

## 58 States and Stages of Consciousness: Current Research and Understandings

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If the two Tucson conferences on consciousness have made one thing clear it is that we have no clear agreement on a definition for consciousness.

Even though people may not know what consciousness is, they have gone to enormous efforts throughout recorded history to try to change it. Physiological methods such as fasting, sleep deprivation, exposure to heat or cold; environmental approaches such as solitude and retreats in nature; sensory stimulation by music and dance; pharmacological means such as psychedelics; disciplines such as yoga, meditation, or contemplation; all have been used for thousands of years to alter consciousness.

The prevalence and importance of altered states of consciousness (ASCs) may be gathered from Bourguignon's (1973, p. 11) finding that 90 percent of cultures have institutionalized forms of them. She concludes that 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."

And yet in the West, systematic study of ASCs began just recently, undertaken primarily by transpersonal psychologists. Our understanding of ASCs therefore has developed mostly in parallel with the transpersonal movement.

This movement began in the late 1960s when a small group of people met in the San Francisco Bay area seeking to expand the scope of Western psychology and culture, which seemed to be overlooking some of the most meaningful and important aspects in human existence. Born in the laboratory and clinic, Western psychology and psychiatry had been dominated by behaviorism and psychoanalysis. These disciplines had contributed a great deal, but by focusing on simple, measurable behavior and on pathology they had also overlooked a great deal, including psychological health and exceptional well being. Worse still, they had reduced or pathologized crucial parts of human experience such as alternative states of consciousness to neurotic processes or neuropathology.

Abraham Maslow was a leader in giving birth to the transpersonal movement. Maslow (1968) was increasingly interested in psychological health as opposed to pathology and concluded that, "to oversimplify the matter, it is as if Freud supplied to us the sick half of psychology and we must now fill it out with the healthy half".

One characteristic in Maslow's exceptionally healthy subjects—"self-actualizers," he called them—was to prove crucial for the transpersonal movement's birth. These subjects tended to have peak experiences: spontaneous, ecstatic, unitive states of consciousness akin to the mystical experiences widely reported and highly valued in many centuries and cultures. Here was an indication that psychological health and potential might include possibilities undreamed of by mainstream psychology. Transpersonal psychology arose to explore these possibilities. The name *transpersonal* was chosen to reflect a characteristic common to many of these possibilities: the sense of self or identity could extend beyond (trans-) the personality or individual person, beyond the entity Alan Watts called the skin-encapsulated ego, to encompass larger aspects of humankind, life, and cosmos.

Initially it was thought that peak experiences were inevitably spontaneous, brief, and almost overwhelming. Subjects regarded these experiences as the high points of their lives but also doubted if they could stand them for more than brief periods (Maslow 1971).

It was therefore a shock when the pioneers turned eastward. For they found that Asian psychologies, philosophies, religions, and contemplative disciplines have been systematically studying consciousness and its states for centuries and have detailed accounts, not just about peak experiences, but whole families of peak experiences. Moreover, they seemed to have disciplines—such as yoga and meditation—capable not only of inducing peak experiences but of sustaining them. In other words, they claimed that peak experiences could be transformed into plateau experiences and altered states of consciousness could be stabilized as altered traits of consciousness. Knowing the long history and remarkable richness of the Asian traditions' study of consciousness, it seems essential that future conferences on consciousness ensure that those perspectives be represented.

## THE MANY STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

### Multiple States

As research continued, more and more alternate states of consciousness were recognized and many appeared beneficial. This abundance contrasted starkly with the conventional Western view, which had long considered altered states to be relatively few and primarily pathological, such as delirium and intoxication. Indeed, our culture has long resisted even recognizing the existence, let alone the value, of alternate states.

A most dramatic example of this resistance was the reaction to hypnosis and the British physician James Esdaile. While stationed in India more than a century ago, Esdaile discovered the remarkable capacity of hypnosis to reduce pain and mortality in surgical patients. So startling were Esdaile's findings that medical journals refused to publish his reports. On his return to Britain, Esdaile therefore, arranged a demonstration before the British

College of Physicians and Surgeons, where he amputated a gangrenous leg while the hypnotized patient lay smiling calmly. His colleagues' conclusion? Esdaile had paid a hardened rogue to pretend he felt no pain. Charles Tart (1986, p. 80) comments, "They must have had very hard rogues in those days."

The cause and result of this resistance is that our modern Western world view is the culture that anthropologists call *monophasic*, as opposed to *polyphasic* (Laughlin, McManus, and Aquilino 1992, Laughlin, McManus, and Shearer 1993). That is, we value and derive our world view almost exclusively from one state: the usual waking state. By contrast, polyphasic cultures value and derive their world views from multiple states such as waking, dreaming, and various contemplative states. One goal for the transpersonal movement therefore has been to try to open psychology and other disciplines to polyphasic perspectives.

Let us summarize the story thus far. Some of the transpersonal pioneers' earliest discoveries centered on the value and variety of alternate states of consciousness. Specifically they discovered whole families of potential transpersonal states, that these states have been recognized and valued for centuries by many cultures, but by contrast that all have generally been denied or pathologized in the West (Walsh 1993).

#### THE TASK OF DIFFERENTIATING STATES

Once this richness and plasticity of consciousness were recognized, the obvious question was: How can these alternate states, and the disciplines that produce them, be categorized and compared? One response was to put them all together and say of diverse states and disciplines that they are just equivalent roads up the same mountain. General systems thereby would call this an argument for equifinality, the claim that diverse states and paths will invariably culminate in the same state.

This interpretation was very neat but unfortunately very naive. Indeed it became ever more apparent that the truth is far more complex. Significant differences distinguish the states produced by different disciplines, but also we have ways of categorizing and clustering these states. Phenomenological mapping and deep structural analyses would provide the necessary methods.

In the past, most who made comparisons attempted only to say whether specific states were identical or different. Phenomenological mapping, though, is a method for mapping and comparing states of consciousness on multiple experiential dimensions and it therefore allows more precise and multidimensional comparisons. For example, it has been claimed that shamanic, yogic, and Buddhist practices result in identical states of consciousness: "shamans, yogis and Buddhists, alike are accessing the same state of consciousness" (Doore 1988, p. 223) and that the shaman "experiences existential unity—the samadhi of the Hindus or what Western mystics and spiritualists call enlightenment and illumination, *unio mystica*" (Kalweit 1988, p. 236).

**Table 58.1** Transpersonal States: Distinctions and Similarities (from Walsh 1993)

Dimension	Shamanism	Buddhist (Vipassana) Insight Meditation	Patanjali's yoga
Control	↑ Partial	↑ Partial	↑↑ Extreme control in some samadhis
Awareness of environment	↑ Decreased	↑ Increased	↓↓ Greatly reduced
Concentration	↑ Increased, fluid	↑ Increased, fluid	↑↑ Increased, fixed
Arousal	↑ Increased	↓ Usually decreased	↓↓ Greatly decreased
Affect	+ or -	+ or - (positive tends to increase)	Ineffable bliss
Identity	Separate self-sense, may be a nonphysical "soul"	Self-sense is deconstructed into a changing flux: "no self"	Unchanging transcendent self, or <i>purusha</i>
Out-of-body experience	Yes, controlled ecstasy ("ecstasis")	No	No, loss of body awareness ("enstasis")
Experience	Organized, coherent imagery determined by shamanic cosmology and purpose of journey	Deconstruction of complex experiences into constituent stimuli and flux	Single-object ("samadhi with support") or pure consciousness ("samadhi without support")

In fact, however, we find major differences when we map states from these disciplines on multiple experiential dimensions. When we compare such vital aspects as control, awareness of the environment, concentration, arousal, emotion, self-sense, and content of experience, many differences among shamanic, yogic, and Buddhist states become apparent (see Table 58.1).

The point in phenomenological mapping is that it allows us to map, compare, and differentiate states of consciousness on not one, but many experiential dimensions, with greater precision than has heretofore been possible. The result is that we can better appreciate the richness and variety of transpersonal states and also clearly differentiate them from pathological states such as schizophrenia, with which they have sometimes been confused (Walsh 1990, 1993; Walsh and Vaughan 1993a).

### COMMON DEEP STRUCTURES

Once we discover these many states, several questions come up. Can we make sense of this multiplicity of states? Can we identify commonalities and cluster states in some coherent manner? Are they related in some developmental sequence? And can we find a framework to provide coherent understanding of their roles and relationships? In recent years the answer to all these questions has been yes, thanks mainly to Ken Wilber, who has used the principles of developmental structuralism to identify similarities among

states and to cluster them accordingly (Walsh 1993, 1996; Walsh and Vaughan 1994; Wilber 1995, 1996, 1997; Wilber, Engler, and Brown 1986).

A major concept in Wilber's work is the "deep structure," which was introduced first in linguistics but is perhaps easiest to clarify by analogy with the human face. Underlying the billions of unique human faces are a few deep structures, such as ears, eyes, nose, mouth, and hair. These few structures allow for vast numbers of different faces (surface structures) and allow us to distinguish one from another.

Wilber's contribution is in applying this kind of deep structural analysis to states of consciousness. He suggests that underlying the vast array of states of consciousness are relatively few deep structures. For example, the shaman seeing power animals, the Buddhist contemplative envisioning Buddha images, and the Hindu practitioner merging with her Ishta deva clearly are all having different experiences. And yet at a deep structural level they are all seeing archetypal religious figures: figures that symbolize and "embody" specific desired qualities such as wisdom, compassion, or power.

Likewise, the Buddhist in nirvana and the Vedantist in nirvikalpa samadha are both experiencing states in which no objects or images arise into awareness. The deep structure of their experiences is therefore similar or identical. It is also clearly distinct, though, from the deep structure of an archetypal religious figure and from nondual experiences.

This kind of deep structural analysis makes clear that it may be possible to cluster contemplative experiences and states and identify a finite number of underlying deep structures. This analysis in turn may allow a map of contemplative experiences and states, which Wilber in fact provides.

Although applying deep structural analyses to transpersonal experiences is a remarkable innovation, Wilber goes further, combining it with developmental analyses, thus yielding a powerful developmental structuralism. Wilber (1995, 1996) suggests that transpersonal deep structures and their corresponding states of consciousness may take form in a specific developmental sequence in several major stages. Among these stages are (1) recognizing increasingly subtle realms of mind, (2) going beyond all objects and appearances to pure consciousness, and (3) recognizing all objects and phenomena as creations or projections of consciousness. Wilber calls these stages subtle, causal, and nondual.

### Subtle

When contemplative practices work their effects, when the usual raucous mental activity is stilled, when the mind quiets and becomes more sensitive, then, say various traditions, an inner world of subtle mental phenomena comes to awareness. These mental phenomena may be formless, as in the light and sound of shabd and nad yoga or the emotions of love and joy in the Buddhist *brahma viharas*. On the other hand, the mental phenomena in these subtle stages may take specific forms such as the archetypal images described above or also random forms.

## Causal

After subtle states have deepened and stabilized, causal states devoid of objects, images, or phenomena may arise. This is the unmanifest realm called, for example, pure consciousness, Mind, spirit, or geist. This causal condition is described as the abyss of Gnosticism, the Atman of Vedanta, the nirvana of Buddhism, and the Tao of Taoism.

## The Nondual

In the nondual condition, objects and images reappear but are immediately and spontaneously perceived as projections, or modifications of consciousness (Wilber 1995, 1996). Now it seems that consciousness manifests itself as the universe. This state is described as Zen's One Mind, Aurobindo's Supermind, Hinduism's Brahman-Atman or *sat-chit-ananda* (being-consciousness-bliss).

Contemplatives who reach this stage experience consciousness in a radically new way. For them, consciousness seems to have awakened and seems to see itself in all things; to recognize itself in and as all worlds, realms, and beings of the universe; unbound by space, time, and limits of any kind because it creates space, time, and limits. This, so it is said, is the final realization or awakening variously known as enlightenment, liberation, wu, moksha, or fana, which these traditions regard as one of the highest goals in human existence (Walsh 1993; Wilber 1995, 1997)

Here I describe phenomenological accounts and I do not try to argue for one ontology. I do, however, argue for open-mindedness about ontologies.

For example, the nondual experience obviously suggests a radical philosophical idealism: a world view that sees consciousness as primary and matter as derivative. Most participants in the Tucson conferences have been wedded to philosophical materialism, the belief that matter is primary. Remember that this world view has never been proved by science or philosophy; rather it is a presupposition. Indeed, neither science nor philosophy has ever been able to prove the existence of an outside world, a problem that Immanuel Kant referred to as "the scandal of philosophy."

From the contemplative's viewpoint, philosophical materialism is the world view that follows naturally in the absence of ASCs. Contemplatives suggest that the deeper one's meditation, the richer the array of ASCs experienced: the further one has explored the mind contemplatively, the more likely one is to recognize the remarkable creative capacity of consciousness and to move toward a philosophical idealism.

For those who object that consciousness could not possibly create an apparently external, objective, material, independent world, not to mention bodies, please remember that we do it every night. We call it dreaming.

## LABORATORY SUPPORT

Enlightenment sounds like a nice idea, but do we have supporting evidenced for it, or is it merely a pleasant fantasy? In recent years both supportive analogies and laboratory findings have become available.

From laboratory studies of meditators comes evidence of heightened awareness in both waking and sleeping states. Tachistoscopic studies of advanced meditators who had reached at least the first in the four classic Buddhist stages of enlightenment revealed enhanced perceptual processing speed and sensitivity (Brown, Forte, and Dysart 1984a, b).

Rorschach tests showed a particularly interesting pattern. They suggested that these enlightened subjects were not necessarily free of normal psychological conflicts about dependency, sexuality, and aggression. Strikingly, however, they showed little defensiveness and reactivity to these issues (Brown and Engler 1986; Murphy and Donovan 1997).

Enhanced awareness may also occur during sleep. In the transcendental-meditation tradition the first stage in enlightenment is named cosmic consciousness and is defined by unbroken continuity of awareness—which Ken Wilber calls subject permanence—during waking and sleeping states. Recent EEG studies of advanced TM practitioners who claimed to have reached this state were supportive (Mason et al. 1997).

The awareness that one is dreaming during dreams, known as lucid dreaming, may offer an excellent analogy or metaphor for enlightenment. Lucid dreaming has been advocated for hundreds of years by yogic, sufi, and Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Western psychologists dismissed the state as impossible, however, until the 1970s, when it was demonstrated in the laboratory (LaBerge 1985, Gackenbach and Bosveld 1989, Walsh and Vaughan 1992, 1993a).

During lucidity, subjects “awaken” in their dream. At that moment they are startled to recognize that the world that formerly seemed unquestionably external, objective, material, and independent is in fact an internal, subjective, immaterial, and dependent mental creation and that they are the creators, not the victims of the dream. They can then, if they choose, begin various meditative practices within the dream (LaBerge 1997; Surya Das 1997).

Just how far this discipline can be taken is indicated by advanced practitioners such as Aurobindo (1993) and Tibetan dream yogis. In Tibetan dream yoga, practitioners are first taught to become lucid in their dreams and then to use dreams as part of their meditative practice. Lucidity is then cultivated in nondream sleep so that the yogis seek to remain continuously aware 24 hours a day. Meanwhile, during daylight hours, they cultivate the awareness that their waking experience is also a dream (Dalai Lama 1983, LaBerge 1985, 1993). The ideal result is unbroken awareness around the clock and the sense that all experience is a creation of mind (La Berge 1997)

## OUR USUAL STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Clearly, then, the human condition offers possibilities far beyond those usually recognized. It follows that the condition we have called "normality" is not the peak of human development but rather may represent an arbitrary, culturally determined form of developmental arrest. Maslow (1968, p. 16) summarized the situation well by saying "Certainly it seems more and more clear that what we call 'normal' in psychology is really a psychopathology of the average, so undramatic and so widely spread that we don't even notice it ordinarily."

Indeed, the world's contemplative traditions widely agree that our usual state of consciousness is not only suboptimal but significantly distorted and dreamlike. In the East the dreamlike characteristics of our usual state have been called *maya* or illusion, and in the West they have been called a consensus trance (Charles Tart), a verbal trance (Fritz Perls), hypnosis (Willis Harman), or a collective psychosis (Roger Walsh).

Usually the dream goes unrecognized for several reasons. We all share in it, we have been hypnotized since infancy, and we live in the biggest cult of all: *cult-ure*.

Let us summarize the contemplative traditions' primary claim. A state of consciousness is available to us that is related to our ordinary waking state as lucid dreaming is to ordinary dreaming.

We can therefore very easily summarize the great contemplative traditions' message. It is "Wake up!" Wake up from your suboptimal entranced state of consciousness; wake up to your postconventional developmental possibilities; wake up to your transpersonal nature.

## SUMMARY

What then has been achieved in our understanding of states and stage of consciousness?

We started by recognizing that there is more to human beings and the human possibility than had been recognized, and that this more includes multiple states of consciousness.

From thinking that there was only one type of peak experience we have come to recognize whole families of such experiences and have devised ways of mapping and comparing them.

We have recognized that ours is a monophasic culture, which may constrict and distort our world view.

We have identified common structures underlying experiences that apparently differ widely and thereby have been able to cluster transpersonal experiences and states into classes.

We have mapped development beyond the limit that was formerly thought the ceiling of human possibility and have found preliminary evidence of common transpersonal, transconventional developmental sequences in many traditions.

We have discovered common elements and processes in many of the world's authentic contemplative disciplines and recognized that these disciplines form an art and technology for catalyzing postconventional development. Moreover, we have gathered laboratory evidence that these disciplines are efficacious and now have several hundred studies just on meditation.

We have also begun to understand the achievement that for centuries has been considered the *summum bonum*—enlightenment or liberation—and have found laboratory support for some classical claims.

Most of these discoveries have been made during the last thirty years. Who can guess what the next thirty will bring? But they may bring most if we combine the best of Eastern and Western perspectives and combine the best of science with the best of contemplative inquiry.

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