



FROM STATE TO TRAIT: THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSFORMING TRANSIENT INSIGHTS INTO ENDURING CHANGE

Roger Walsh

In this panel I'd like to take up a theme that has been implicit in earlier talks and echoed throughout the conference: the difficulty of stabilizing insights and breakthroughs. This focus echoes the concern with which Huston Smith concluded his classic paper in *The Journal of Philosophy*, "Do Drugs Have Religious Import?," over thirty years ago.¹ There he said that it's clear that drugs can induce religious experiences, but it's less clear that they can induce religious lives.

The basic question here is: how can these powerful, profound and potentially transformative experiences be used as catalysts for real transformation? It's important to remember that this is not a problem unique to entheogens. It is a problem common to psychotherapy and spiritual disciplines in general. In psychotherapy it's sometimes called "the problem of generalization": how do you get a person's insights to generalize outside the consulting room? So it's not a unique problem, but it's a very important one. I assume that most people who have researched this issue carefully conclude that entheogens can occasionally induce long-lasting benefits.

For many people, one of the major areas of growth that arises as a result of entheogenic experiences is an interest in religion, spirituality, and mysticism. There has been much debate over whether entheogens can induce genuine mystical experiences.² By "genuine" I mean experientially indistinct from classic experiences. The weight of evidence seems to suggest that they

can. In addition, the philosopher Stace's argument of so-called "causal indifference" implies that in some ways it doesn't matter what causes the experience.³ If the experience is indistinguishable from others, then it's the real thing; although, that does not say that the aftereffects are necessarily the same. So, given this capacity for entheogens to induce genuine spiritual and mystical experiences, what then are their advantages and disadvantages compared to formal spiritual practices, and what can we do to increase the chances that such experiences will result in long-term beneficial transformation?

CHEMICAL VERSUS CONTEMPLATIVE EXPERIENCES

Although these days it is not politically correct to acknowledge, there are some (not unproblematic) advantages to entheogens. These include the relative ease, speed, intensity, and depth of the experience and the fact that it can be controlled to some extent as regards timing. You sit down to meditate and you hope that sometime in the next twenty years you'll have a breakthrough, which is a little different from being able to schedule it for Saturday afternoon. Of course, there are no guarantees even when you schedule it for Saturday afternoon, but still there is that hope.

But clearly there are disadvantages, and I intend to categorize them in four ways. There are the issues of uncontrollability, integration, misuse, and the limited capacity for stabilizing the gains.

Uncontrollability – Chemically induced experiences can be unpredictable, overwhelming, and uncontrollable. I think of a metaphor of strapping a rocket – an unguided missile – on one's back as opposed to learning to fly a plane.

Integration – I find a useful map here is Piaget's. Piaget speaks of assimilation and accommodation. During development a child's experiences are either assimilated into the existing cognitive structure or they bust that cognitive structure and force the child to accommodate to the new experience. *With assimilation the child takes an experience and just fits it into his or her box. With accommodation the child has to construct a bigger box.*

This distinction is crucial because entheogens may induce experiences that are powerfully challenging to individual as well as social systems. They challenge beliefs, values, behavior, and lifestyles, both in the social groups we are part of and in society at large. These experiences seem to demand that we accommodate, that is enlarge our cognitive maps, if we are to understand and research adequately.

Contemplatives may have a distinct advantage here because, as Louis Pasteur said, "chance favors the prepared mind." Ideally the contemplative

will already have in place a belief system and worldview large enough to contain the mystical experience when it finally occurs, a tradition and social group to support it, an ethic to guide its expression, and a discipline to repeat, cultivate, deepen, and stabilize it.¹⁴ It is likely that the contemplative's mind is somewhat prepared, but there's no guarantee that this will be the case for an entheogen user. Of course, one of the hallmarks of good therapy is the preparation, but there is a limit to what one can do in a few sessions of preparation compared to years of contemplative practice.

Misuse – There's a recurrent mistake that we tend to make in our thinking about profound experiences: we adopt implicitly a mechanistic model in which we assume that experiences do things to us instead of remembering that we use experiences. That's a key factor in why different people have such different outcomes. What's clear is that any experience – particularly a powerful, potentially transformative experience – has the potential both for transforming, and for being co-opted by, the ego structure. It's important to remember that some people get worse in psychotherapy. There has been significant realization that some people can actually use the psychotherapeutic experience to make themselves worse. So, again, the problem of difficult reactions, etc. is not unique to the entheogens. In the spiritual arena this is known as spiritual materialism, the tendency to co-opt experiences for things like ego inflation. These are problems of misuse.

THE CHALLENGE OF STABILIZATION

This challenge concerns the limited capacity we seem to have to catalyze ongoing development as a result of a single experience. What are the issues here? I think we need to distinguish two distinct dimensions in thinking about this problem of stabilizing any insights or breakthroughs obtained in drug-assisted therapy. We need to think of both the developmental stages and the psychological processes that are involved in transpersonal growth.

There are many different models of transpersonal stages. For simplicity's sake, I want to refer to a Tibetan Buddhist model. This has four distinct stages: first is intellectual comprehension, second is direct experience, third is stabilization of the experiences, and fourth is liberation.

Stabilization itself involves two phases. The first is being able to re-introduce the experience voluntarily, and the second is a penetration or extension of the characteristics of the experience state into the usual waking state. So this stabilization of altered states is a general process of moving from state to trait, from peak to plateau experience (Maslow), or from trait to stage (Ken Wilber).^{5,6} As Huston Smith so beautifully put it, it's the challenge of

transforming flashes of illumination into abiding light.⁷

There are specific examples of this transition in various traditions. For the Transcendental Meditation practitioner, it's the challenge of transforming transcendental consciousness into cosmic consciousness; for Sufis it is the movement from remembrance of the heart to remembrance of the soul; in Buddhism it is the transformation of prompted states of consciousness to unprompted or automatic states; in Christianity it is the progression, which St. Teresa spoke of, from the spiritual betrothal to spiritual marriage.

Using the four-stage model of the Tibetan Buddhists, I would suggest that the entheogens usually only move people from stage one to stage two. That is, they may move some people from intellectual understanding to some direct experience. Experiences can occur spontaneously, or they can occur as a result of practice or use of entheogens; but stabilization and liberation, as far as I can see, almost always demand prolonged contemplative discipline, and attempts to "stay high" by repetitive heroic doses of entheogens have been notoriously unsuccessful.

The reason becomes apparent when we examine the psychological processes that are involved in this kind of stabilization or development. There are at least seven common elements involved in authentic spiritual practice. These are the development of ethics, stabilization of attention, emotional transformation, motivational shifts, refinement of awareness, the cultivation of wisdom, and service.⁸ My working hypothesis is that profound experiences are most likely to induce enduring transformations by offering glimpses of deeper, more accurate views of the mind, of cosmos, and of reality. Even very brief glimpses can induce long-lasting changes in understanding and cognitive maps. For example, imagine that you're going through an unknown territory at night, there's a single flash of lightning for an instant, and suddenly you have a glimpse of the way things really are. Likewise, accounts suggest that even brief experiences of the Buddhist nirvana, or momentary near-death experiences, can forever change a person's life in some ways – not all people, but at least some people.⁹ Likewise, in Tibetan Buddhism the teacher introduces the view, a glimpse of reality, at the beginning of practice.

My sense is that these brief insights can sometimes result in shifts in motivation. A new, deeper understanding of mind, self, and reality can result in a reorientation of values, motives, and behaviors. This may not necessarily occur, but observations from psychotherapy, contemplative practices, and drug-assisted therapy suggest that it can. Out of such deeper understanding can flow an ethics; transpersonal ecology and deep ecology are based in large part on the idea that a glimpse or experience of unity of ourselves with all life will induce a spontaneous, compassionate outflow of behavior.¹⁰ This is by no means guaranteed, but it's a possibility.

On the other hand, I suspect that emotions accompanying a single experience will fade with time. Likewise attentional stabilization (concentration) will not be much enhanced by a single or even a few experiences. Concentration seems to require prolonged meditative practice.

SUMMARY

What this suggests is that entheogenic experiences may facilitate transpersonal development in some individuals. However, entheogens are most likely to be effective for stabilization of altered traits and for continued development if they are used in conjunction with a contemplative discipline. That, in fact, was the conclusion of a number of self-transcenders, people who'd had profound entheogenic experiences and had also been involved in deep contemplative practices.¹¹ So, as Huston Smith wrote presciently in 1964, it seems clear that entheogens can produce religious experiences, but less clear that they can produce religious lives. I think that now, several decades later, we can see the accuracy of that statement. But we can also now better understand why it's accurate. Lastly, we can say that by themselves, entheogens may not produce religious lives, but they may initiate and deepen the religious lives of those who commit themselves to some form of spiritual practice.