The Sacred and Spiritual Facets of Psilocybin:

An Exploration of the Mystical Benefits of

Entheogenistic Practices

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The question our century puts before us is: Is it possible to regain the lost dimension, the encounter with the Holy, the dimension that cuts through the world of subjectivity and objectivity and goes down to that which is not world but is the mystery of the Ground of Being?

(~ Paul Tillich)

Over the last century or so, substances with mind-altering and mind-expanding properties have been renamed several times. At one point, they were referred to as "psychotomimetics," indicating that individuals experimenting with these substances completely lose contact with reality and become temporarily psychotic. Eventually, the term became less popular, presumably because it failed to capture the wide array of non-psychotic, often religiously-oriented experiences produced by the drugs. More commonly, they have been referred to as "hallucinogens," indicating that perceptual distortions occur, although actual hallucinations are uncommon (Snyder, 1). Perhaps the term heard most often in mainstream vocabulary is "psychedelic," which means "mind-manifesting." As Solomon H. Snyder writes, the term psychedelic may be more accurate because the term emphasizes, "the extraordinary change in the sense of self, a feeling of communion with the infinite, a dissolution of ego boundaries with the self, seeming to merge with environment" (1).

Unfortunately, the word *psychedelic* gained a multitude of negative connotations after the use of psychedelic drugs became mainstream in the 1960s and 1970s, and the term is now commonly associated with radicalism, irresponsibility, and the party scene rather than with mystical experience. Scholars eventually coined the term "entheogen," which essentially means "God-evoking," and entheogen remains the term most commonly used in academic literature

today (Ruck, 2). A review of the historical tradition of the Mesoamericans, combined with the psychological implications of the research performed by Lerner, Pahnke, and other researchers, combined with personal narratives from entheogen users indicates that there is the potential for meaningful religious experience under the influence of psilocybin and other entheogens.

The dialectic battle to properly name mind-altering and mind-expanding chemicals reflects a deeper historical battle. At least since the emergence and world-wide spread of Christianity, entheogens have gradually been categorized as illusionary and irresponsible — even demonic — and have been contrasted with the "true," chemical-free mystical experiences of religious tradition. However, these categorizations and contrasts illustrate a deep, seemingly unfounded bias that runs throughout religious history. Entheogenic experiences tend to at least closely resemble mystical experiences that are not drug-induced, and often they appear to be identical to one another. Several scholars have in fact suggested that entheogens have not only been used to enhance religious experience, but may even be the historical root of religious tradition itself. In *Cleansing the Doors of Perception,* Huston Smith argues, " . . . Consciousness-changing devices . . . may actually have initiated many of the religious perspectives which, taking root in history, continued after their entheogenic origins were forgotten" (18). To support his point, Smith quotes Mary Barnard:

> Which was more likely to happen first, the spontaneously generated idea of an afterlife in which the disembodied soul, liberated from the restrictions of time and space, experiences eternal bliss, or the accidental discovery of hallucinogenic plants that give a sense of euphoria, dislocate the center of consciousness, and distort time and space, making them balloon outward in greatly expanded vistas? (19)

Once one has recognized that it may be possible to experience genuine mystical moments through the use of entheogens such as peyote, LSD, and psilocybin, it is not such a far leap to

imagine that an early ancestor may have stumbled upon these substances while gathering food, eaten them, and then found themself transported to a completely different, apparently transcendent reality. Theoretically, *many* of our early ancestors might have had this experience. At the very least, anthropological and archeological research strongly suggests that humans were aware of and utilizing plants with entheogenic properties long before recorded history (Ruck, 4), and the experiences produced by entheogens were either responsible in some ways for the emergence of religion in human history, or absorbed into the existing religious traditions. "Those traditions," reads a legal brief prepared in the interest of defending the Native Americans' rights to use entheogens, "provided conceptual frameworks or belief systems that helped prepare participants for the powerful experiences they might undergo, while the experiences in turn helped to shape and sustain the belief systems" (4).

One particular entheogen that has been historically associated with religious experience is *psilocybin*, a chemical found in the "magical mushrooms" used in America and found all over the globe. The psilocybin genus is distributed worldwide; however, religious use of psilocybin has been primarily documented in Mexico, although circumstantial evidence suggests that it has been more widely used (Furst, 32). Stone artifacts emphasizing the transcendent properties of magical mushrooms have been discovered in Guatemala and southeastern Mexico, dated from 1,500 B.C.E. (Ruck, 7). Mesoamericans refer to the mushrooms containing psilocybin as *teonanacatl*, or the "flesh of the Gods." *Teonanacatl* has been used throughout history in communal spiritual ceremonies, creating a striking parallel between the Indians' sacred rituals and the Eucharist of the Catholics, or the Communion ceremony of the Protestants.

Perhaps as a result of the similarities between the sacred psilocybin rituals and the sacred Christian rituals, psilocybin mushrooms were demonized when the Spanish colonized the Indians, and it was assumed that the Mesoamericans' "flesh of the Gods" was in fact the flesh of the Devil. In fact, scholars such as Peter Furst have suggested that the Spanish Inquisition was primarily aimed at eliminating the use of entheogens such as psilocybin and peyote (*Mushrooms*, 85). The ardent efforts of the Spanish colonizers appear, however, to have been ultimately unsuccessful. Today, tribes including, but not limited to, the Mazatec, the Chinantec, the Chatino, the Mije, and the Mixtec of Mexico include psilocybin in their ceremonies of healing, worship, and divination (Ruck, 7).

Within the last century, psilocybin has been the most commonly used entheogen in clinical research. Often, clinical research involving psilocybin is aimed at examining the spiritual properties of the entheogen. Several decades ago, Walter Pahnke administered psilocybin to fifteen theology students within the context of a Good Friday service, in an attempt to study the religious import of the chemical. "The results," Huston Smith writes, "showed that 'those subjects who received psilocybin experienced phenomena which were indistinguishable from, if not identical with the categories defined by our typology of mysticism' " (22).

Similarly, Michael Lerner researched the values and beliefs of psychedelic drug users, including individuals who had used psilocybin. Lerner found that those who have experimented with entheogens tend to score higher than other users of non-psychedelic illegal drugs, as well as higher than non-drug users, for traits such as mystical beliefs, a connection with God and the universe in general, empathy, spirituality, creativity, humility, and ecological awareness (4).

Lerner, then, essentially demonstrated that psychedelic drug users do appear to reap the same spiritual benefits as non-drug users who participate in religious practices.

Unfortunately, the spread of entheogenic practices into the mainstream culture of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a widespread fear and illegalization of psilocybin as well as LSD, peyote, and other entheogens. "The use of psychedelics," Stanislav Grof writes,

> moved from supervised clinical work to the unsupervised experimentation by the counterculture . . . The invasion of the Dionysian element into the rigid, Puritanical structure of our society, that came with the mass use of psychedelics, threatened the establishment . . . The government miscategorized psychedelics into the class of Schedule I drugs, meaning that they have no therapeutic value, thereby making them extremely difficult to use or even to study (142).

While scientific studies may have become difficult to pursue, philosophers are still examining and re-examining entheogenic benefits as well as mystical experiences in general. Over the centuries, it has gradually become more possible to determine certain traits that accompany mystical and religious experience. In *The God Gene,* Dean Hamer discusses a "Self-Transcendence Scale" that has been developed within the psychological community to measure self-transcendence. Although a simple scale based upon survey questions seems like an unlikely way to measure something as expansive as mystical experience, the qualities measured by the scale are drawn from centuries upon centuries of religious literature. The "Self-Transcendence Scale" asserts that there are three components of self-transcendence: Self-Forgetfulness, Transpersonal Identification, and Mysticism (Hamer, 23). In addition, philosophers have recently been examining other age-old characteristics of self-transcendence,

which include the ability to transcend dualities, and the ability to escape from the psychological confines of the past and the future.

When rated using the Self-Transcendence Scale, entheogenic experiences again appear to be almost synonymous with non-entheogenic religious experiences, and certain aspects of the psilocybin experience all correspond perfectly to the five different components of self-transcendence discussed above. For scientific research, refer to the studies performed by Pahnke and Lerner, as well as the study *Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance* by Griffiths et al. In the interest of grounding the discussion in concrete, interpersonal detail, however, the following information is derived primarily from personal, non-scientific accounts of psilocybin experience.

The first primary source for the following discussion is taken from Alan Watts' account of experimenting with LSD and psilocybin, excerpted from his book *The Joyous Cosmology,* which was published in 1962. Although it is difficult to tell which parts of the narrative are inspired by LSD and which parts are inspired by psilocybin, the theological implications of the entheogenic experience only gain strength when the aspects of the LSD experience, the psilocybin experience, and the mystical experience are so similar that they are almost indistinguishable. The other source for the following discussion is a personal account by Elizabeth Bean[1], a twenty-two year old theology student who is writing about her experiences with psilocybin between 2005 and 2006. Both accounts illustrate a brilliant parallel between

[1] Name has been changed in the interest of protecting the sources' identity

self-transcendence as defined by Dean Hamer, Eckhart Tolle, Ken Wilbur, and others and mysticism as experienced by psilocybin users.

The first component of mystical experience as defined by Dean Hamer is "self-forgetfulness," or "the flow state." Hamer describes this state as the following:

> Sometimes a task or subject is so fascinating that you become utterly absorbed . . . Such an absorption can happen to a painter who becomes one with the process of painting, a musician who becomes lost in his music, a priest deep in prayer, or an ordinary person (24).

In this mental state, the subject experiences time in a completely different manner. Rather than counting seconds or minutes, the subject is not even *aware* of seconds or minutes, sometimes even of hours, because he or she is so fascinated by some aspect of reality that the subjective experience of time loses all meaning. "This world," Watts writes (referring to the world that he is immersed in when experiencing the effects of psilocybin or LSD), "has a different kind of time. It is the time of biological rhythm, not of the clock and all that goes with the clock. There is no hurry" (27). Similarly, Bean writes,

> I am completely absorbed in the puzzle piece around myself. I see mountains, lakes, trees, brilliant emerald grass, fiery leaves, and the intimate intricacy of each branch, each insect . . . is enough to keep me here forever. I've lost track of time — I think it's been hours, but it can only have been seconds. Or maybe minutes, but I think it's been Eternity (2).

The concept of eternity that Bean refers to appears to be a common description of the peculiar qualities adopted by Time when one is experiencing the effects of psilocybin. This is perhaps a result of the amount of attention that is often paid to the overwhelming detail of one simple aspect of reality that humans tend to naturally block out, but that entheogen users tend to take note of. As Watts describes it, the amount of detail in one single flower out of countless

flowers out of countless plants out of an entire world of biological intricacy is enough to suggest infinity: "Normally we do not so much look at things as overlook them . . . But here the depth of light and structure in a bursting bud go on forever. There is time to see them, time for the whole intricacy of veins and capillaries to develop in consciousness, time to see down and down into the shape of greeness" (27).

The experience of timelessness and self-forgetfulness is not limited to the awe inspired by nature. Psilocybin users might just as well become absorbed in the tiny spirals and elaborate patterns of asphalt and concrete. Bean reports that she was once completely enchanted by the swirling mold of a plaster ceiling (3). However, nature is often deeply connected to both mystical and psilocybin experiences, not only in terms of the deep reverence that arises from a study of nature, but also in terms of an interpersonal connection that is felt with nature and with the universe in general.

The second component of self-transcendence as defined by Hamer is "transpersonal identification." According to Hamer, this experience includes the following characteristics:

> The hallmark of this trait is a feeling of connectedness to the universe and everything in it — animate and inanimate, human and nonhuman, anything and everything that can be seen, heard, smelled, or otherwise sensed. People . . . can become deeply, emotionally attached to other people, animals, trees, flowers, streams, or mountains. Sometimes they feel that everything is part of one living organism (26).

Hamer is not the only researcher to highlight this aspect of self-transcendence. In *Cleansing the Doors of Perception,* Huston Smith points out that R.C. Zaehner has distinguished three aspects of mysticism, one of which he defines as "nature mysticism, in which the soul is united with the natural world" (23). Academically, Zaehner has used his aspects of self-transcendence to argue against the religious use of entheogens such as psilocybin. However,

he has acknowledged that entheogen users experience nature mysticism, and his description of nature mysticism closely resembles the following description of nature written by Watts of "burnished mountains which I seem to remember from an immeasurably distant past, at once so unfamiliar as to be exotic and yet as familiar as my own hand" (Watts, 30).

Watts found that he not only felt as if he were one with nature in general, but also as if he and his friends were one and the same: "At the deep center of a time perpendicular to ordinary time we are, and always have been, one. We acknowledge the marvelously hidden plot, the master illusion, whereby we appear to be different" (47). Bean also reports that she has felt that, "there is no more distinction between myself and my environment, or my self and my friends, than there is between my skin and my hand" (2). Referring to the psilocybin study performed by Pahnke, Grof points out that these feelings of oneness with the universe are not limited to the time spent under the influence of psilocybin, but instead are often carried beyond the few hours of entheogenic enlightenment, and into day-to-day consciousness. The participants in the study, according to Grof, "developed a deep sense of connection with the cosmos, with other people, and with nature, which resulted in more ecological awareness" (137), and the results were long-term.

Not only do people engaged in mystical or entheogen-inspired experiences feel deeply inseparable from the concrete reality surrounding them, they also tend to feel connected to an abstract Being or reality. As Zaehner defines it, this is "monistic mysticism, in which the soul merges with an impersonal absolute" (Smith, 23). While Zaehner describes this as a *component* of mysticism, Hamer defines the same feeling as mysticism itself, because for Hamer mysticism

overall is a component of self-transcendence. Hamer describes mysticism as an enthrallment with the supernatural or with relationships and experiences that cannot be defined by science.

Hamer points to Albert Einstein as an example of a mystical individual, asserting that Einstein's "reverence was directed to the harmony of the cosmos, the sheer wonder of existence" (Hamer). Hamer's description of Einstein's veneration of the mystery of the cosmos bears a striking resemblance to the following account by Watts: "Down and at last out — out of the cosmic maze to recognize in and as myself, the bewildered traveler, the forgotten yet familiar sensation of the original impulse of all things, supreme identity, inmost light, ultimate center, self more me than myself" (Watts, 67).

Interestingly enough, Zaehner asserts that entheogen users may experience both natural and monistic mysticism, but that they do not experience the third component of mysticism, "theistic mysticism, in which the soul confronts the living, personal God" (Smith, 23). Here, Zaehner is drawing a distinction between an expansive connection to an abstract and yet meaningful Absolute, and a specific connection to a specific deity. In eliminating the theistic experience from entheogenically inspired experience, Zaehner is supposedly proving that the two are not ultimately synonymous. Bean, however, asserts that while meditating under the influence of psilocybin, she came into direct contact with a deity that she refers to as the "Eternal Goddess":

> I feel the Eternal Goddess in my mind, which has become my body, which has become an iridescent flower unfolding into the prism that is the air, the room, the walls, the ceiling, the universe. She — the Goddess — has been in every breath that I've drawn my entire life, but now I feel her above me, around me, inside of me. She has placed a cool hand upon my brow and swallowed the fever of my anxiety into her eminent presence (3).

Another component of self-transcendence is the ability to transcend dualities. Hamer does not specifically mention this ability, although it seems to be closely related to transpersonal identification. Transcending dualities has, however, been discussed by philosophers such as Eckhart Tolle in the book *The Power of Now*, and Ken Wilbur in the book *No Boundaries.*

The ability to transcend dualities and boundaries goes beyond the ability to identify deeply with nature, although the two abilities seem to spring from the same place. The ability to transcend dualities and boundaries is the ability to see beyond the dualistic world-view that has been largely adopted by mainstream Western culture, in which good opposes and is fundamentally different from evil, women are fundamentally different from men, humans are different from non-humans, space creates boundaries between people and objects, senses such as taste, sight, and smell work differently from one another and are distinguished from one another . . . and the list goes on and on. In many religious traditions, particularly Eastern traditions such as Buddhism, an important aspect of self-transcendence is the ability to recognize that there are no boundaries or opposites, that in fact everything is all part of one living existence. Albert Hoffman also pointed to the importance of changing dualistic, boundary-ridden perspectives:

> The spiritual crisis pervading all spheres of Western industrial society can be remedied only by a change in our world-view. We shall have to shift from the materialistic, dualistic belief that people and their environment are separate, toward a new consciousness of an all-encompassing reality which embraces the experiencing ego, a reality in which people feel their oneness with animate nature and all of creation (quoted in Smith, VIII).

In terms of the psilocybin experience, "synesthesia" is common. Snyder describes synesthesia as "a seeming transmutation of the senses, e.g., visualizing sound waves upon hearing a loud noise, defines synesthesia" (1). Although this has often been interpreted as a

distortion of perceptions, leading to the term "hallucinogen," the experience of synesthesia may just as well be interpreted as a natural transcendence of boundaries. From this perspective, the senses are not viewed as separate from another, but as interrelated, which may be a more accurate picture of reality. It is well known, for example, that scent is a very important factor in taste, but Western conceptualizations generally separate one from the other.

The transcendence of boundaries and dualities can go beyond the senses in psilocybin experience. For example, under the influence of entheogenic substances, Watts has found a way to dismiss the illusions of boundaries and dualities. At the very beginning of *The Joyous Cosmology,* Watts writes, "Slowly it becomes clear that one of the greatest of all superstitions is separating the mind from the body" (3). Later, Watts speculates that "what consciousness overlooks is the fact that all boundaries and divisions are held in common by their opposite sides and areas, so that when a boundary changes its shape both sides move together" (50). Watts does not leave his conclusions to be supported by speculation alone, but includes a visual image, pointing out that "the shape of a leaf *is* its color. There is no outline around the leaf; the outline is the limit where one colored surface becomes another" (31).

Ken Wilbur also suggests in *No Boundaries* that there has eventually come to be boundaries in the human psyche, between the self and the ego, and between the ego and the unconscious. Carl Jung, along with others, has suggested that it is this boundary between the self, the ego, and the unconscious that creates such conflict in the human mind and throughout human history. Interestingly enough, entheogens even seem to have the potential to transcend these psychological boundaries. Stanislav Grof writes that "Nonordinary states of consciousness can have remarkable therapeutic mechanisms. These mechanisms are far superior to the process

of tediously untying the knots in the unconscious by making inferences from material emerging in discussions with the therapist" (Grof, 136). Entheogens, in Grof's experience, could be used to unite the conscious with the unconscious, thus producing both spiritual and psychological health.

Finally, the last component of mysticism or self-transcendence discussed here is that of freedom from the past and the future. This aspect of self-transcendence is particularly highlighted by Eckhart Tolle in *The Power of Now,* and is also found in Zen Buddhism and many Eastern philosophies. In escaping from the abstract and essentially manufactured concepts of the past and the present, Tolle and others argue, it is possible to find eternity in the present moment, immortality in the "now." Hamer, of course, alludes to this component when he discusses self-forgetfulness, but the ability to escape from the past and future implies more than simply temporarily forgetting about time as it is measured by a clock. The past and the future are psychological concepts that, according to Tulle, create "an identification with the past and continuous compulsive projection into the future" (Tolle, 36), which results in anxiety. These concepts of past and future permeate day-to-day existence — some might even say that they are imaginary realms that interfere with and distract from true human experience, creating problems. A "problem," Tolle asserts, "means that you are dwelling on a situation mentally without there being a true intention or possibility of taking action now and that you are unconsciously making it part of your sense of self . . . When you create a problem, you create pain" (41-42).

Watts makes a similar point while writing his psilocybin inspired stream-of-consciousness: "Problematic pain arises with the tendency of self-consciousness to short-circuit the brain and fill its passages with dithering echoes — revulsions to revulsions,

fears of fear, cringing from cringing, guilt about guilt — twisting thought to trap itself in endless oscillations" (75). Bean also recounts a similar epiphany:

> I spent all of my time thinking, thinking, thinking about what might happen or what had happened before, how I should deal with it, or how I should have dealt with it. I was always so anxious, and so obsessive-compulsive. But since I've started experimenting with psilocybin, a new kind of peace has settled over me. Those things don't matter until they happen — I will deal with it then. I want to be alive more than I want to imagine living" (5).

Beans, Watts and other psilocybin users appear to be able to rise above the constraints of the past and the future, and as in self-forgetfulness, time takes on a flavor of infinity: "Time is so slow as to be a kind of eternity, and the flavor of eternity transfers itself to the hills" (Watts, 30). Unlike the experience of self-forgetfulness, however, the benefits of this ability to escape the psychological strangle-hold of the past and the future last beyond the amount of time that it takes to be absorbed in a single task or subject, and carries on into everyday existence.

From all appearances, five of the major components of self-transcendence or mysticism are met by psilocybin use, within certain contexts, approximately as well as they are met by meditation or life-long religious dedication. Is one *guaranteed* a religious experience if one experiences with psilocybin, LSD, or peyote? Of course not. The vast array of experiences that might be inspired by psilocybin experimentation cannot be confined *only* to mystical experience — the above argument is only an attempt to illustrate that mystical experience is *one experience* that could possibly arise from an encounter with psilocybin. Likewise, there is no guarantee that if one has a genuinely mystical and self-transcending experience while experimenting with psilocybin, then the experience will necessarily be life-altering or lead to a life-long spiritual revival.

As with any other religious practice, discipline and dedication are expected in order to reap the full spiritual benefits of entheogenic experiences. As Smith points out, "It is indeed possible for chemicals to enhance the religious life, but only when they are set within the context of faith (conviction that what they disclose is true) and discipline (exercise of the will toward fulfilling what the disclosure asks of us)" (31).

If psilocybin and other entheogens were to be legalized for public use again, would we run the risk of exposing these drugs to misuse? To answer this, perhaps we must ask ourselves: is our society mature enough to use these entheogens with the proper respect? After all, if one accepts that there is religious significance inherent in entheogens, and uses this precept to justify the legal use of such substances, one must be prepared to accept that the entheogens should be treated as sacred objects, as most indigenous cultures have done, rather than as party drugs. Nevertheless, in a world that is increasingly ruled by the pressures of Time, the past and the future, dualities and boundaries, and hopelessness, there is good reason to further explore the benefits that entheogens may offer to the human psyche, collectively as well as individually.

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