

# Phenomenological Mapping and Comparisons of Shamanic, Buddhist, Yogic, and Schizophrenic Experiences

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In recent years there has been increased interest, in anthropology, psychology, religious studies, and the culture at large, in the study of alternate or altered states of consciousness (ASC). There is significant evidence that altered states may represent a core experiential component of religious and mystical traditions and that practices such as meditation and yoga may induce specific classes of ASC (Shapiro; Shapiro and Walsh; Goleman). The prevalence and importance of ASCs may be gathered from Bourguignon's finding that 90% of cultures have institutionalized forms of them. This is "a striking finding and suggests that we are, indeed, dealing with a matter of major importance, not merely a bit of anthropological esoterica" (11).

One of the early assumptions that was often made about altered state inducing practices was that they exhibited equifinality. That is, many authors, including this one, mistakenly assumed that differing techniques, such as various meditations, contemplations, and yogas, necessarily resulted in equivalent states of consciousness. This largely reflected our ignorance of the broad range of possible ASCs that can be deliberately cultivated (Goleman). For example, the varieties of ASC that have been identified in Indian meditative and yogic practices alone include highly concentrated states such as the yogic samadhis or Buddhist jhanas, witness-consciousness states in which equanimity is so strong that stimuli have little or no effect on the observer, and states where extremely refined inner stimuli become the objects of attention

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such as the faint inner sounds of shabd yoga or the subtle pseudonirvanic bliss of Buddhist vipassana meditation (Goldstein; Goleman). Then too there are unitive states in which the sense of separation between self and world dissolves such as in some Zen satoris (Kapleau:281); there are others in which all objects or phenomena disappear such as in the Buddhist nirvana or Vedantic nirvikalpa samadhi; and there are states in which all phenomena are perceived as expressions or modifications of consciousness, e.g., sahaj samadhi (Wilber 1980:74; Free John: 589). Of course this is not to deny that certain states may display significant functional and experiential commonalities.

Asian meditative and yogic states are now recognized as distinct states *sui generis* that may exhibit a variety of unique phenomenological, perceptual, electrophysiological, and hormonal changes (Shapiro; Shapiro & Walsh; Wilber, Engler & Brown; Goleman). Until recently, however, these Asian meditative and yogic states were often regarded as pathological, and their practitioners were regarded as neurotic or psychotic (Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry). Thus one textbook of psychiatry concluded that

The obvious similarities between schizophrenic regressions and the practices of yoga and Zen merely indicate that the general trend in oriental cultures is to withdraw into the self from an overbearingly difficult physical and social reality. (Alexander and Selesnich:457)

The reasons for this long history of the conflation and pathologizing of religious states are probably several. These include a general bias against accepting the very existence of certain altered states; witness the nineteenth century surgeons who observed apparently painless amputations performed under hypnosis and concluded that the subjects had been bribed to pretend they felt no pain (Tart 1986). Related to this is the limited range of Western categories for states other than waking, sleeping, and pathological ones. This dovetails with the widely observed bias in clinical psychiatry and psychology to pathologize unusual experiences (Jung:xlii; Maslow:5; Noll, 1983:444). This can be particularly important in cross cultural studies because "anthropologists sometimes fail to distinguish clinic and culture" (Opler:1092). Related to this is what Michael Harner (1982:XVII) calls "cognicentrism," the tendency to assume that one's own usual state is optimal. Finally, most researchers have had little direct experience of the states they investigate. Yet classical descriptions, psychological and philosophical arguments (Tart 1983b; Walsh 1989d), and personal reports by Western trained researchers who have experienced altered states (e.g. Globus; Harner 1982; Tart 1986; Ram Dass 1990) suggest that it may be difficult to

comprehend fully and differentiate alternate states without direct experience of them.

However a number of phenomenological, clinical, psychometric, physiological, chemical, and theoretical comparisons have indicated significant differences between meditative-yogic states and those of psychological disturbances, including schizophrenia (Kornfield; Shapiro; Walsh 1980; Wilber 1983; Wilber, Engler, and Brown). Indeed, several hundred studies now attest to potential therapeutic benefits of these practices (Shapiro; Shapiro and Walsh; Murphy & Donovan), and, as Ken Wilber (1980:78) concluded, meditative-yogic states and pathological states "can be seriously equated only by those whose intellectual inquiry goes no further than superficial impressions."

So Western academic evaluations of the alternate states of consciousness induced by Asian meditative and yogic disciplines have undergone a marked shift. Many initial evaluations assumed that they were pathological and regressive whereas more recent assessments have acknowledged their uniqueness and potential benefits. The purpose of this paper is 1) to examine whether a similar reevaluation may be appropriate for another tradition for which altered states appear to be central, namely shamanism, 2) to employ a new approach that allows more precise, multidimensional description, mapping, and comparison of states of consciousness, 3) to map shamanic states, and 4) then to compare shamanistic states with other states with which some authors have claimed they are identical.

## DEFINING SHAMANISM

Shamanism is now going through a period of surprising popularity in the West, and shamanic workshops and books are multiplying rapidly. At the same time there is a growing appreciation of the centrality of alternate states of consciousness in shamanism. Indeed the definition of shamanism seems to be changing to reflect this appreciation.

Early definitions of shamanism focussed on the shaman's ability to contact and control "spirits." Thus Shirokogoroff (269) claimed that the term shaman refers to "persons of both sexes who have mastered spirits, who at their will can introduce these spirits into themselves and use their power over the spirits in their own interests, particularly helping other people, who suffer from the spirits."

However, contemporary anthropologists seem less impressed by the importance of spirits than by the altered states in which they are experienced, and definitions seem to have shifted accordingly to focus on

these states (Walsh 1990:9). Within this definitional class there are broad and narrow definitions. Broad definitions such as those of Peters and Price-Williams (1980:408) stipulate that the "only defining attribute is that the specialist enter into a controlled ASC on behalf of his community." Narrow definitions stipulate a specific category of ASCs, most often states in which shamanic journeying or soul flight occurs (Eliade 1964:5; Noll 1983:444; Walsh 1989a:4, 1990:10), and Michael Harner (1982:xvi) has attempted to describe and define shamanism in terms of a single specific state.

The definition used here is a narrow one which describes shamanism as a family of traditions whose practitioners focus on voluntarily entering altered states of consciousness in which they experience themselves, or their spirit(s), traveling to other realms at will and interacting with other entities in order to serve their communities. While no single definition will satisfy all researchers, this one has several advantages. First, it describes a group of practitioners that almost all researchers would view as shamans. Second, because of its specificity and narrowness, the definition is able to differentiate this tradition from other traditions and practices, e.g., mediums, priests, and medicine men, as well as from various psychopathologies, with which shamanism has been confused (Walsh 1990a).

## Shamanic Experiences

### Interpretations

While there is now greater interest in shamanic ASCs and a beginning appreciation that they may be specific, it is still commonly assumed in both anthropology and psychology that shamanic states and those who experience them are pathological (Kakar, Noll 1983). Indeed, the "experience of the shaman has been likened to almost every psychopathology" (Peters and Price-Williams 1980:394). The shaman has been called, among other things, mentally deranged, an outright psychotic, a veritable idiot, a charlatan, an epileptic, and, perhaps most often, an hysteric or schizophrenic (e.g., Devereux; Wissler).

An opposite but equally extreme view seems to be emerging in the popular literature. Here shamanic states are being identified with those of Buddhism, yoga, or Christian mysticism. For example, Holger Kalweit (236) claims that the shaman "experiences existential unity—the *samadhi* of the Hindus or what Western spiritualists and mystics call enlightenment, illumination, unio mystica." Likewise Gary Doore (223)

claims that "shamans, yogis and Buddhists alike are accessing the same state of consciousness."

There seem to be serious deficiencies with these comparisons. Almost universally they appear to be based on gross similarities rather than on careful phenomenological mapping and comparison (Walsh 1990).

One significant and important exception is the work of Richard Noll (1983). Noll did a careful phenomenological comparison between shamanic journey states as described in the traditional literature and the states of schizophrenics as documented in the American Psychiatric Association's (1980) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Noll was able to demonstrate, contrary to decades of assumptions, that there are clear phenomenological differences between schizophrenic and shamanic experiences and that the two could not be regarded as identical.

For example, Noll demonstrated major differences on the dimension of control. He pointed out that shamans are generally able to induce and terminate their ASCs at will and modulate their experiences to some extent, while schizophrenics are almost entirely helpless victims of their states and experiences. As will be shown later, comparisons on several other phenomenological dimensions also demonstrate significant differences.

Of course it must be noted that Noll focused on shamanic journey states and not on the earlier life period of the shamanic initial call, which may sometimes constitute a major life crisis with considerable bizarre behavior (Eliade 1964; Grof and Grof 1989). Consequently, Noll's data does not fully rule out the possibility that shamans may once have been disturbed or even schizophrenic but subsequently recover.

To Noll's comparisons can be added several other observations. The first is that the clinical picture of the initial crisis suggests significant differences from schizophrenia (Grof and Grof 1986, 1989; Walsh 1990). The second is that the shaman is said to function often as one of the most effective members of the tribe, displaying superior energy, concentration, memory, knowledge, and leadership (Eliade, 1964; Harner, 1982; Reichel-Dolmatoff; Rogers), qualities that are hardly consistent with the chronic deterioration common in schizophrenia. Taken together, these facts constitute a strong argument against the facile equation of shamanism and schizophrenia.

Noll's work points to new possibilities and standards for diagnostic and comparative assessment of shamanic states. Henceforth it will no longer be adequate simply to conclude on the basis of superficial simi-

larities that shamanic states of consciousness are equivalent to other states, such as those found either in various forms of pathology or in other traditions such as Buddhism or yoga. Rather what will be necessary is a careful multidimensional mapping of shamanic states of consciousness and then an equally careful multidimensional comparison of these states with those of other populations. After all, as Huston Smith (1987:558) pointed out: "Claims for similarities or differences spin their wheels until they get down to *ways* and *degrees* in which things differ or are alike."

This article aims to expand Noll's work by providing a more detailed (yet still preliminary), multidimensional, phenomenological map of shamanic states of consciousness and comparing this with the pathological states of schizophrenia and with the meditative states of Buddhism and yoga. It will become apparent that all these states show significant differences and that equating them can no longer be justified. Henceforth each type must be regarded as a distinct class of states which differ on multiple significant dimensions.

### The Varieties of Shamanic States of Consciousness

In making these comparisons it is important to acknowledge that there is not one but many states of consciousness that are invariably sought and used in shamanism. Shamans may induce altered states by a variety of means including fasting, solitude, dancing, drumming, and drugs (Harner 1973, 1982; Dobkin de Rios and Winkleman; Walsh 1989b). Major classes of shamanic altered states include possession, drug, and journey states. Shamanic possession-states refer to states in which the shaman's consciousness is experienced as being taken over to varying degrees by an ego-alien entity, usually believed to be a spirit. (Peters and Price-Williams 1980; Walsh 1990).

Drug states encompass a remarkably wide variety of states (Grof 1980, 1988; for their relationship to shamanism see Harner 1973; for the relationship of drug states to non-drug induced religious states see Smith 1964; and for a theoretical explanation of this relationship see Walsh 1990). This is not to deny that there may be significant overlap or functional equivalence between some of these states (Peters) but rather that there seems no reason to assume a single shamanic state.

This paper focuses on mapping the states occurring during the shamanic journey. The journey has been chosen because it is one of the key, some would say one of the defining, characteristics of shamanism (Eliade 1964; Harner 1982; Noll 1983). In addition we have many

descriptions of it and the intense imagery which occurs in it has often been confused with schizophrenic hallucinations (Noll 1983; 1985).

Even here to say that there is only a single state of consciousness may be an oversimplification. As anyone who has done multiple shamanic journeys knows, one's state may vary perceptibly from journey to journey, and there are probably significant individual differences between practitioners. This is not to deny that there are commonalities among these states and experiences. However, it does point out that considerable variation may occur and that even the concept of a "state of consciousness" is an arbitrary and static crystallization of what is, in living experience, a multidimensional dynamic flow of experience. For the sake of simplicity in this paper I will sometimes use the term "shamanic state of consciousness" to refer to shamanic journey state(s).

## NATURE OF THE SHAMANIC JOURNEY STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

### Trance States

The shamanic state of consciousness during journeys is often spoken of as a trance. The term trance seems to be widely used but imprecisely defined. Indeed, it is usually so imprecisely defined that some researchers try to avoid it "partly because it carries negative connotations, partly because it has never been clearly enough defined" (Tart 1986:70). It seems to have been used broadly to cover all waking ASCs and more narrowly to indicate an ASC marked by focused attention (Peters and Price-Williams 1983; Winkleman). I use the term only in this latter sense.

Definitions of focused attention trances tend to include the criteria of engagement in an inner world accompanied by reduced awareness of, and responsiveness to, the environment (Pattison, Kahan, and Hurd:286). This is probably useful as a first step, but it may be that the definition and differentiation of trance states can be taken considerably further. The following is an initial attempt to begin this process.

I would suggest that the key defining characteristic of a trance is a focusing of attention with reduced awareness of the experiential context (objects, stimuli, or environment outside this focus). The focus of the constricted attention may be either internal or external. When it is internal then there is the possibility of rich, intense images and fantasy including journeys of the shamanic type. Of course shamans would

argue for the objective reality of their realms and experiences and deny that they are merely images (Harner 1982; 1984).

Assuming that the shamanic state of consciousness is a form of trance, can we go further and ask "what type of trance?" In other words, to what extent can we differentiate and map trance states? Various maps of states of consciousness have been proposed for millennia. Ancient Asian systems include the Buddhist Abhidharma (Nyanaponika) and yogic chakra systems (Tart 1983a). Recent Western suggestions include maps based on systems theory (Tart 1983b), the level of arousal (Fischer), inducing variables (Ludwig), developmental stages (Wilber 1980), and phenomenological dimensions (Clark). None of these maps appear fully appropriate to the purposes of this paper. The phenomenological dimensions examined here are based on the frequency with which these dimensions are described and the importance they are accorded in descriptions of the states to be considered. Based on these criteria the following dimensions seem particularly relevant.

#### Key Dimensions for Mapping Altered States

1. Degree of reduction of awareness of the experiential context or environment: ranging from complete to minimal or none
2. Ability to communicate
3. Concentration: important factors here include:
  - a. The *degree* of concentration and
  - b. Whether the attention is *fixed* immovably on a single object (e.g., Buddhist jhanas or yogic samadhi states) or *momentary* or *fluid*, where attention is allowed to shift between selected objects (e.g., in shamanic journeys)
4. Degree of control.
 

Here there are two important types of control:

  - a. Ability to enter and leave the ASC at will
  - b. Ability to control the content of experience while in the ASC
5. Degree of arousal
6. Degree of calm. This refers to more than low arousal, which refers simply to the level of activation, since calm also implies low levels of agitation and distractibility (Nyanaponika Thera).
7. Sensitivity or subtlety of sensory perception. This may be either reduced, as in hypnotic anesthesia, or enhanced, as in Buddhist insight meditation.
8. Nature of the sense of self or identity
9. Affect: especially whether the experience is pleasurable or painful

10. Out of body experience (OOBE)  
Does the subject experience perceiving from a point that seems outside the body?
11. Content of inner experience:  
Here many further differentiations can be made such as: Is the content formless or with form?
  - a. Formless, i.e., without differentiation into specific objects or forms, e.g., an experience of undifferentiated light or clear space, as in the Buddhist jhanas
  - b. With form, differentiated, having specific objects, e.g., visual images. If the content is differentiated then it and the state of consciousness can be divided along several subdivisions. Critical subdivisions include:
    - 1) Degree of organization
    - 2) Modality of the predominant objects, e.g., auditory, visual, somatic
    - 3) Intensity of the objects
    - 4) Psychological "level" of the objects, e.g., personal or archetypal imagery
12. The developmental level of the state. In some disciplines different ASCs emerge in a fixed sequence of stages, e.g., the formless samadhi states of yoga emerge after earlier stages in which attention is focussed on specific images (Wilber 1980; Wilber et al.). There does not seem to be clear evidence in the literature of a distinct developmental progression of states in shamanism, and so this dimension is not discussed further in this paper.

These parameters are obviously broad and preliminary and compared to the exquisite subtleties of the Buddhist Abhidharma are relatively insensitive. Doubtless they will be refined by further research. Yet even at this stage they allow significantly more sensitive phenomenological comparisons than have been the norm. In addition, the very breadth of these etic categories may confer significant advantages inasmuch as they should easily encompass the relevant emic descriptions from diverse populations.

### MAPPING SHAMANIC JOURNEY STATES

With this preliminary delineation of important experiential dimensions of ASCs we can now turn attention specifically to the shamanic journey state and its attendant experiences. The following description of the state is based on three sources. The first is the description of jour-

neys in the literature (e.g. Shirokogoroff; Eliade 1964; Harner 1982; Noll 1983; Peters and Price-Williams 1980). The second is interviews with native  
undergone intensive long-term (minimum one year) shamanic apprenticeship and training in native South American, Huichol, and Nepalese traditions. Understanding these descriptions was facilitated by a third source of information, namely, several years' personal experience with shamanic journeys. Training for these was obtained primarily under the tutelage of Michael Harner, formerly a professor of anthropology at the New School for Social Research, who has synthesized his life-long study of, and study with, shamanic practitioners from diverse cultures into courses on what he calls "core shamanism," which focus significantly on shamanic journeying. I mention the personal experience because there is growing evidence that, due to state-specific learning, understanding of alternate states may be significantly enhanced by direct experience of them (Tart 1983a,b). Space limitations obviously preclude giving detailed accounts of the many individual journeys obtained from these several sources, some of which are already available in the literature, but the general profiles are as follows.

The shamanic journey is always undertaken for a specific purpose, such as to obtain information or power with which to solve a problem afflicting someone in the tribe. The shaman first enters an altered state with the assistance of practices such as preparatory fasting, sleep deprivation, and ritual, followed by aids such as drumming, dancing, and singing. Once established in the ASC the shaman experiences separating from the body, largely losing awareness of the body and environment, and traveling as a free soul or free spirit, to one of the three worlds of the shamanic cosmology—the upper, middle, or lower worlds. The shaman's attention is fixed on the appropriate world, which is experienced vividly in multiple sensory modalities, i.e., visual, auditory, tactile, etc. In this world the shaman may first call his or her personal spirits (spirit helpers, power animals) for assistance. The shaman then roams at will in search of a source of relevant information or power, experiencing a wide range of emotions depending on the specific experiences that occur, and having found the source attempts to bring the information or power back. Reentering the body the shaman terminates the ASC and communicates the information or transmits the power to the persons in need, perhaps prescribing a particular medication, ritual, or course of action intended to alleviate the problem for which the journey was undertaken. With this general outline of the journey we can

now map the shamanic journey state on our experiential dimensions as follows.

The shamanic journey state is usually one of reduced awareness of the environment. That this reduction may be incomplete is suggested by the fact that some shamans communicate with spectators during their journeys (Peters and Price-Williams 1980; Harner 1982).

Concentration is said to be increased. This concentration is momentary rather than fixed since the shaman's attention moves freely from object to object.

Shamans usually maintain good control of the state. They are usually able to enter and leave the ASC at will and also able to partly determine the type of imagery and experiences. This partial control of experience is similar to that described in lucid dreaming states (dreaming in which one recognizes that one is dreaming) (La Berge) and to a number of psychotherapeutic visualization techniques. These techniques include guided imagery, guided meditation, "waking dreams," Jungian active imagination, and a variety of other visualization strategies (Noll 1983; Walsh 1989c, 1990).

Shamans may be moderately aroused and agitated during their journeys. This is hardly surprising since they may experience themselves traversing strange worlds, placating angry gods, and battling fearsome spirits. Calm is not a word that would usually be applied to shamans' journeys. Their affect is variable, depending on the types of experiences they undergo.

Shamans usually continue to experience themselves during journeys as separate individuals but now as "souls" or "spirits," freed from the body. As such they feel able to travel through or between worlds, to see and interact with other spirits, and to intercede with these spirits on behalf of their people. The shamanic journey therefore bears similarities to the out-of-body experiences described throughout the world in spontaneous, learned, lucid dream, or near-death experiences (Monroe; Moody 1975, 1988; Ring 1980, 1984, 1986; Irwin). It may be that spontaneous out-of-body experiences such as these provided the inspiration for their voluntary mastery and incorporation into a set of practices and rituals that became the basis for the tradition of shamanism (Walsh 1989c, 1990). Similar journey experience may also occur in other traditions, including Taoism, Islam, yoga, and Tibetan Buddhism, although the journey is not as central a practice as in shamanism (Evans-Wentz; Siegel and Hirschman; Baldrian). All this is not to imply that these experiences necessarily involve a separation of consciousness from the body. Though this is indeed the interpretation of shamans, most West-

em researchers, but not all, would regard them as imaginal rather than truly exosomatic.

The experiential content of the shamanic journey is complex and coherent. The images or phenomena encountered are remarkably rich, multimodal (e.g., visual and auditory), highly structured, meaningful, consistent with the shaman's learned cosmology and the purpose of the specific session, and under partial voluntary control.

### COMPARATIVE MAPPING

Until now comparisons between different states of consciousness, such as between those of shamanism and schizophrenia, have been rather superficial. All too often people have simply concluded, on the basis of very imprecise comparisons, that these states were identical or that they were different. Multidimensional phenomenological mapping allows us to move beyond such simple claims, to compare several dimensions of experience, and to say on which dimensions states are similar and on which they differ. In short, this approach allows us to move from unidimensional to multidimensional comparisons and to compare more sensitively and distinguish between states.

*We can now use this approach to compare shamanic states with those that occur in other conditions. Since it has been claimed that shamanic states are the same as those of schizophrenia, Buddhism, and yoga, let us map these states on the dimensions of experience that we have used to map shamanic states and then compare them.*

#### Schizophrenic States

Many people who claim that shamans are schizophrenic and that shamanic and schizophrenic states are equivalent seem to assume that there is only one shamanic altered state and one schizophrenic state. Yet we have already seen that there are probably multiple shamanic states and the same is certainly true of schizophrenia (American Psychiatric Association). To simplify things I will focus here on the state that occurs in an acute schizophrenic episode, since this has probably been most often confused with shamanic experiences.

An acute schizophrenic episode can be one of the most devastating experiences any human being can undergo. Psychological disorganization is extreme and disrupts affect, cognition, perception, and identity. Though there are significant variations within and between individuals

we can map the acute schizophrenic episode in terms of our experiential dimensions and compare it to the shamanic state.

Control is almost entirely lost. The victim of an acute schizophrenic episode has little ability to halt the process or modify experiences. Awareness of the environment may be reduced when the person is pre-occupied with hallucinations, and cognition may be so disorganized that the person may be unable to communicate. Concentration is drastically reduced, and the patient is usually highly aroused and agitated. The experience is usually extremely unpleasant, and emotional responses are often distorted.

The schizophrenic's experience is usually highly disorganized and incoherent. This disorganization extends even to the sense of identity, and schizophrenics may consequently feel that they are disintegrating, dying, and losing the ability to discriminate what is self and what is not. This may occasionally result in a sense of being outside the body, which in these circumstances is called autoscopia, but the experience is brief and uncontrolled (American Psychiatric Association 1987; Kaplan and Sadock:757).

Table I  
*Phenomenological Mapping of States of Consciousness*

<u>Dimension</u>	<u>Shamanism</u> Journey State	<u>Schizophrenia</u>	<u>Buddhist</u> Vipassana (Insight) Meditation	<u>Patanjali's Yoga</u>
Awareness of Environment	↓	↓ often distorted	↓	↓↓ pratyahara reduced sensory and somatic awareness
Ability to Communicate	sometimes	communication is usually distorted	usually	↓↓ drastically reduced
Concentration ability to enter and leave ASC at will	↑ momentary yes	↓↓ no	↑ momentary yes	↑↑ fixed, samadhi yes
Control ability to control the content of experience	↑ partial	↓↓	↑ partial	↑↑ extreme control in some samadhis
Arousal	↑	↑	↓ usually	↓↓

Calm	↓	↑ ↑ agitation may be extreme	↑ ↓	↑ ↓
Self Sense	Separate self sense.	Disintegrated.	loss of ego boundaries. Unable to distinguish self representation and object representations	Unchanging transcendent Atman or purusha "samadhi" without support
	may be a noncorporeal "soul"	usually - rarely +, often blured and inappropriate	usually - rarely +, often blured and inappropriate	no, loss of body awareness "ensais"
OOBE	yes, controlled	occasionally	occasionally	no
Content	organized coherent imagery determined by shamanic cosmology and purpose of journey	often disorganized, fragmented, incoherent	deconstruction of complex experiences into ("samadhi" with support) or pure their constituent consciousness ("samadhi" without support)	deconstructed into an <i>evanescent flux</i>

Comparisons of Shamanic and Schizophrenic States

Once both the shamanic journey and acute schizophrenic states have been mapped on these dimensions, it is relatively easy to compare them. Table I reveals that they differ significantly on several important dimensions including concentration, control, sense of identity, affect, and intent. This comparison makes clear that there are major differences between the states of consciousness found in shamanic journeys and in acute schizophrenia.

The other shamanic episode that has sometimes been confused with a schizophrenic one is the shamanic initiation crisis. At the time of their initial calling a few shamans-to-be appear to undergo a major life crisis and exhibit a variety of bizarre behaviors (Shirokogoroff, Eliade 1964; Walsh 1990). These are certainly suggestive of psychopathology and have been given several diagnoses, including schizophrenia. However, this phase is temporary and usually followed by successful resolution and even exceptional subsequent functioning. It has therefore been suggested that it might be interpreted as an example of a developmental crisis that has been variously called a "creative illness" (Ellenberg), "regenerative process" (Pelletier and Garfield), "renewal process" (Perry), "meianotic voyage," "visionary state," "mystical experience" (Berry).

rience with psychotic features" (Lukoff), "resilience" (Flach), "spiritual emergency," "spiritual emergence," and "transpersonal crisis" (Bragdon; Grof and Grof 1986, 1989, 1990). For a fuller discussion of the unusual behavior following the initial call and its various diagnostic interpretations see Walsh (1990). It seems most unlikely that the initiation crisis can be diagnosed as a schizophrenic episode; it occurs in only a minority of shamans. It is clearly inappropriate to use the initiation crisis as a reason to diagnose or dismiss all shamans as schizophrenic.

Social functioning must also be considered in comparing shamans and schizophrenics. It will be recalled that shamans are often outstanding members of the community, may display considerable intellectual, artistic, and leadership skills, and make significant contributions to their community. Such skills and contributions are rare among schizophrenics.

Henceforth shamanism and schizophrenia are best identified as distinct phenomena. Although it is understandable that early researchers sometimes labelled shamans as schizophrenic, it is also clear that this practice is no longer appropriate. Of course this is not to deny the possibility that some shamans may be psychologically disturbed, but it is certainly to deny that they are all necessarily so.

### Comparisons with Other Traditions

Within recent years there has been a growing tendency to equate shamans with masters of various contemplative traditions, especially Buddhism and yoga, and to assume that the states of consciousness that the shaman enters are identical to those of these practitioners and traditions.

Yet, as we will see, multidimensional mapping and comparisons reveal some significant similarities but also significant differences between these states. Furthermore, in addition to the evidence of careful phenomenological comparisons there are significant theoretical arguments against equivalence. These arguments can be outlined briefly as follows:

1. As was mentioned, there are probably multiple shamanic states of consciousness, e.g., journey, possession, and drug states. Therefore careful comparison between traditions involves more than finding one shamanic state and claiming it is identical with a state attained in other traditions. Rather multiple comparisons are necessary.
2. Other traditions such as Buddhism and yoga have many distinct practices and paths. Buddhism, for example, has literally dozens of

meditation practices (Conze; Goleman), and there is no evidence to suggest that they induce identical states. In fact, phenomenological reports suggest major differences between them. For example, the Buddhist concentrative states, the jhanas, differ dramatically from the states of the central Buddhist vipassana (insight) meditation (Buddhaghosa). Indeed, the jhanic concentrative states are closer in many ways to yogic samadhis (Goleman), but this is hardly surprising given that they were originally derived from yogic concentration practices (Narada).

3. \* Yogic and Buddhist practices evolve through apparently invariant series of markedly distinct states and stages, e.g., the ten zen oxherding pictures and the eight jhanas of Buddhism and the various stages of yogic samadhi (Feuerstein 1989). Therefore, multiple states may exist even within a single practice.

In summary, claims that shamans and masters of other traditions are equivalent and access identical states will need to make multiple comparisons between multiple states on multiple dimensions, something that simply has not been done. These theoretical arguments point to several reasons why it is difficult to make sweeping claims for identity between shamanic states and those of other traditions. Of course this is not to deny that there may be some experiential and functional overlap between different states inasmuch as they may involve similar processes and aims, such as attentional training and compassionate service (Peters).

These theoretical reservations are supported by data, for when we make direct multidimensional comparisons we find not identity but major differences. Thus, for example, let us make a summary comparison in the accompanying table between the prototypic shamanic journey state and prototypic states that are likely to occur in advanced Buddhist vipassana meditation and advanced yogic practice. This comparison will be aided by a summary presentation of the principles and experiences of classical yogic and Buddhist insight meditations. These descriptions are based on classic texts (e.g., Prabhavananda and Isherwood; Buddhaghosa), recent descriptions (e.g., Goldstein), interviews with advanced Asian and Western practitioners, psychological testing (Shapiro and Walsh; Forte and Dysard 1984a,b; Brown and Engler), and fifteen years of personal meditative experience (Walsh 1977, 1978).

Classical yoga is a concentration practice in which the mind is stilled until it can be fixed with unwavering attention on inner experience such as the breath, an image, or a mantra (Eliade 1969; Zimmer; Feuerstein 1989, 1990). To do this the yogi withdraws attention from the body and outer world, a technique called *pratyahara*, to focus inwards "like a tor-

toise withdrawing his limbs into his shell." As a result awareness of the body and outer world is largely lost and the yogi can focus undistractedly on ever more subtle internal objects. Finally all objects drop away and the yogi experiences samadhi, which is an example of the classical ecstatic mystical union or *unio mystica* (Underhill; Stace; Forman).

Whereas classical yoga is a concentration practice, Buddhist insight meditation is a so-called awareness practice. Whereas yoga emphasizes the development of unwavering attention on inner objects, insight meditation emphasizes fluid attention to all objects, both inner and outer. Here all stimuli are observed and examined as precisely and minutely as awareness will allow. The aim is to examine and understand the workings of senses, body, and mind as fully as possible, and thereby to cut through the distortions and misunderstandings that usually cloud awareness. "To see things as they are" is the motto of this practice (Buddhaghosa; Goldstein; Goleman).

Table 1 shows that the shamanic journey and yogic and Buddhist states differ on a number of significant dimensions. Perceptual sensitivity to environmental stimuli shows dramatic differences between states. In Buddhist vipassana meditation states both ancient and modern phenomenological reports (Buddhaghosa; Nyanaponika Thera; Walsh 1977, 1978; Goldstein) as well as recent tachistoscopic testing (Brown, Forte and Dysart 1984a,b) suggest that perceptual sensitivity to environmental stimulation can be significantly enhanced. However awareness of the environment is usually somewhat reduced in the shamanic journey and drastically reduced, even to the point of nonawareness, in advanced yogic states (Zimmer, Feuerstein 1989). Indeed Eliade (1958:78) defined samadhi as "an invulnerable state in which perception of the external world is absent."

These differences in environmental awareness are reflected in differences in communication. Buddhist insight meditators can usually communicate, and shamans can sometimes do so (Peters and Price-Williams 1980). However, in advanced yogic concentration communication is usually sufficient to break concentration and remove the practitioner from the state (Goleman).

The types and degree of concentration also vary from tradition to tradition. In contradistinction to schizophrenia, in which concentration is drastically impaired, all three traditions train for increased concentration. Indeed, training attention appears to be a common denominator among consciousness-altering practices (Novak). In shamanism and vipassana meditation, concentration is momentary, since attention

moves fluidly from one object to another (Eliade 1964; Golstein). This is in marked contrast to advanced yogic practice, where attention is fixed and immovable (Eliade 1969; Feuerstein 1989).

Closely related to concentration is control. Two different dimensions of control should be distinguished. The first is the ability to enter and leave the ASC at will, and the second is the ability to determine the experiential content of the ASC. Contrary to schizophrenia, where control is drastically reduced, all three disciplines enhance both types of control. Practitioners are able to enter and leave their respective states at will although the shaman may require external assistance such as psychoactive drugs or entrancing stimuli such as drumming. Both shamans and vipassana meditators are able to exert partial control over their experiences in the ASC, while yogis in samadhi have almost complete control. Indeed, the second line of Patanjali's classic yogic text states that "yoga is the control of thought-waves in the mind" (Prabhavanada and Isherwood:15).

There are also significant differences in arousal. Shamans are usually aroused during their journey and may even dance or become highly agitated. Vipassana meditators, on the other hand, report initial emotional and arousal lability, which gradually yields to greater calm (Walsh 1977, 1978; Goldstein). Calm may become profound in yogic samadhi when much of the normal cognitive processing ceases (Brown; Eliade 1969; Shapiro and Walsh). Although I cannot fully agree with Roland Fischer's "cartography of nonordinary states" based on levels of arousal, it is interesting to note that he places samadhi at the extreme end of hypoarousal and schizophrenic states near the extreme end of hyperarousal.

The self-sense differs drastically among the three practices. The shaman usually retains a sense of being a separate individual, though now perhaps identified as a soul rather than as a body. However, the Buddhist meditator's microscopic awareness deconstructs the self-sense into a flux of evanescent component stimuli. This is the experience of *anatta*, in which it is recognized that the sense of a permanent, separate egoic self is an illusory product of imprecise awareness. This apparently continuous self-sense arises in much the same way as an apparently dynamic continuous movie arises from a series of still frames (Goldstein; Goleman), a phenomenon known as flicker fusion. The yogi, on the other hand, may come to realize an unchanging transcendent Self, or *purusha* (Eliade 1969; Zimmer).

The shaman's experience may be either joyous or painful, as may the

Buddhist vipassana meditator's. However, in advanced stages the yogi's experiences are said to be increasingly blissful.

The content of the practitioners' experiences also differs dramatically between traditions. The shaman experiences organized coherent imagery consistent with the shamanic worldview and the purpose of the journey. However, both ancient phenomenological reports and recent perceptual testing (Brown and Engler) suggest that Buddhist meditators eventually deconstruct all experiences into their constituent stimuli. What remains is the perception of an evanescent flux of simple stimuli which arise and pass away with extreme rapidity. By contrast, the advanced yogi is said to attain "samadhi without support," an experience of unchanging pure consciousness devoid of images or objects of any kind.

Practitioners from the three traditions show significant differences with regard to their experience of the body. Whereas the shaman typically has a controlled out-of-body experience (OOBE) or "ecstasis," the Buddhist vipassana meditator does not. Yogis, on the other hand, may lose awareness of the body due to *pratyahara* (elimination of sensory input) and experience "enstasis." On this point Eliade, whose theoretical knowledge of both shamanism and yoga was probably as extensive as anyone's, was very clear on the difference between the two:

Yoga cannot possibly be confused with shamanism or classed among the techniques of ecstasy. The goal of classic yoga remains perfect *autonomy*, enstasis, while shamanism is characterized by its desperate effort to attain the 'condition of a spirit,' to accomplish ecstatic flight. (339)

### COMMON EXPERIENCES AND CAPACITIES

There is a popular saying that all things are both similar and different. Having demonstrated significant differences between shamanic, Buddhist, and yogic states, the question naturally arises "in what ways are they similar?" Certainly we would expect some similarities since all three groups of practitioners have undergone long-term intensive mental training designed to cultivate religious sensitivity, experiences, and understandings. I will therefore briefly summarize the similarities that can be identified on the experiential dimensions we have been using.

### Control

All three practitioners have developed the ability to enter and leave desired states of consciousness with relative ease. Of course, this is hardly surprising, since this ability was a criterion for inclusion in this study.

### Concentration

All three groups of practitioners exhibit heightened concentration. However the type of concentration, fixed or fluid, is specific to the training and task.

### Affect

In the course of their training all three practitioners are almost invariably forced to confront a variety of fearful negative experiences. The general tendency is, as might be expected from psychological principles of implosive therapy, a gradual decrease in the intensity of these negative experiences. In these practices this is followed by a tendency for more pleasant, even ecstatic and blissful, experiences to arise (Elkin; Goldstein; Goleman).

### Self-Sense

All three practitioners experience a shift in identity, although there are significant differences in the experiences that induce it and the sense of self that results. However, the common element is a disidentification from the conventional egoic body-bound self-sense.

### Content

All three practices induce specific religiously significant experiences. What is remarkable is that these experiences are consistent with the worldview and ontocosmology of the tradition. This suggests that there is an intriguing complementarity between a tradition's worldview and its technology of transcendence such that an effective technology (set of practices) elicits experiences consistent with and supportive of the world-view (Walsh 1991). Since worldview and expectation can mold experience, there is therefore an interesting question as to what extent technology or worldview is chicken or egg.

### IS THERE A COMMON MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE?

One of the major questions that has dominated philosophical discussion of mysticism since William James is whether or not there is any core mystical experience that is common across cultures and traditions. Walter Stace and some advocates of the perennial philosophy argue yes; no, say "constructivists," such as Steven Katz (1978, 1983), who argue that all experience, including mystical experience, is constructed and hence mediated and modified by a variety of conditioned, inescapable, personal and cultural experiences and filters. Others argue that the question remains open (Smith 1987; Rothberg 1989, 1990). For an excellent examination of the epistemological assumptions underlying Katz's position see Rothberg (1989, 1990). Since the comparisons made above clearly indicate significant differences between shamanic, yogic and Buddhist experiences, they would seem to favor the constructivists and argue against the view that there exists a common mystical experience.

Yet this may be only part of the story. Although the yogic and Buddhist meditative experiences described above are indeed advanced, they are not the most profound. At the highest reaches of meditation, transcendent experiences of a wholly different kind, radically discontinuous from all that have gone before, are said to occur. These are the samadhi of yoga and the nirvana of Buddhism.

Here description and reason are said to fail: "Not by reasoning is this apprehension attainable" (Katha Upanishad 1,2,4); "words return along with the mind not attaining it" (Taittiriya Upanishad 2,9,1). For these experiences, and the realms they putatively reveal, are said to be beyond space, time, qualities, concepts, and limits of any kind. Hence these experiences are said to be ineffable, indescribable, and inconceivable because they are transempirical, transverbal, and transrational. In the words of the third Zen patriarch Sengstan:

To this ultimate finality  
no law or description applies. . . .  
The more you talk about it  
The further astray you wander from the truth.

Here phenomenological description, mapping, and comparison fail, for even to attempt to qualify, let alone map and measure, experiences and domains is said to result invariably in paradox, inasmuch as this is Nicholas de Cusa's "coincidence of opposites," Zen's "not-one, not-two," and Vedanta's "advaita."

The paradox of attempting to describe the coincidence of opposites

is, as Kant was to discover, that the opposite of any apparently valid statement is also valid. Almost fifteen hundred years before Kant, Nagarjuna—founder of Madhyamaka Buddhism—reached virtually the same conclusion, “a conclusion echoed and amplified in succeeding generations by every major school of Eastern philosophy and psychology: Reason cannot grasp the essence of absolute reality, and when it tries, it generates only dualistic incompatibilities” (Wilber 1983:18). The primary and liberating task, say both Buddhist and yogic traditions, is not to describe these states and experiences but rather to know them for oneself through direct, transrational intuition and its resultant wisdom, *prajna*, or *jnana*.

Are the yogic samadhi and Buddhist nirvana identical, or, more precisely, are they indistinguishable? It seems that one can not say that they are different, but then one also cannot say they are the same, since both similarities and differences depend on being able to attribute and compare qualities. The answer, at least for yoga and Buddhism, to the question of whether there exists a common core mystical experience may be neither yes nor no but rather, from a Western philosophical perspective, “what can be said at all can be said clearly, what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence” (Wittgenstein 1961:3).

The ineffability of the yogic samadhi and Buddhist nirvana does not answer the questions of whether there exists a mystical experience common to diverse traditions or whether all mystical experiences are constructed. However, it does suggest that, although many yogic, Buddhist, and shamanic states can be differentiated by phenomenological mapping, there may be some states, perhaps the most profound, that cannot be mapped or distinguished.

### Are Shamans Also Mystics?

And what of shamanism? Do its practitioners also access mystical states? I have found no references to the *unio mystica* in the literature, and one authority categorically states that in shamanism “we never find the mystical union with the divinity so typical for the ecstatic experience in the ‘higher forms of religious mysticism’” (Hultkrantz:28).

However, there are three lines of evidence that suggest that this conclusion could be incorrect. These are the facts that shamanism is an oral tradition, that powerful psychedelics may be used, and that some Western practitioners report unitive experiences.

Since shamanism is an oral tradition, it is possible that such experiences may have occurred, at least occasionally, but have been lost to

subsequent generations and of course therefore to Western researchers. Without writing there may be no way to preserve adequately a record of the highest and rarest flowerings of a tradition.

Although not an essential part of shamanism, the use of psychedelics is common in some areas (Harner 1973). Peyote and ayahuasca, for example, are powerful psychedelics capable of inducing experiences that some researchers regard as genuine mystical ones (Grof 1988; Smith 1964; Walsh and Vaughan).

Finally, Westerners being trained in shamanic practices may report unitive experiences, and I have personally heard two such accounts. These seemed to be examples of nature mysticism, although of course there is the possibility that other types of mystical experience may also occur. All of this suggests that, although the *unio mystica* is not the goal of shamanic practices, it may sometimes occur.

#### SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

Claims that shamanic states are identical to those of schizophrenia, Buddhism, or yoga appear to have been based on imprecise comparisons and both theory and data argue against their equivalence. In part this confusion reflects a history of imprecise mapping of altered states. More precise, though still preliminary, multidimensional phenomenological mapping and comparisons of altered states are now possible. The maps and comparisons presented here are obviously only initial steps. However, even at this preliminary stage of development they suggest that, while shamanic, Buddhist and yogic states show some functional and experiential overlap, they are usually quite distinct and also show major differences from schizophrenic states. An obvious next step would be to use one of the psychometric tests now being developed, such as *The Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory* (Pekala and Kumar), to obtain quantitative assessments and comparisons of the phenomenology of these states. Another would be to obtain electrophysiological measurements of shamanic states to compare with the measurements already available of schizophrenic and meditative states. Hopefully further research will enable us to map, compare, and distinguish these and other states with increasing precision.

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