

# PHENOMENOLOGICAL MAPPING: A METHOD FOR DESCRIBING AND COMPARING STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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## INTRODUCTION

States of consciousness have long been a central concern of transpersonal psychology. Indeed, the field arose out of the recognition of a family of transpersonal states in which the sense of self expanded beyond (*trans*) the individual person or personality to encompass wider aspects of life and the cosmos. Such experiences have been highly valued across cultures and centuries—our own being a notable exception—and some have even been regarded as the *summum bonum*, the highest good and highest goal of existence.

*experiences  
highly  
valued  
across  
cultures  
and  
centuries*

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

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,

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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, 1988).

For example, consider the varieties of ASC that have been identified in Indian meditative and yogic practices alone. These 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 such as the faint inner sounds of *shabd* yoga or the subtle pseudonirvanic bliss of Buddhist *vipassana* meditation (Goldstein, 1983; Goleman, 1988). Then too there are unitive states in which the sense of separation between self and world dissolves; there are others in which all objects of phenomena disappear such as in Buddhist *nirvana* or Vedantic *nirvikalpa samadhi*; and states in which all phenomena are perceived as expressions or modifications of consciousness, e.g. *sahaj samadhi* (Wilber, 1980, 1995; Free John, 1985). Of course this is not to deny that certain states may display significant functional and experiential commonalities.

distinct  
states  
sui  
generis

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, 1980; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984; Wilber, Engler & Brown, 1986; Goleman, 1988). Until relatively recently, however, these Asian meditative and yogic states were often regarded as pathological and their practitioners were regarded as neurotic at best or psychotic at worst (Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, 1976). 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 & Selesnich, 1966, p. 457).

The reasons for this long history of the conflation and pathologizing of religious states are probably several. Most notably, Western psychology, philosophy, and culture are predominantly monophasic, meaning that their world view is drawn almost exclusively from only one state of consciousness, namely the usual waking state. This contrasts with many other cultures and disciplines, e.g., Vedantic philosophy, Buddhist *Abhidharma* psychology, and Jewish Kabbalah which are polyphasic, i.e., drawing their worldview from multiple states including contemplative and dream states (Laughlin et al., 1992, 1993). A major goal of transpersonal psychology has been to move our culture and psychology from monophasic to polyphasic.

One cause and effect of the prevailing Western monophasia has been 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 limitation doubtless plays a role in the widely observed bias in clinical psychiatry and psychology to pathologize unusual experiences (Jung, 1957; Maslow, 1968; Noll, 1983). This bias can be particularly important in cross-cultural studies because “anthropologists sometimes fail to distinguish clinic and culture” (Opler, 1961). Related to this is what Michael Harner (1990) calls “cognicentrism,” the tendency to assume that one’s own usual state is optimal.

*“cognicentrism”*

A final reason for the conflation and pathologizing of religious ASCs is that most researchers have had little direct experience of the states they investigate. Yet classical descriptions, psychological and philosophical arguments (Tart, 1983; Walsh, 1989d), and personal reports by Western trained researchers who have experienced altered states (e.g. Globus, 1993; Harner, 1990; Tart, 1986, Ram Dass, 1990) suggest that it may be difficult to fully comprehend 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 on the one hand and those of psychological disturbances, including schizophrenia, on the other (Kornfield, 1979; Shapiro, 1980; Walsh, 1980; Wilber, 1983; Wilber, Engler & Brown, 1986). Indeed, several hundred studies now attest to potential therapeutic benefits of these practices (Shapiro, 1980; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984; Murphy & Donovan, 1989) and, as Ken Wilber (1980, p. 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 em-

ploy a new phenomenological approach that allows more precise, multidimensional description, mapping, and comparison of states of consciousness, 3) to map shamanic states, 4) to then compare shamanistic states with other states which some authors have claimed are identical, 5) to point out the possibilities of this new phenomenological method for comparing states a) across disciplines, b) within a given discipline, and c) during maturation of a particular practice.

### *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 (1935, p. 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."

*broad  
and  
narrow  
definitions*

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; Nipinsky-Naxon, 1993). Within this definitional class there are broad and narrow definitions. Broad definitions such as those of Peters and Price-Williams (1980, p. 408) stipulate that the "only defining attribute is that the specialist enter into a controlled ASC on behalf of his community." Narrow definitions on the other hand stipulate a specific category of ASCs, most often states in which shamanic journeying or soul flight occurs (Eliade, 1964; Noll, 1983; Walsh, 1989a, 1990), and Michael Harner (1990) has attempted to describe and define shamanism in terms of a single specific state.

The definition used here is a narrow one. Shamanism is defined 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, 1990).

#### 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, 1982; Noll, 1983). Indeed, the "experience of the shaman has been likened to almost every psychopathology" (Peters & Price-Williams, 1980, p. 394). The shaman has been called, among other things, mentally deranged, an outright psychotic, a veritable idiot, a charlatan, epileptic, and, perhaps most often, an hysteric or schizophrenic (e.g. Devereux, 1961; Wissler, 1931; Radim, 1972).

*pathological  
and  
popular  
comparisons*

On the other hand 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. Thus, for example Holger Kalweit (1988, p. 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 (1988, p. 223) claims that "shamans, yogis and Buddhists alike are accessing the same state of consciousness."

Unfortunately 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 focussed 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 & 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 recovered.

However 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 & Grof, 1986, 1989; Walsh, 1990). The second is that the shaman is said to often function as one of the most effective members of the tribe, displaying superior energy, concentration, memory, knowledge, and leadership (Eliade, 1964; Harner, 1990; Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1987; Rogers, 1982), 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.

*new  
possibilities  
and  
standards*

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 similarities that shamanic states of consciousness are equivalent to other states such as those found in either 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, p. 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 on one hand and with the meditative states of Buddhism and yoga on the other. What will become apparent is 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 single state of consciousness that is invariably sought and used in shamanism but many. Shamans may induce altered states by a variety of means including fasting, solitude, dancing, drumming, and drugs (Harner, 1973, 1982; Dobkin de Rios & Winkelman, 1989; 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. For discussions of shamanic possession states, see Peters and Price-Williams (1980) and Walsh (1990).

Drug states encompass a remarkably wide variety of states. For discussion of the varieties of drugs used, see Ott (1993); for the families of drug states and their classification, see 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, 1989), but rather to say that there seems no reason to assume a single shamanic state.

This paper will focus on mapping the states occurring during the shamanic journey. The journey has been chosen for several reasons. First, 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).

*mapping  
states  
occurring  
during  
the  
shamanic  
journey*

Even to say that there is only a single state of consciousness possible in the shaman's journey may be an oversimplification. As anyone who has done multiple shamanic journeys knows, the state may vary perceptibly from journey to journey, and there are probably significant individual differences between practitioners. Of course this is not to deny that there are commonalities among these states and experiences. However it is to point out that considerable variation may occur and that even the concept of a "state of consciousness" is a somewhat 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), but the above caveats should be kept in mind.

*Trance States*

The shamanic state of consciousness during journeys is often spoken of as a trance state. 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, p. 70). It seems to have been used broadly to cover all waking ASCs and more narrowly to indicate an ASC marked by focussed attention (Peters & Price-Williams, 1983; Winkleman, 1986). In this paper the term will be used only in this latter sense.

Definitions of focussed 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 & Hurd, 1986). 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.

*the  
definition  
and  
differentiation  
of  
trance  
states*

I would suggest that the key defining characteristic of a trance state is a focussing 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, 1984, 1990).

Given the fact 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, 1976) and yogic *chakra* systems (Tart, 1983). Recent Western suggestions include maps based on systems theory (Tart, 1983), the level of arousal (Fischer, 1986), inducing variables (Ludwig, 1968), developmental stages (Wilber, 1980), and phenomenological dimensions (Clark, 1983). However this area of study is in its infancy, and none of these maps appear fully appropriate to the purposes of this paper. Consequently 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 and 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, 1976).
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., 1986). 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.

more  
sensitive  
phenomeno-  
logical  
comparisons

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 previously. 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 of information. The first is the description of journeys in the literature (e.g. Shirokogoroff, 1935; Eliade, 1964; Harner, 1982; Noll, 1983; Peters & Price-Williams, 1980). The second is interviews with native Balinese and Basque practitioners and with Westerners who had 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 professor of anthro-

pology 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, 1983, 1992). 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 person(s) 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.

*general  
profiles  
of  
shamanic  
journeys*

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 & 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, 1985, 1993) 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; Vaughan, 1995a, b; Walsh, 1989c, 1990).

Shamans may be 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  
as  
"souls" or  
"spirits"  
freed  
from  
the  
body*

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, 1971; Moody, 1975, 1988; Ring, 1980, 1984, 1986, 1993; Irwin, 1985). 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 Judaism, Taoism, Islam, yoga, and Tibetan Buddhism although the journey is not as central a practice as in shamanism (Evans-Wentz, 1958; Siegel & Hirschman, 1984; Baldrian, 1987). For example, one of the earliest Jewish spiritual disciplines comprised the *Merkabah* or chariot practices in which practitioners tried to recreate Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot. After rigorous prayer and discipline, practitioners would experience themselves ascending through the seven heavens and confronting fearful guardians until they were finally granted a vision of the throne of God. Chariot practices flourished during the first millennium of the common era but, as in many other parts of the world, these shamanic practices were eventually replaced by other disciplines (Idel, 1988; Kaplan, 1982; Scholem, 1961).

Of course 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 Western researchers,

but not all, would regard them as imaginal rather than as 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 more sensitively compare and distinguish between states using a multidimensional grid analysis.

*comparing  
several  
dimensions  
of  
experience*

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, 1994). To simplify things we will focus here on the state that occurs in an acute schizophrenic episode since it is this that has probably been confused most often 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 be-

tween individuals, we can map the acute schizophrenic episode in terms of our experiential dimensions and compare it to the shamanic state as follows:

Control may be 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 preoccupied 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 autoscopy, but the experience is brief and uncontrolled (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Kaplan & Sadock, 1995).

#### *Comparisons of Shamanic and Schizophrenic States*

*comparing  
shamanic  
journey  
and  
schizophrenic  
states*

Once both the shamanic journey and acute schizophrenic states have been mapped on these dimensions, then it is relatively easy to compare them. Table I reveals that they differ significantly on several important dimensions including concentration, control, self-sense, affect, and content. 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, 1935; 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" (Ellenberger, 1970), "regenerative process" (Pelletier & Garfield, 1976), "renewal process" (Perry, 1986), "metanoic voyage," "visionary state," "mystical experience with psychotic features" (Lukoff, 1985), "resilience" (Flach, 1988), "spiritual

emergency,” “spiritual emergence,” and “transpersonal crisis” (Bragdon, 1988; Grof & Grof, 1986, 1989, 1990). For a fuller discussion of the unusual behavior following the initial call and its various diagnostic interpretations, see Walsh (1990). Suffice it to say here that it seems most unlikely that the initiation crisis can be diagnosed as a schizophrenic episode and that it occurs in only a minority of shamans. Consequently it is clearly inappropriate to use the initiation crisis as a reason to diagnose or dismiss all shamans as schizophrenic.

Another factor that must be considered in comparing shamans and schizophrenics is social functioning. 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.

*shamanism  
and  
schizophrenia  
as  
distinct  
phenomena*

#### *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 also 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 to be 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, 1956; Goleman, 1988), 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, 1975). Indeed, the *jhanic* concentrative states are closer in many ways to yogic *samadhis* (Goleman, 1988), but this is hardly surprising given that they were originally derived from yogic concentration practices (Narada, 1980).

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, 1989).

*multidimensional  
comparisons  
find  
major  
differences*

These theoretical reservations are supported by data. For when we actually make direct multidimensional comparisons, we find not identity but rather 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 two-thousand-year-old texts (e.g. Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 1953; Buddhaghosa, 1975), recent descriptions (e.g., Goldstein, 1983), interviews with advanced Asian and Western practitioners, psychological testing (Shapiro & Walsh, 1983; Brown, Forte & Dysard, 1984a, b; Brown & Engler, 1986), and two decades 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, 1969; 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 tortoise withdrawing his limbs into his shell.” As a result, awareness of the body and outer world is largely lost, and the yogi can now 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, 1974; Stace, 1987; Forman, 1990).

As previously discussed, Western researchers initially tended to dismiss yoga and other contemplative practices as culture specific pathologies. Such interpretations still occur occasionally, e.g., Castillo’s (1991, 1995) conclusion that yogic enlightenment with its witness consciousness of the Atman is a form of dissociation or depersonalization. However, several factors seem to argue against this conclusion. First, these states are very different from cases of clinical dissociation. Second, studies of deep meditative experiences suggest that experience of self-transcendence is an independent dimension, largely uncorrelated with personality dimensions or disorders (Gifford-May & Thompson, 1994). Finally the phenomenological analyses presented here suggest enhanced mental ability rather than pathology. Indeed, pathologizing interpretations such as dissociation seem more and more like pathomorphism: the tendency to misinterpret or mislabel psychological phenomena in terms of pathological categories.

*factors  
arguing  
against  
culture  
specific  
pathologies*

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, 1975; Goldstein, 1983; Goleman, 1988).

Table I shows that the shamanic journey, yogic, and Buddhist states differ on a number of significant dimensions. Perceptual sensitivity to environmental stimuli (Awareness of Environment) shows dramatic differences between states. In Buddhist Vipassana meditation states, both ancient and modern phenomenological reports (Buddhaghosa, 1975; Nyanaponika, 1976; Walsh, 1977, 1978; Goldstein, 1983) as well as recent tachistoscopic testing (Brown, Forte & Dysard, 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 is drastically reduced, even to the point of nonawareness, in advanced yogic states (Zimmer,

TABLE 1  
COMPARISONS OF THE STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS OCCURRING IN SHAMANIC JOURNEYS, ADVANCED YOGIC AND  
BUDDHIST MEDITATION, AND SCHIZOPHRENIA

DIMENSION	SHAMANISM	BUDDHIST (VIPASSANA)		SCHIZOPHRENIA
		INSIGHT MEDITATION	PATANJALI'S YOGA	
Control ability to enter and leave ASC at will	Yes	Yes	Yes	↓↓ Dramatic reduction of control
ability to control the content of experience	↑ Partial	↑ Partial	↑↑ Extreme control in some <i>samadhis</i>	↓↓
Awareness of Environment	↓	↑	↓↓ Reduced sensory and body awareness	↓ Often decreased and distorted
Ability to Communicate	Sometimes	Usually	None	↓ Communication is usually distorted
Concentration	↑ Fluid	↑ Fluid	↑↑ Fixed	↓↓
Arousal	↑	↓ Usually	↓↓	↑↑ Agitation may be extreme
Calm	↓	↑ Usually	↑↑ Extreme peace	↓
Affect	+ (Positive feelings) or - (negative feelings)	+ or - + Tends to increase as practice deepens	++ Ineffable bliss	Usually very negative though rarely positive, often distorted and inappropriate
Self-sense	Separate self-sense, may be a non-physical "soul"	Self-sense is deconstructed into a changing flux: "no self"	Unchanging transcendent Self or <i>purusha</i>	Disintegrated, loss of ego boundaries. Unable to distinguish self and others
OOBE	Yes, controlled ecstasy ("ecstasis")	No	No. Loss of body awareness ("enstasis")	Rarely, uncontrolled
Content	Organized coherent imagery determined by shamanic cosmology and purpose of journey	Deconstruction of complex experiences into their constituent stimuli. Stimuli are further deconstructed into a continuous flux	Single object (" <i>samadhi</i> with support") or pure consciousness (" <i>samadhi</i> without support")	● Often disorganized and fragmented

1969; Feuerstein, 1989). Indeed Eliade (1969, p. 78) defined *samadhi* as "an invulnerable state completely closed to stimuli."

These differences in environmental awareness are reflected in differences in communication. Buddhist insight meditators can usually communicate, and shamans can sometimes do so (Peters & Price-Williams, 1980). However, in advanced yogic concentration, communication is usually sufficient to break concentration and remove the practitioner from the state (Goleman, 1988).

The types and degree of concentration also vary from tradition to tradition. In contradistinction to schizophrenia, in which concen-

tration is drastically impaired, all three traditions train for increased concentration. Indeed, training attention appears to be a common denominator among consciousness altering practices (Novak, 1987). In shamanism and vipassana meditation, concentration is momentary since attention moves fluidly from one object to another (Eliade, 1964; Goldstein, 1983). 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 entraining 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 & Isherwood, 1953, p. 15).

*two  
different  
dimensions  
of  
control*

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, 1983). Calm may become profound in yogic *samadhi* when much of the normal cognitive processing ceases (Brown, 1986; Eliade, 1969; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984). Although I cannot fully agree with Roland Fischer's (1986) "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, 1983; Goleman, 1988), 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, 1969).

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 & Engler, 1986) 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.

*differences  
in  
experience  
of  
the  
body*

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 "ecstasy," 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 (Eliade, 1969, p. 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 initial 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 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, 1977; Goldstein, 1983; Goleman, 1988), especially in the yogic samadhis.

### *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 bodybound 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 art of transcendence such that an effective technology (set of practices) elicits experiences consistent with and supportive of the worldview (Walsh, 1990, 1991). Since worldview and expectation can mold experience, it is therefore an interesting question as to what extent technology or worldview is chicken or egg.

COMPARISON WITHIN DISCIPLINES AND ACROSS  
DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

It seems obvious that phenomenological mapping using the dimensions described above can differentiate among at least some of the states induced by the practices of different traditions. The next logical questions are to what extent it can differentiate: 1) the states induced by different practices within a tradition, and 2) the states induced at different stages of a single practice.

That it may sometimes be able to differentiate among different practices within a tradition can be shown by the example of Buddhism. Classical Buddhism employs two central meditative practices: concentration (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassana*). The former uses fixed attention, for example on the breath, to develop concentration, ultimately resulting in a series of eight increasingly refined *jhanas*: states of unwavering attention marked by intense bliss. Using the phenomenological dimensions employed above, these states are largely indistinguishable from the yogic ones, but this is hardly surprising since they were apparently historically derived from yoga; however, they are clearly distinguishable from *vipassana*. Table 2 makes clear the major differences in the states induced by the advanced concentration and insight practices of Buddhism and the marked similarities of the *jhanic* states to the yogic ones.

*difficulties  
distinguishing  
between  
states  
with  
subtle  
differences*

However, these phenomenological dimensions have a more difficult time differentiating among the different *jhanic* states because the differences between these states are so subtle (Table 3). All of them are characterized by extremely high degrees of control, calm, and concentration, and almost total lack of awareness of the environment and ability to communicate. They do differ slightly in the specific type of positive affect, e.g., a combination of rapture and happiness in the first two *jhanas*, happiness without rapture in the third, and equanimity in the remaining five. Likewise, the content may also differ, with, for example, the meditator being aware of infinite space in the fifth and infinite consciousness in the sixth. Thus it seems that phenomenological mapping may be used to differentiate and compare contemplative stages of development, but that in some cases the distinctions may be very subtle and identifying them may require an intimate knowledge of the practice.

*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

TABLE 2  
COMPARISONS OF YOGIC, BUDDHIST SECOND JHANIC, AND BUDDHIST VIPASSANA STATES

DIMENSION	PATANJALI'S YOGA	BUDDHIST (VIPASSANA) INSIGHT MEDITATION	2ND JHANA
Control ability to enter and leave ASC at will at will	Yes	Yes	Yes
ability to control the content of experience	↑↑ Extreme control in some samadhis	↑ Partial	↑↑ Extreme control
Awareness of Environment	↓↓ Reduced sensory and body awareness	↑	↓↓ Reduced sensory and body awareness
Ability to Communicate	None	Usually	None
Concentration	↑↑ Fixed	↑ Fluid	↑↑ Fixed
Arousal	↓↓	↓ Usually	↓↓
Calm	↑↑ Extreme peace	↑ Usually	↑↑ Extreme peace
Affect	++ Ineffable bliss	+ or -- + Tends to increase as practice deepens	intense happiness and rapture
Self-sense	Unchanging transcendent self or <i>purusha</i>	Self-sense is deconstructed into a changing flux: "no self"	Merged with the object of concentration
OUBE	No, loss of body awareness ("enstasis")	No	No, loss of body awareness ("enstasis")
Content	Single object ("samadhi with support") or pure consciousness ("samadhi without support")	Deconstruction of complex experiences into their constituent stimuli. Stimuli are further deconstructed into a continuous flux	Formless mental qualities and affects such as intense happiness

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 here are indeed advanced, they are not necessarily the most profound. At the highest reaches of meditation, transcendent experiences of a wholly different kind, radically discontinuous from all that have gone before,

TABLE 3  
COMPARISONS WITHIN THE BUDDHIST TRADITION OF THE SECOND, THIRD, FOURTH AND SIXTH JHANAS

DIMENSION	2ND JHANA	3RD JHANA	4TH JHANA	6TH JHANA
Control				
ability to enter and leave ASC at will	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
ability to control the content of experience	Extreme control	Extreme Control	Extreme control	Extreme control
Awareness of Environment	Minimal	Minimal	Minimal	Minimal
Ability to Communicate	None	None	None	None
Concentration	↑↑ Fixed	↑↑ Fixed	↑↑ Fixed	↑↑ Fixed
Arousal	↓↓	↓↓	↓↓	↓↓
Calm	Extreme peace	Extreme peace	Extreme peace and equanimity	Extreme peace and equanimity
Affect	Intense happiness	Intense happiness	No affect since affect is nullified by equanimity	No affect
Self-sense	Merged with the object of concentration	Merged with the object of concentration	Merged with the object of concentration	Merged with the object of concentration
OUBE	No. Loss of body awareness ("enstasis")	No. Loss of body awareness ("enstasis")	No. Loss of body awareness ("enstasis")	No. Loss of body awareness ("enstasis")
Content	Formless mental qualities and affects such as intense happiness and rapture	Formless mental qualities and affects such as intense happiness	Formless mental qualities	Unbounded consciousness

are said to occur. These are the full *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 trans-empirical, transverbal, and transrational. In the words of the Third Zen Patriarch Sengstan (1975):

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,

these experiences and domains is said to invariably result 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 Madhyamika 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). 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*.

*direct  
transrational  
intuition  
and  
its  
resultant  
wisdom*

Are the yogic *samadhi* and Buddhist *nirvana* identical, or more precisely, are they indistinguishable? It seems that one cannot 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, p. 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, 1973).

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 adequately preserve 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 & Vaughan, 1993).

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  
based  
on  
imprecise  
comparisons*

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 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 & Kumar, 1986), to obtain quantitative assessments and comparisons of the phenomenology of these states. Another would be to employ some of the new technologies for measuring brain activity, e.g., PET (positron emission tomography) and multichannel EEG (electroencephalography) to both compare states and begin to understand their physiological corre-

lates, though without falling into the trap of interpreting altered states as *only* altered physiology (Wilber, 1993, 1995).

Careful interviews of practitioners may also be helpful. However, one limitation here may be that interviewers who have themselves not undertaken consciousness disciplines and experienced alternate states may be limited in their ability to comprehend the nuances involved. Charles Tart's (1992) argument for using "yogi-scientists" as research-practitioners may be appropriate here.

Whatever future methods may evolve, it is clear that we have only begun to appreciate the variety, value, differences, and development of altered states and that understanding them better is a project of enormous importance and one of the transpersonal movement's greatest challenges and opportunities.

a  
project  
of  
enormous  
importance

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