

DO DRUGS HAVE RELIGIOUS IMPORT? A 40-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE



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Matters, which won the Wilbur Award for the best book on religion published in 2001. In 1996, Bill Moyers devoted a five-part PBS special to his life and work. His film documentaries on Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Sufism have all won international awards, and *The Journal of Ethnomusicology* lauded his discovery of Tibetan multiphonic chanting as "an important landmark in the study of music."



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GARY BRAVO graduated from Harvard University with a degree in biology and did his medical and psychiatric training at the University of California, Irvine, College of Medicine. While serving there on the clinical faculty, he did research with Drs. Walsh and Grob on the subjective effects of MDMA (Ecstasy) and helped develop the first government-approved research protocol on the clinical effects of MDMA. He has published papers and lectured internationally on psychedelics and is a public psychiatrist practicing in Santa Rosa, California.



ALISE AGAR launched and coordinated numerous conferences on new scientific paradigms, psychedelics, the near-death experience, and nonordinary states of consciousness for Esalen Institute, the Fetzer Institute, Arupa, and the Institute for the Study of Human Consciousness. She was the director of operations for the Institute of Noetic Sciences, director of public relations for two health care organizations, and executive director for the Study of Human Consciousness at Berkeley, California. An extraordinary networker who brought together leading figures from science, religion, psychology, and the arts, she died after a long illness in June 2001.



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Summary

Four decades ago, Huston Smith published one of the most influential articles ever written on psychedelics, titled "Do Drugs Have Religious Import?" As part of "The Oral History of Psychedelic Research Project," he was interviewed and invited to revisit this topic. The interview covers his personal experiences, as well as the influences of psychedelic experiences on religious traditions and contemplative practices. Examples of such influences that are discussed include the ancient Vedic tradition and Eleusinian mysteries, and the contemporary Native American Church. At the social level, he reflects on factors that limited the effectiveness of the psychedelic movement of the 1960s in producing significant social change, the state of contemporary culture, society, and drug policy, and the role of elders in society.

Keywords: *psychedelics; entheogen; religion; mysticism; spirituality; elder; Huston Smith*

When psychedelics exploded on an unsuspecting world in the 1960s, they generated enormous social, cultural, political, and psychological change. They also generated enormous controversy and polarization. A media feeding frenzy, largely driven by superficial sensationalism, soon obscured deeper reflections on the many questions that these curious chemicals raise (Duke & Gross, 1994; Grob, 2002; Lee & Shlain, 1985). This obscuration represents a great loss because psychedelics clearly hold crucial implications for areas as diverse as religion, philosophy, neuroscience, psychology, and society (Roberts, 2001; Smith, 2000; Stolaroff, 1993; Walsh, in press; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

However, considerable research was done and experts turned their attention to understanding the implications of psychedelics (Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1997; Grob, 2002; Grof, 1988). In fact, the range of researchers was remarkable and included psychologists and psychiatrists, biologists and pharmacologists, sociologists and anthropologists, philosophers and theologians, as well as labora-

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tory and clinical scientists (Harner, 1973; Roberts, 2001; Smith, 2000; Tart, 1991; Walsh, in press). In the short span of a decade and a half, they produced thousands of research articles and dozens of books. Yet, when the government clamp-down occurred, even clinical research was banned.

Paradoxically, this makes the surviving early researchers a uniquely valuable group. They had an opportunity, perhaps never to be repeated, to witness firsthand the powerful and mysterious effects, both positive and negative, of these drugs. These surviving researchers therefore make up a unique resource and reservoir of experience and knowledge and, because of their advancing age, are clearly an endangered resource. Recognizing this, in the late 1990s, a group of researchers, funded by the Institute of Noetic Sciences and Fetzer Institute, began interviewing surviving pioneer researchers (Fadiman, Grob, Bravo, Agar, & Walsh, in press; Walsh & Grob, in press).

One of the most eminent of these researchers is Huston Smith, an internationally recognized philosopher and theologian and author of the popular book, *The World's Religions* (Smith, 1991). Huston Smith has had a long-standing interest in the implications of these substances, dating back to his 1963 landmark article, "Do Drugs Have Religious Import?" That article is one of the most famous of all publications on psychedelics and the most reprinted in the history of the *American Journal of Philosophy*. The following interview therefore represents a 40-year retrospective to that article.

INTERVIEW

Huston, you have devoted your life to a study of the great religions. Could you begin by giving a synoptic overview of how you currently view them?

I regard the world's great religions as the winnowed wisdom of the human race—with a lot of dross, of course. One of the things that first attracted me to studying them was the tremendous exuberance of the vision that they hold out for human life. In my own spiritual sadhana practice, I always begin the day—along with meditation and a little yoga—by reading a couple of pages of sacred scripture.

At the moment, I'm working my way through the New Testament. In doing so, I came upon a phrase in *Peter*—a little letter towards the end—the phrase in which he refers to “those things on which angels themselves long to gaze.” Wow! I mean that will do it for the day. Talk about exuberance! And this is what they are aspiring for—a vision that even the angels would give their eye teeth to have. So that is the dominant mood of these traditions.

The mood is not one of denial—in the psychological sense of denial—of the difficulties and evils of life. I just this week came across a definition of denial. It's like thinking that you can see the world better by closing one eye. One of the virtues of the wisdom aspect of the world's great religions—what I call the wisdom traditions—is their realistic awareness of the difficulties, atrocities, and problems along the way. This combination of exuberance and realism is what drew me to them and is the dominant note that I hear sounded in them.

Starting with that broad framing of the wisdom traditions, let's begin to address the question of what relationship the psychedelics or entheogens—and the experiences that they can help to bring about—have had with the wisdom traditions. What role did they play in your life, and what role could they be playing in people's lives?

All right. It sounds like you've asked everything you need to ask in the three parts of that one question. I spoke of the exuberance in these traditions. But they also refer repeatedly to occasions when the validity of this exuberance breaks through on people in unmistakable, undeniable, and life-transforming ways. And it not only breaks through for the people involved directly, but also sometimes for their successors. A primary example would be Gautama the Buddha under the bo-gaha (wisdom tree). After 6 long years of preparation, according to the classic account, one night the heavens finally opened and in came his history-transforming illumination. Then one can go on from that. Jesus came out of the river Jordan at his baptism, and the heavens opened. Then on Mt. Tabor there was the transfiguration, when three of his disciples saw his face shining and his raiment transformed. When St. John was on the Isle of Patmos, again, the same thing happened to him. For Jakob Boehme, the remarkable 17th-century German mystic and

cobbler, it was when he was looking in a pewter dish. In all these cases there's not just news of a different world, but the *experience* of a different world—one is *in* that world.

I fully believed the master accounts in these traditions; I took them on faith. So when the news came that there were techniques for achieving transcendence, well, I was whoring after the Absolute. Nothing could hold me back. And so I broke in my legs in meditation—10 years faithfully. I went to Japan and entered a Zen monastery. But I discovered that experientially I was pretty flatfooted. My wife, Kendra, who was putting up with this obsession of mine, would validate that I gave it everything I had. But I didn't get much off the ground. A little bit, but not very much.

Then Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* came along. I already knew Huxley, having sought him out after reading his book, *The Perennial Philosophy*. He was something of a guru for me at that stage, and when he produced *The Doors of Perception*, I was more than interested.

I was at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at the time, and I played a part in bringing Huxley there for a semester. He arrived at MIT as a distinguished visiting professor of humanities in exactly the same week that Timothy Leary arrived at Harvard University from Berkeley.

Leary had taken his vacation that year in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where he first consumed those seven sacred mushrooms that so strongly influenced his life. Leary had an incredible reputation as an early genius, and he had a dream assignment—three years at the Center for Personality Research at Harvard University with no strings attached. He could turn his creativity in any direction he wanted.

Well, what was burning a hole in his head was the question of what to make of that mushroom experience. He knew, of course, of Huxley's little book, and so it wasn't long before they got together. And since I was volunteering to be Huxley's social secretary, I too eventually met up with Leary.

So on New Year's Day, 1961—quite a way to begin a decade—Kendra and I arrived in Leary's living room. After coffee and pleasantries he produced a vial, shook out some tablets from it, and told us that one tablet was a mild dose, two was a medium dose, three was a heavy dose. I believe these were psilocybin. “Be my guest,” he

said. I took two, while Kendra, more venturesome, took three. After about an hour, I was into the experience that for the previous 15 or 20 years I had been trying to get by other means.

I had no doubt from the start that it was an authentic experience. First of all because it validated experientially my worldview that was already in place. In philosophical parlance, this was the Great Chain of Being which envisions all reality as proceeding that infinity contains within it every virtue. The apex of the Great Chain has been described in various ways. The Hindus call it sat, chit, ananda—infinite being, “the good, the true, the beautiful.” At the apex, everything is smelted down into its vir-

only true mode; because the dross enters as one falls away from this sacred source.

I had no doubt that my experience was valid, because it was retracing exactly what I was convinced was the nature of reality. However, I had not previously experienced the upper echelon personally, and it brought an element of surprise. That’s a confession, because the texts should have prepared me for this surprise, but obviously I sort of passed over that bit. That surprise was the element of fear—or more precisely, awe. Awe, I came to see so clearly, is the distinctive religious emotion because it combines two emotions that otherwise tend to be opposite: fear and fascination.

In awe, you want to move toward the fascination, because this is not only unknown territory but territory that one could not have imagined actually exists. What could be more fascinating than that? So that draws you to it. But on the other hand it’s new territory, and are the natives friendly? Is the ozone atmosphere viable? You don’t know, and so that causes you to hold back. The result is this unique blend of fear and fascination, and I experienced both. The intensity built as I mounted the links of the Great Chain of Being, until I got to the penultimate level—next to the infinite, the Absolute. And there I paused to take a second look at this question, “Do I want to make that final step, or do I not?”

Tim was sort of in the background, observing during the day, but at that moment he was in another part of the building. Kendra was also in a different room, alone. Just as I was debating: “Do I want to take that final step or not?” Tim walked in, pleasantly relaxed, and asked, “How are things going?” I blurted out, “Tim, you better watch out and be aware of what you’re playing with here, because if

I decide to take this final step, you might end up with a corpse on your couch. The emotional intensity is increasing so exponentially that if I take that step, I feel it might be like plugging a toaster into a power line. And then you would have my dead body on your hands.”

“Don’t worry,” I continued. “I have a loving family and I don’t find life intolerable, so I’m not going to take that step. But I want to register this point. I’m well aware that I am under the influence, but that doesn’t in any way undercut what I’m saying. At this moment, it feels very clear to me that if I *do* take this step, it will shatter my physical frame.”

Well, in retrospect, I think I was wrong about that. I’m not aware of reports of any deaths occurring to normally healthy people through these substances. So I think I was mistaken there. But nevertheless, my sentiment rang true to what I was experiencing.

To consider the effect that these substances have had on my life leads to the baffling question of behavior change in general. How do you measure behavior change? And what causes it? If anybody, any psychologist, got a firm grip on those questions—to say their reputation would be made is an understatement! So when I consider my life, I have no idea what it would have been like without these substances. What’s the basis for comparison? There is a saying, “Isn’t life strange?” To which someone replied, “Compared with what?” And it’s a little bit like that, when I’m asked what effects these substances have had on my life. I have no basis for comparison.

But several things are very clear. One of these is that I am immensely grateful that I had that experience, and several others which followed. I must have had a half-dozen—including the Good Friday experiment¹—that were very powerful. After which, the utility seemed to go down quickly and the bummers increased; I had some very negative experiences. So I came to the same conclusion as the Alan Watts admonition: “When you get the message, hang up the phone.” It seemed to me that I’d gotten the message.

In my case I can’t think of any value to these bad trips, except that the spirit bloweth where it listeth—one can get the human spirit under one’s thumb, but it’s like a ball of mercury. One can set up all kinds of precautions—set, setting, and substance—and yet one cannot predict the result. The classic case for me was when Stan Grof was conducting his perfectly legal research at Spring Grove, Maryland. He was flying in people whose accounts he

wanted to accumulate. I was flown in, and maybe I was kind of set up for a fall. I'm not comfortable with this, but I got a little whispering, "Boy, we've really got a big fish here," because I had spent so much time studying the world's mystics and so on. "This is going to be a real blowout!" Well, maybe that in itself was a negative inducement.

And there was another problem: I wanted Kendra to be with me. However, she could not arrive on time; she arrived in midstream, so I felt that we were out of synch. I don't think she took the substance at all in that case. So maybe it was that I was in and she was out. Whatever the reason, it was just 11 hours of cacophony and Indonesian monkey dances and so on. [laughs] It was bad news. But I don't think I learned anything except maybe these little trivia that I've reported.

So I find myself to this day in an intellectually curious situation. I have fallen into the pattern of saying that these experiences comprise one aspect of the three most important experiences of my life. The first one is my marriage and my children. The second, my first trip around the world, where my eyes were opened to this world's phantasmagoria. And then the third aspect is the entheogenic experience, which introduced me to another order of reality—what Carlos Castaneda referred to in the title of one of his books as *A Separate Reality*. This reality was not just separate—although that's very important, as distinct and different—but incredibly more mysterious, more awesome, and more wonderful than "normal" reality. So I'm in this very curious situation, where entheogenic voyages constitute one aspect of the three most important experiences of my life, and yet I have no desire or inclination to repeat the experience.

That's puzzling! I don't think I've gotten to the bottom of it, but I have some reason for not continuing the experiential side of this path. One reason may be that the element of awe includes fear, and so that fear may contribute to my reluctance. A second reason is that I feel like I know where that place is, and I know that it is there. Now the work is to transform the components of my life so that they more approximate that state. Now I have an agenda and that's my job, rather than going on a kind of spiritual R&R of revisiting that land.

I want to qualify that last pejorative, flippant statement of "spiritual R&R," because I think that these experiences can exert a kind

of spiritual gravitational pull on my life. In themselves, they can move one's life toward a spiritual existence.

I was 42 when I came to this, and there were about 3 years that I was involved with it. Three very exciting years at Harvard when there was this nucleus, at first visible, and then increasingly underground as the plot began to thicken. But the nucleus of about 20 people or so would gather once a month pretty regularly to discuss these matters and hang out together. There's a great wish to be with those who know what you're talking about. I had about a half dozen experiences distributed over 3 years, so it wasn't very often. Every 6 months or something like that, in my case. Of course, for others it was very different.

Do you have any theories about groups like the Native American Church that do use an entheogen on a regular basis? Can such use fit into a regular practice for some people, or for some groups?

The experiences occasioned by entheogens, on the one hand, and those that occur *au naturel* or spontaneously, on the other, are very similar. I've done a little research into this connection. I took knowledgeable people as my subjects, and drew one pile of reports from classic accounts in the mystical traditions. But these reports were not so well known that everybody would recognize them. A second sample of reports was generated from psychedelically occasioned experiences. I shuffled the two piles, and then asked these knowledgeable people to sort them back into their original piles. They couldn't do it. It was almost 50%, but they were wrong 1% of the time more than they were right. So this to me says that, phenomenologically, these two kinds of experiences are indistinguishable. Being that close, it would be surprising if there were *not* some kind of institutional connection between entheogens and religion.

In fact, we're very sure that this has happened in history. The Native American Church's use of the mescaline-containing peyote cactus goes back several centuries—five, nine, no one really knows—into the twilight zone of Mesoamerica. And then there is the soma of the Rg Veda, the most ancient of Indian scriptures, dating back some 3,500 years ago. Soma was an entheogenic plant used from the second millennium B.C., the identity of which has been lost. And of course there were the sacred Eleusinian mystery

rites in Greece that survived for 1,000 years until the fourth century, where the secret kykeon potion produced visionary consciousness. In all three cases the substances were integrated into a full-bodied religious practice.

We know that this integration happened, but you were asking, "Why?" Well, I think it seems natural between the experiences, however they are invoked, that they would become integrated into religious practices. It probably wasn't calculatedly thought out. Perhaps it came over people incrementally until they eventually moved these things into place, and a solid institution with such a center was established.

So something about the institutional practice might make entheogenic experiences have more enduring value?

I think that's true, that combined with a sacred setting. Again, we have to realize that these experiences are not for everyone. While we don't know in the case of kykeon or soma, we do know in the case of the peyote use by the Native American Church, that even in tribes where the Church is very vigorous, some people choose to join and some do not.

You've mentioned kykeon and soma. In some of your writings you noted that the Eleusinian mysteries were shrouded in secrecy, and that the identity of soma was at first protected and then consciously forgotten. Could you explain that a little bit more, and maybe speculate as to why there was so much secrecy?

Well, I'll try. You're asking about issues that are not well understood, so we're in the area of hypotheses. R. Gordon Wasson has made the clearest hypothesis in his book on soma. He posits that something like a psychedelic down-swirl occurred, and recreational use entered. In other words, the sacred element was lost, and profane use got out of hand. According to Wasson's hypothesis, rather than have it go that route, the Brahmins decided to shut it down. I'm only reporting Wasson's theory here, as I don't have an independent theory. But his theory is as good as any I know.

Considering this most important plant/god, as well as the especially awesome tone of the ninth book of the Rg Veda, where the hymns are entirely dedicated to soma, we're to believe that the identity of the soma plant would be just forgotten? That's incredi-

ble! How could that have happened? It cries out for a hypothesis, and Wasson's is plausible. In fact, it's the only hypothesis that has been ventured. All the other Vedic scholars throw up their hands and say this is one of the mysteries of history. But Wasson, at least, moves in with a hypothesis.

In the case of Eleusis, I don't know whether or not after Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire there were overt measures against it. I can believe that there may have been. But I have not really looked into the history of the shutdown of that awesome phenomenon. One thousand years and some of our greatest and most influential minds, like Plato and Pythagoras probably, had their philosophy shaped by that experience. And yet something that important was kept an absolute secret for one thousand years? Oh, that's confidentiality for you!

Reflecting on more recent entheogen use, why wasn't the psychedelic movement of the 1960s fully successful at bringing about rapid, beneficial changes?

I think everybody realizes that the decade, the generation, was not successful or we would have a more "flower-child" America today than we do. Kendra and I always have some book that we are reading aloud. Our present one is Peter Coyote's *Sleeping Where I Fall*, which is a tremendously vivid account of the 60s and its ideals. And of course he admits, as everybody does, that they were not fully realized.

But this is a murky area, because they *did* change America in those 10 years, and in certain ways enduringly. Civil rights, for example, was a change for the good. But nevertheless the ideal of the "greening of America"—one can hardly claim that that has come about.

There are several reasons why many ideals weren't achieved. One reason was—well, the technical word is *antinomian*. *Nomos* has to do with law. So antinomian is going "against the law," with the connotation that you can rise above the law—the law here meaning ethics, the basic principles of ethics. And so, you are above the law, outside the law. And I think that sentiment, neglecting the importance of ethical commitments as a foundation for a spiritual life, was very much part of the picture.

Another reason that many ideals were not achieved is more subtle. All the religious traditions have a wisdom-based esoteric

dimension. The common way of saying it is, "Cast not your pearls before swine." Or the Taoists say, "Know ten things; tell nine." Some things should not be just flaunted to the public. To go back to the pearls before swine, for example, there's a double reason. First of all, if you cast them before swine it won't do the pearls any good; they'll likely get trampled. And it won't do the swine any good, because they'll get sick. So in the same way, there are truths that if they fall on uncomprehending ears can only be distorted and misunderstood. And I think that element was overlooked. Well, the brashest case was this notion of spiking the water system with LSD that Tim Leary had at one point—I don't know how seriously—as a way to change society's consciousness. So that's a second reason.

A third reason that many ideals were not achieved may have been due to context, or the lack thereof. By ignoring the religious context for these substances, one failed to create genuinely holy experiences.

In addition, the movement at that time lacked a social philosophy or a blueprint for relating itself to society. Let's contrast this to an example of early Christianity. On the esoteric side, for the first several centuries, there would be a moment in the mass where some official would cry out, "The doors! The doors!" And that was the point where the catechumen—who were sort of learning on the kindergarten or first-grade level—had to leave, while the Eucharist was actually unveiled and participated in. So there was a clear recognition that unless you really *understand* what's going on, this could seem like cannibalism—when you say, "This is my blood, this is my body," and things like that. In other words, this could be misunderstood. So the ritual provided a structure that prevented such a misunderstanding.

This is backtracking a little bit, but you said that one of the three most important experiences in your life was the entheogenic experience. Could you say a little bit more about why that was? What happened during some of those experiences that brought you to that conclusion?

Well, the most obvious is that I experienced—*ontologically* would be the philosophical word for it—what before that time I had only believed. So, it's like fleshing out an intellectual, cerebral understanding, with the conviction of actually experiencing that

reality itself. One could think of the difference between reading a marriage manual, then suddenly you're into the real thing. So that would be the most obvious.

Then there was also an opening of the heart. This was an opening to all other beings, human and otherwise. When one is in that state, doing anything mean or mean-spirited, much less something bad, to somebody would just be out of the question.

And there is carry over. After the Good Friday experiment, people asked, "Well, are you a different person?" And I always say, "Well, I can't really say, in the long run, because I don't know what kind of person I would have been without it." But after that occasion, for 6 weeks or maybe longer, I was in a different mood as I went into the institute. I was not always in love and charity with my colleagues, but I was more so, and *palpably* more so. In addition, the sense of my pain and my pathos, and the sense of the pain that other people were going through, as well as the joys and so on, was far more in my awareness. If you think you're drawing closer to God, and not in fact drawing closer to your neighbor, you're just fooling yourself.

Let me move back to the virtues that are common to different wisdom traditions. There are two mechanisms by which such traditions work to inculcate these values. One has to do with precept or doctrine, and the other with practice. The first acts as a road map—one with as much crystalline clarity and detailed accuracy as possible. One must keep that road map of life's pilgrimage in place. And that includes delineation of the virtues that one should seek to cultivate as part of it.

The second mechanism is practice through setting an example. That is, not keeping it solely a head trip. There's the adage, "What you are speaks so loudly to me that I can't hear what you're saying." The most powerful way of teaching virtue is through the influence
have
a huge sense of humor when you talk about spiritual attainment!

One of the reasons that I remain concerned about the issue of entheogens is that I feel I was privileged, even blessed, by them. I was accorded not just the philosophy or the theory of the way things are, but also an *experience* which validates this theory. I was incomparably fortunate to have that validation. And it makes me very sad and distressed that these days people cannot have the same validation without risking a knock at the door. I think there's something rotten in the state of Denmark where this situation pre-

vails. Now, everybody realizes that it's a can of worms. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't open the can and go to work sorting them out.

Having lived through the 60s, witnessing the hopes of the psychedelic movement dashed due to the cultural reaction, what is your sense of today's culture? Here we are nearly four decades later. Have conditions changed sufficiently that renewed efforts to incorporate psychedelics within society may be successful?

Well, I'm not a social theorist. I am concerned, but I don't spend time keeping up on the latest developments. And I'm not very good at taking a pulse of our social ethos. Are we any more open now than we were then?

I have entertained the possibility of an experimental situation in which an established religious group—let's just say a church, if it had interest in this direction—could include an entheogen in its monthly or weekly services. I would opt for monthly in the communion cup or something like this. And then bring in the best sociologists to study what happens in the church. Does conviction in the spiritual life consolidate? What about the Bodhisattva vow and humanitarian spin-offs? Are they more concerned with human beings, more compassionate? By works as well as sentiment? I would like to see that happen, and it's one sort of wedge into the issue. Let's try to be creative and constructive, rather than just bemoaning the deplorable state of affairs. I guess that's my one concrete wish.

If a young person, maybe one of your own children or grandchildren, at one point expressed an interest in having an entheogenic experience, at what point in his or her life do you think that would be most appropriate? And what kind of circumstances would you want to see surrounding that session?

Well, I'm very clear on the second question, although I don't think I have much of an idea on the first question. I don't think they should be beneath the "age of discretion," as the phrase goes, which would be what? Late teens, college age, or something. I wouldn't want it below that. Now, I'm not a developmental psychologist, but I assume that at a stage younger than the late teens, one is forming one's ego boundaries, sort of creating a mold into which to pour

one's life. And I would have the same fear of giving it to someone who already had problems with ego boundaries—namely that they may have problems of spacing out and not reintegrating.

As to the circumstance, I think it should be with the people to whom one wishes to commit one's life. What I mean is that these people will be around for the long haul. These are the people that one wants to be most deeply related to in the course of the years ahead.

In describing your first experience in 1961, you said that you had had a disciplined meditation practice for at least a decade and had studied the religious literature extensively. What effect do you think that had on your first experience? And how much similar preparation would you suggest that someone else should complete before having a first experience?

Oh,
in terms of making declarations about these substances and their effects. But in my case, I think the substances simply poured experience into the molds of my existing worldview. But I know people for whom it just exploded their view of reality and gave them a worldview to live in. I know three or four people who were logical positivists—materialists to the core, totally convinced—until the experience. Now they've completely lost interest in teaching the philosophy of science. All they want to do is teach mysticism. So, there are some surprises along the way.

How many mystics can the world use? How many mystics does the world need? [joking]

How many does the world need? [laughs] Well, we could quibble about the word, but in the way that I define the word, that's like asking, "How many saints could the world use?" More.

You said that when you took psychedelics early on it was a validation of your belief system. What, though, if you took individuals who had different belief systems? Would psychedelics validate each of those belief systems?

Well, if I heard you correctly you didn't repeat back my qualification. Because I said that in *my case* that is what seems clear to me

that they did. But then I went on to describe these logical positivists and the like, where the experience just spun their whole worldview around and left them with a new and different worldview. They couldn't have been more surprised at what happened. So, underneath those two examples is my point concerning the importance of reticence and caution about overgeneralizations and declarations with regard to the effects of these substances.

Has the psychedelic experience given you any understanding or insight into death and dying?

It has confirmed what I already believed; namely that dropping the body—as the Indians say—is not the end of our journey. I recently wrote an introduction to a new edition of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* which, as you know, deals with the bardos—the stages of the after-death experience. Rereading that book reaffirms what I have experienced in this life, and the psychedelic experience acts as a confirmation to this understanding of death.

Does that include transmigration of the soul?

One of my students once asked Ram Dass, "What about reincarnation?" And in his usual inimitable, eloquent, precise way, he said, "It's there when I need it." I think that's perfect. I can't think of a more logical, more constructive—when fully understood—view that makes sense about our moral behavior. Do I actually believe it in its literalism? I do believe that our work is never completed unless we're the one in ten thousand billion people for whom this is our last incarnation. Short of that, we all have work to do after this body drops. But whether it's done on other bardos, or coming back into another body—the wisdom traditions themselves disagree on that. And I, too, am not really invested in that issue.

Considering the many wisdom traditions, what might it mean to live in a "wisdom society"? Or, what might we do here and there to patch up or ameliorate some of the devastating aspects of our current society?

I think that second question is a little bit more manageable, but, again, I'm not a social theorist. I have sometimes said to my social

scientist friends and colleagues that God and the Infinite I find manageable, but history is too messy—it's too complex and chaotic.

Of course, the virtues should flourish and we should cultivate those. To blueprint, one can trot out the platitudes of equality. But now how do you parse that? And then there's egalitarianism. Do we do away with all differentiation? It's easier to see the devastating flaws, like the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Now that's terrible! I mean that's flatly immoral. And racial discrimination is flatly immoral, as is violence. I get a little more solidity from pointing out what is wrong, because that just jumps out at me. So, one can target it that way.

I've mentioned the virtues a couple of times, and the West tends to target the virtues, - veracity. But Asia gets to the same place by targeting the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion. These are what stand between us and the virtues. With a Western background, we always think it's good to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative. So I asked Asian teachers, "Why do you take the negative approach to the same goal?" And they said, "If you focus on the positive virtues, they are way out there and you're striving. But the poisons are right here and we have to deal with them every day. That's what we should work on, with the assurance that incrementally, drop by drop, to every extent the poisons are eliminated, they will create a vacuum into which the virtues will flow automatically." So, I feel sort of the same way about society. Let's target what we want to tone down, get rid of as much as we can, and then the visions of a good society will emerge in greater clarity as we succeed.

At the present time there are large numbers of people who are taking entheogenic substances, and many of them are quite young. What would you want to say to them?

What bubbles up is, "Be cautious, go slow, but do not give up the quest." But I don't know. I don't have much confidence in myself as an advice giver. It depends so much on the individual and what the person is seeking, and I wouldn't want to impose my worldview. And that too sort of hobbles me in terms of giving advice.

In religious circles this is known as a pastoral question. A pastoral question is one where you don't just flip out stock answers. You enter into the actual situation of the person that you are conferring

with, and then as that comes to light, some suggestions might be applicable. So, I think I'd rather leave that there.

What does it mean for you to be an elder in today's society?

I heard that somebody asked Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, while I was getting my degree there, "What is it like to be old?" And with his typical ironic way, he said, "Just like it was to be young—not good." [laughs] Now, granted, that's just a flip response.

If I'm moved to ultimate seriousness, I'll tell a story about someone I've known for a decade. Last week he called up the police and said, "I'm going into my backyard to shoot myself, and it would be good if you came and cleared up the mess before my wife returns home." Now this was a person who was not depressed. He was 82 years old, but very vigorous in one of the churches around here, and conducted a weekly . . . had a wonderfully varied career, with achievements in several directions, and was very well liked. He didn't want to be a burden on people, and one could even look at it as an act, in his eyes, of generosity.

However, this is where it bears on your question. Kendra and I both feel that it's part of life to accept one's limitations, which grow in the advancing years steadily every year, every month sometimes. And part of the total life experience is to accept being dependent, and to move out of the mold of giving, giving, giving, that one has poured oneself into for so many years, into one of being helpless and receiving. So even though his act, I feel sure, was prompted by altruism on his part, from our standpoint, why, there's still a limitation in that particular response to life.

But that's no general answer to what it means to be an elder. I've given you a flip answer and I've gone to the other extreme, in the serious vein. I think the best thing that the elderly can give to the world is a model of how it is possible to accept life's inevitable limitations in good cheer. That's what we're working for. [laughs] Wiser than despair—that's another phrase that has come over the horizon just within the last 2 weeks. I don't know where it came from, but there it is: "Wiser than despair."

One final question. What role would you like to see psychedelics have in our society?

Minimally, I would like to begin with a touch of rationality in our absurd drug laws, which make no sense from any possible angle and do so much damage. Once a year I visit my one remaining brother in Detroit. He's very conservative, but when I asked, "Well, what do you propose for the ills of the world?" I was surprised to hear him say, "Legalize drugs." And he's very Republican—conservative politically. We disagree on every other issue I can think of, but these laws are so absurd. I'd like to see them changed.

Beyond that, I would like to see entheogens legally available to serious spiritual seekers. Of course, there are other aspects of it, like the recreational use of these substances. I don't take a puritanical view towards that. After all, I enjoy wine, which is a pleasurable aspect of life. So I wouldn't draw any sharp line there, but recreational use is not the area of my first concern.

NOTE

1. On April 20, 1962, 20 theological students participated in Walter Pahnke's Good Friday Marsh Chapel experiment. In a double-blind study, half of the students were given psilocybin, the other half got a placebo, and they all attended a Good Friday worship service. Pahnke hypothesized that a psychedelic drug might generate a mystical experience when consumed in a religious setting by a group of spiritually inclined subjects. And indeed, this seems to have been the case. In a 25-year follow-up, Rick Doblin (1991) found that one subject had experienced a dysphoric episode, but that the 10 others he spoke with who had consumed the psilocybin still felt that they had had genuine and beneficial mystical experiences.

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