment." Instead of talking about actions and reactions between different things and events, he prefers to speak of transactions. In the transaction of buying and selling, there is no selling unless there is simultaneously buying, and *vice versa*. The relation of organism to environment is also considered a transaction, because it has been found that living creatures exist only in a balanced relationship to one another. The present natural state of this planet "goes with" the existence of human beings, just as buying goes with selling. In any radically different environment, man could survive only by becoming a different type of being.

The implications of this organism/environment relationship are somewhat startling, for what is really being said is this: The entity we are describing is not an organism in an environment; it is a unified field or process, because it is more simple and more convenient to think of what the organism does and what the environment does as a single "behavior." Now substitute for "entity we are describing" the idea of the self. I myself am not just what is bounded by my skin. I myself (the organism) am what my whole environmental field (the universe) is doing. It is, then, simply a convention, a fashion, an arbitrary social institution, to confine the self to some center of decision and energy located within this bag of skin. This is no more than the rule of a particular social game of cops and robbers, that is, of who shall we praise and reward, and who shall we blame and punish? To play this game, we pretend that the origin of actions is something inside each human skin. But only force of long ingrained habit makes it hard to realize that we could define and actually *feel* ourselves to be the total pattern of the cosmos as focussed or expressed *here*. This would be a sense of our identity consistent with the scientific description of man and other organisms. It would involve, too, the sensation that the external world is continuous with and one with our own bodies—a sensation very seriously needed in a civilization where men are destroying their environment by misapplied technology. This is the technology of man's *conquest* of nature, as if the external world were his enemy and not the very matrix in which he is brought forth and sustained. This is the technology of the dust bowls, of polluted air, poisoned streams, chemical chickens, pseudo-vegetables, foam-rubber bread, and the total Los Angelization of man.

Yet how is this long-ingrained sense of insular identity to be overcome? How is twentieth-century man to gain a feeling of his existence consistent with twentieth-century knowledge? We need very urgently to know that we are not strangers and aliens in the physical universe. We were not dropped here by divine whim or mechanical fluke out of some other

## A Psychedelic Experience - Fact or Fantasy?

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---

universe altogether. We did not arrive, like birds on barren branches; we grew out of this world, like leaves and fruit. Our universe "humans" just as a rosebush "flowers." We are living in a world where men all over the planet are linked by an immense network of communications, and where science has made us theoretically aware of our interdependence with the entire domain of organic and inorganic nature. But our ego-feeling, our style of personal identity, is more appropriate to men living in fortified castles.

There seems to me a strong possibility that the psychedelics (as a medicine rather than a diet) may help us to "trigger" a new sense of identity, providing the initial boost to get us out of the habit of restricting "I" to a vague center within the skin. That they make us aware that our whole knowledge of the external world is a state of our own bodies is not a merely technical and trivial discovery. It is the obverse of the fact that our own bodies are functions, or behaviors, of the whole external world. This—at first—weird and mystical sensation of "unity with the cosmos" has been objectively verified. The mystic's subjective experience of his identity with "the All" is the scientist's objective description of ecological relationship, of the organism/environment as a unified field.

Our general failure (over the past three thousand years of human history) to notice the inseparability of things, and to be aware of our own basic unity with the external world, is the result of specializing in a particular kind of consciousness. For we have very largely based culture and civilization on concentrated attention, on using the mind as a spotlight rather than a floodlight, and by this means analyzing the world into separate bits. Concentrated attention is drummed into us in schools; it is essential to the three R's; it is the foundation of all careful thought and detailed description, all high artistic technique and intellectual discipline. But the price we pay for this vision of the world in vivid detail, bit by bit, is that we lose sight of the relationships and unities between the bits. Furthermore, a form of attention which looks at the world bit by bit doesn't have time to examine all possible bits; it has to be programmed (or prejudiced) to look only at *significant* bits, at things and events which are relevant to certain preselected ends—survival, social or financial advancement, and other fixed goals which exclude the possibility of being open to surprises, and to those delights which are extra special because they come without being sought.

In my own experience, which is shared by very many others, the psychedelics expand attention. They make the spotlight of consciousness a floodlight which not only exposes ignored relationships and unities but also brings to light unsuspected details—details normally ignored because of their lack of significance, or their irrelevance to some prejudice of what ought to be. (For example, the tiniest hairs on people's faces and blotchy variations of skin color, not really supposed to be there, become marvelously visible.) There is thus good reason to believe that the psychedelics are the opposite of hallucinogens insofar as they decrease the selectivity of the senses and expose consciousness to events beyond those that are supposed to deserve notice.

Time after time, this unprogrammed mode of attention, looking *at* things without looking *for* things, reveals the unbelievable beauty of the everyday world. Under the influence of programmed attention, our vision of the world tends to be somewhat dusty and drab. This is for the same reason that

*staring*

at things makes them blurred, and that trying to get the utmost out of a particular pleasure makes it something of a disappointment. Intense beauty and intense pleasure are always gratuitous, and are revealed only to senses that are not seeking and straining. For our nerves

## A Psychedelic Experience - Fact or Fantasy?

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---

are not muscles; to push them is to reduce their efficiency.

What, finally, of the strong impression delivered both by the psychedelics and by many forms of mystical experience that the world is in some way an illusion? A difficulty here is that the word "illusion" is currently used pejoratively, as the negative of everything real, serious, important, valuable, and worthwhile. Is this because moralists and metaphysicians are apt to be personality types lacking the light touch? Illusion is related etymologically to the Latin *ludere*, to play, and thus is distinguished from reality as the drama is distinguished from "real life." In Hindu philosophy, the world is seen as a drama in which all the parts—each person, animal, flower, stone, and star—are roles or masks of the one supreme Self, which plays the *lila*

or game of hide and seek with itself for ever and ever, dismembering itself as the Many and remembering itself as the One through endless cycles of time, in the spirit of a child tossing stones into a pond through a long afternoon in summer. The sudden awakening of the mystical experience is therefore the one Self remembering itself as the real foundation of the seemingly individual and separate organism.

Thus the Hindu *maya*, or world illusion, is not necessarily something bad. *Maya* is a complex word signifying the art, skill, dexterity, and cunning of the supreme Self in the exercise of its playful, magical, and creative power. The power of an actor so superb that he is taken in by his own performance. The Godhead amazing itself, getting lost in a maze.

Classical illustrations of *maya* include the apparently continuous circle of fire made by a whirling torch, and of the continuity of time and moving events by the whirring succession of *Asana*, or atomic instants. Physicists use similar metaphors in trying to explain how vibrating wavicles produce the illusion of solid material. The impenetrability of granite, they say, is something like the apparently solid disk made by the blades of an electric fan: it is an intensely rapid motion of the same minute orbits of light that constitute our fingers. Physics and optics have also much to say about the fact that all reality, all existence is a matter of relationship and transaction. Consider the formula

a            b = Rainbow

c

where *a* is the sun, *b* is moisture in the atmosphere, and *c* is an observer, all three being at the same time in a certain angular relationship. Deduct any one term,

*a*, *b*

or

*c*,

or arrange them in positions outside the correct angular relationship, and the phenomenon "rainbow" will not exist. In other words, the actual existence of rainbows depends as much upon creatures with eyes as it depends upon the sun and moisture in the atmosphere. Common sense accepts this in respect to diaphanous things like rainbows which back off into the distance when we try to reach them. But it has great difficulty in accepting the fact that chunky things like apartment buildings and basic things like time and space exist in just the same way—

## A Psychedelic Experience - Fact or Fantasy?

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Thursday, 07 January 2010 17:35 - Last Updated Saturday, 25 December 2010 22:26

---

*only*

in relation to certain structures known as organisms with nervous systems.

Our difficulty in accepting for ourselves so important a part in the actual creation or manifestation of the world comes, of course, from this thorough habituation to the feeling that we are strangers in the universe—that human consciousness is a fluke of nature, that the world is an external object which we confront, that its immense size reduces us to pitiful unimportance, or that geological and astronomical structures are somehow more real (hard and solid?) than organisms. But these are actually mythological images of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—ideas which, for a while, seemed extremely plausible, mostly for the reason that they appeared to be hard-boiled, down to earth and tough-minded, a currently fashionable posture for the scientist. Despite the lag between advanced scientific ideas and the common sense of even the educated public, the mythology of man as a hapless fluke trapped in a mindless mechanism is breaking down. The end of this century may find us, at last, thoroughly at home in our own world, swimming in the ocean of relativity as joyously as dolphins in the water.