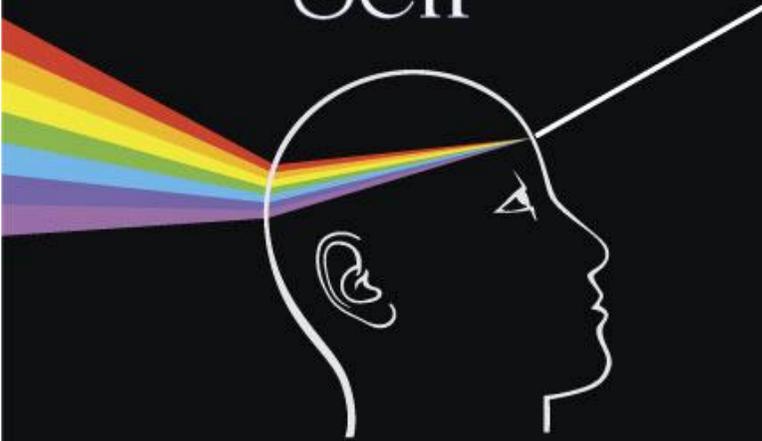


Alteration of the Self



Psychedelic Drugs

by Michael Erlewine

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Alteration of the Self

Note: This article is not for everyone. It will make the most sense to those who have experienced a consciousness-altering drug trip and had trouble forgetting it or stabilizing afterward. Here goes:

LSD was virtually unknown to my generation in the early 1960s, although rumors were all around. The word on the street was that acid (as we came to call it), unlike any drug we knew up to them, actually could alter the mind itself, and permanently. Of course, most of this was pure speculation because few of us had yet taken or had any real experience with the drug. We trembled at what that might mean, but of course were still intrigued. Not everyone rushed out to try it. It was that down side that gave us pause, that acid could permanently alter and perhaps damage the mind. What could those words mean, "permanently alter?" That phrase alone kept many drug enthusiasts at bay.

I know from personal experience that LSD is a very powerful drug, one capable of altering consciousness not only temporarily, but permanently. At least in many, stabilization of a strong acid trip went on for a long time afterward - years. No argument. What I want to discuss here is the fact that part of the problem with consciousness-altering drugs like LSD is not only the drugs themselves, but our own lack of knowledge and familiarity with the context and nature of the mind itself and with the various states of the self and consciousness.

Let's start off with the Eastern view that the true mind cannot be altered, but the "self" can be. Here in the West we tend to think of the mind, consciousness, and the self as the same thing. And I am not simply engaging in semantics here, so those of you with a history of hallucinogenic drugs bear with me. You should be able to

understand what is coming. I have something to say. What 'is' true is that LSD and other hallucinogens are 'self'-altering drugs, consciousness-altering drugs, which is another matter altogether from 'mind-altering', one we will discuss.

Westerners have little to no idea about the actual nature of the Self and little interest in learning. We have an interest in ourselves, of course, but not an interest in 'the' Self and what it actually is or is not. And it is as simple as that we have never bothered to even look, and tend to think of our personal self not only as a permanent "thing," but also as an entity that will continue on after our death to heaven, hell, wherever, or perhaps not continue at all.

Not continuing at all also has its problems. In other words, the nature and fate of our self is mostly unknown to us. Just as we tend to think of a river as something that is permanent and always there, philosophers have pointed out that we can never step in the same river twice, and some have said that you can't step in the same river even once.

The Self is like that river. While we like to think of it as a constant, as the very heart and center of us, and assume that it has been always with us or that it "is" us, even a brief analysis will show that the new bike or 45-record we thought was the center of our life when we were young is different from the new wife or child that became our center later on. What makes up our self is constantly changing, but we prefer (it is convenient) to consider it as a constant. As far as we know, the self has always been with us. And we are firmly attached to it.

It is the 'attachment' to this sense of a having a self-as-center that is the constant and not what actually makes up that self – the memories and components. The fact is that the content of the self is ever-changing, while it is our attachment or connection to that content (whatever it currently happens to be) that remains the same. This miss-take is a real problem.

It is the Self that is most often changed with consciousness-altering drugs, and not the mind itself. LSD and other similar drugs threaten the constancy of the self not only because these drugs tend to fracture it into the components it is made up of, but also (and primarily) because drugs can remove the glue which holds our self together, which is our attachment.

It is the attachment to the self that is shattered on some LSD experiences. Such an experience can plunge us into realizing (however momentarily) that the self is in fact not so permanent or constant, but rather actually is impermanent and ever changing, i.e. that the self is a bunch of stuff we hang on to for dear life or like to have around us.

These consciousness-altering drugs shatter that life-line of attachment we have had to our self and, without that continuing attachment, we are left holding a bunch of memories and identifications that do not add up to anything we could call permanent if we thought about it, which we don't. The thought of an impermanent self is terrifying to most of us, although this is what yogis dream of: non-attachment. Drugs can break that umbilical cord of attachment and fracture what we call our self, at least for a time.

What for yogis is the product of a lifetime of training and a gradual revelation through years of mind practice happens to drug-users all at once. Like a lighting flash, the curtain of the self is suddenly pulled away and behind it is nothing at all except our own peering to see. The self is revealed as empty of everything but our attachment to it. It is the attachment or lack thereof that we discover.

Drugs like LSD fracture the attachment or glue that held the self together and we are left holding a small universe of the isolated memories, imprints, events, etc. of our life, but no longer with a center or 'self' to make them appear coherent. We lose coherence. Although this is

precisely what meditators work for, with drugs this is usually too much, too soon, and can be for many a life-shattering experience – even devastating.

When the great Tibetan adept Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who had a lifetime of mind practice, took LSD, he reported: “Nothing happened!” That tells us the whole story right there. It is not just the drugs that are the problem; it is also the lack of any introduction to the mind itself, much less any actual mind training on the part of most of us. The mind and the self were already well known to Trungpa Rinpoche, so nothing changed. Although Trungpa had a self like the rest of us, he apparently was not attached to it. There we have a clue.

Back in the day those who took LSD were often faced with what might at first seem like a complete loss of self, a glimpse at their own naked mind, and with no familiar landmarks to guide them. Most of us had never previously been introduced to the mind and its landscape through any form of mind training. We had no guide, no manual, and no prior experience in these areas. In fact, the imprint or what we saw on acid (which often was startling) instantly became the only limits and landmarks we had, and they could be frightening. Let me reiterate that last concept.

Having no mind training or familiarity with the actual nature of the mind, no formal introduction or mind training, LSD (or its equivalent) itself became that introduction to the mind, just not a thorough one. LSD or any epochal experience strikes deep in our consciousness and leaves an almost indelible imprint. Often we measure time or our self from that point onward, just as people used to ask “Where were you when President Kennedy was shot?” We all knew precisely where we were because the event had imprinted itself into our memory and was permanently stuck in our consciousness.

In the same way, when LSD reaches deeper into our

mind than we have even been, it by default becomes our limit. It is then as much as we know of the mind and, when we look for deep experience, we will always end up back at that point and that experience with whatever earlier points we had already forgotten or overwritten. We will measure time and experience from there. I don't want to belabor this point, but it is crucial to this discussion to understand the importance of this fact.

Our LSD experience then becomes our introduction to the mind, rather than years of mind training, meditation, mind practice, and the like as in some Asian countries. Needless to say, one night's acid trip is more like a lightning bolt's view of our mental landscape than the gradual dawning of that landscape that meditation and mind practice might bring. On acid there is a lot we did not get or see clearly in that drug trip, not to mention questions that sit unresolved in the back of our mind. It is the difference between a one-shot glimpse and the gradual deliberate training of the mind. I hope you see my point.

The LSD trip itself set the limits of our knowledge of the mind for us rather than a teacher or guide – tough love. This then was our introduction to the mind and it often leaves us staring directly into whatever we imagined or most feared. No wonder it was hard for some of us to get our self together after a trip. But it was also liberating, and we will get to that.

PART 2

The problem for many drug users is not that LSD snatched away the curtain from the Wizard of the Self (troubling enough), but rather that behind the curtain there was no one there. This is what gave us pause. The philosopher Hegel wrote in his main work "The Phenomenology of the Mind," the following:

"We go behind the curtain of the self to see what is there,

but mainly for there to be something to be seen.”

Think about that. Hegel is one of the very few western philosophers that grasped the nature of the self, which is the stock and trade of Zen and Tibetan Buddhists: the fact that the Self has no permanent existence. If the self is held together only by our attachment to its components and LSD fractures our attachment, then many of us who took those conscious-altering drugs have experienced non-attachment. We have seen what only yogis see.

There you have a taste. I could go on and give you more chapter and verse in what I am pointing out here, but I don't think that is necessary. If you had a real LSD experience at one time or another, you should have the idea by now, which summarized is this:

The 'Self' (our self) is a most convenient reference point, the center of attention for most of us, our identity, and is not unlike the warm blanket a toddler carries around for comfort. We have never really looked at our self all that closely and, as long as it is always nearby as a touchstone, we have learned not to ask too many questions. We assume that our self has or is a permanent center, when the truth is that the self has (as adepts have pointed out for centuries) no real permanent center other than our own attachment to its components, and these components change constantly. Our attachment itself is the center we identify with. Think about that for a moment. So what happens if we lose our attachment?

When the attachment to the self is suddenly removed by drugs or broken up (much like a dust devil of wind is broken up when it encounters something), the life-line hold of attachment we had on the concept of our self is broken and our self suddenly seen as the many pieces it in fact is and always has been, empty of any particular meaning and direction. It is we who gave the self its meaning. The self without our attachment is going

nowhere and means nothing. When the illusion of a self is severed, we instantly see what only yogis have seen: a true glimpse of the mind beyond the self. However, few of us are yogis.

What happens next depends on how much mind training or familiarity with the mind we actually do have. For most of us back in the day the shock of suddenly losing a grip on our self, losing self-control, etc. was devastating, sending us into days, weeks, months, and years of scrambling to put our Humpty-Dumpty Self back together again to the way it was before, so that we can feel “normal,” feel as we use to. Well, that never happened. We had to move on in life with an altered sense of our self, which gradually became more and more familiar, or as I like to say: we quickly agree to forget what we find just too hard to remember. So far I have sketched out the rough idea. Now here is the interesting part:

For those of us who had experience with hallucinatory drugs such as LSD, Mescaline, mushrooms, etc. and became disoriented either temporarily or permanently, there is a cure for our disorientation from drugs and it is not getting on prescription drugs, downers, years of therapy, or whatever-else-we-tried. All that remains for us to do is to complete the education that LSD gave us a glimpse of and learn to know the true nature of the mind, what adepts have spoken of for centuries. With acid, we had a lightning-flash course in the mind, which illumined something (our mind) for a moment, but then left us back in the dark or perhaps half-enlightened. Now all we have to do is finish the job.

I know this may at first sound impossible, but it is not. It simply involves learning to train the mind and to gradually become more familiar with the mind itself that we glimpsed way back then. And it is never too late. When our mind gets stuck, it waits for us to unstick it, however long that may be. Learning about the mind is teleological. It is not time dependent, but waits on us to

finish the job.

It is up to us and we may wait lifetimes if we choose. Each step in the mind-training process increasingly removes the confusion that drugs earlier in our life cast upon our consciousness. What was unknown becomes known. What needs to be removed is removed, and what needs to be added is added. And as we come to know the actual landscape of our own mind, we can see where we mistook or misunderstood what we only saw a glimpse of way back then.

Druggies, after they take LSD, invariably create their own cosmology like “The world according to Michael,” but just as invariably it becomes a patchwork quilt with holes in it. We get some pieces of it right, except for the gaping holes where we are missing large chunks. We don’t want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but mostly we have bathwater and very little baby. For many of us it is difficult to abandon our one-horse world view and accept some spiritual system that is better organized. It is the old not-invented-here syndrome and/or a righteous avoidance of organized anything, like: religion. I know; I had this problem.

I was raised Catholic, with what that suggests. For all that Catholics got wrong, they did give me a sense of awe and mystery about the universe and life in it. So after I began having problems putting my particular Humpty-Dumpty Self back together after LSD, I sought out advice. At the time I was fearless and had no shame. I began to visit all the folks I imagined as experts where they lived: doctors, lawyers, professors, spiritual folks, etc. I walked right into their offices and asked to see them, and I didn’t have an appointment.

While most were too stiff to share or able to understand me, others sat with me and we wept together. It was like that. I can remember sitting with the great economist Kenneth Boulding in his office while he recited poetry and we wept together about the wonders of life and all

its struggles. He said “Michael, we learn to fail successfully.” And of course I wanted to go to those Catholics who historically are the most trained in the mind, and this would be the Jesuits. I went to them. I sat down with them. I shared my trip with them. They were no help whatsoever, I am sorry to say. They just did not get it.

It was only when I met the Zen and Tibetan Buddhists that I found any resonance, found where I belonged. They just took me in. Moreover, the Tibetan Buddhists knew right off exactly where I was at because it is all in the mind, and they know the mind. Period. Nothing I could come up with or throw at them fazed them one iota. In fact they simply filled in the blanks, making sense of my story and providing me with practices that would remove any remaining impurities in my vision and strengthen my view. They absorbed what was unique about my drug experience, what made me at times feel special or superior to others, and never blinked. I was welcomed and took this as a very good sign indeed. I was home and had found my lineage; there were others in the world like me!

This is why the remnants of LSD trips frequently include a bit of the savant, a sense that the tripper knows something that others do not, and has been initiated in some way, albeit partially or badly. And they have. For many years I did drug counseling with clients who had bad trips and I can say that the hardest part in working with someone who had a too-powerful LSD trip is to get them to give up that little bit of vision they did have way back then and simply move on. That LSD vision is like a baby taking its first breath, that first glimpse of reality, which was so important (or true) for them that they held their breath and have yet to exhale. In other words, they stopped breathing back there and then and are still holding onto their insights with a death grip. Some may even need a slap on the back to get them breathing again. I was able to do that for them. They realized they

were not unique, not the only ones, woke up, and moved on. An unresolved LSD trip leaves the user in a semi-autistic state. No one can reach them, and they prefer it that way as opposed to the pain of real integration.

PART 3

In my experience as a counselor the trick with these “autistic” LSD types is to get right in there with them and show them that they are not alone, that you know exactly where they are, and that what they cling to as making them unique is in fact common knowledge to all of those who know the mind. There isn’t anything unique or special about their LSD trip and they might as well accept this and move on. Others have been there before them. There is nothing they (at first) hate more than company, because their private drug vision is what has made them unique to themselves all these years. It is all they have at the moment and they have held on to it (frozen in time) and have not progressed from that point since then.

There is nothing these folks need more than to see that they are not alone and not so “special.” This realization spoils the trip that they have been hoarding all these years, and they soon let go of it and rejoin the rest of us. It is a great relief to them, actually. They move on again and real progress is possible. And here is the moral of this story:

While Hallucinogens don’t and can’t change the true nature of our mind, they can and usually do affect our concept of our own self, shattering whatever we had managed to get together up to that point in our life. Drugs are not often kind to our self-image if we are too attached. The aftermath of a drug trip can take months and even years to stabilize, and there are several components it helps to be aware of.

First, as mentioned, the mind itself is not affected,

unless of course you have some physical damage. Take note of that statement please. Knowing this can be a huge relief for those who feel they have been changed forever and don't even know it or can't remember what they were before. The mind itself can't be altered. Buddhists know this. They have mapped it for centuries with clarity and brilliance.

What is affected (and can be altered) is our sense of self, but this is usually only temporary and the self will automatically reassemble itself (like it or not), but this usually takes time. The loss of self or detachment of the self is actually a healthy thing in the long run, but can be uncomfortable in the short run. What one sees when the self is shattered is a glimpse of what yogis and mystics ever strive for. The problem usually is that we become stuck back at the time we took the drug trip, much like an emerging butterfly might be stuck half-way out of its chrysalis. We can't go back where we came from and we are not all the way out, and don't know how to get out.

We then either have to forget what we saw and experienced in that drug glimpse or come to actually understand what happened and become comfortable with that. Well, we can't forget, because that glimpse is perhaps the truest moment we have ever known, so we are stuck in a "Catch-22." We have to move on, either backward or forward. "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing" makes sense here. How to do this?

Some take more drugs (prescription drugs this time) in an attempt to calm and relax their state of mind, still further altering the self. Many more have long and expensive years of therapy trying to put the toothpaste back in the tube. Or like one of those little games where we slide the squares around trying to complete the picture, we monkey with our self like a Chinese puzzle.

All of the above give only partial results and seldom are a complete remedy. Even then there is usually a

hangover, some sense that the self has been permanently changed or damaged. It probably has, but the self is not key here. It will always try to reassemble itself. The self is not what is important.

PART 4

As mentioned, the solution that I recommend is not to attempt to go back to where we started, but to finish the job and become a butterfly. The concept of the self in almost all forms of mind practice is something to get to know, handle, and move beyond. All the Buddhists agree. It is not that there is no self; of course there is, but rather that our attachment to it is misplaced at best and limiting at worst. This is why most meditation methods help us to become clear about what the self is and is not. As some of the ancient wisdom teachings say: "Attachment to the 'self' is the only cloud in an otherwise cloudless sky." What do they mean by this?

They don't mean get rid of the self, but instead to not take our self so seriously. If you get to know it, you can't take the self seriously. Give yourself its due; feed it what it has to have to be happy, but more or less just put it out to pasture. Be kind to yourself as you would to any other person, but don't count on it to solve your problems or rule your life. Put yourself on a diet of reality.

At the same time, and more important, get to know your mind, which is not your 'self'. Your self is replete with the little nagging narrator that tells you that you have a dentist appointment tomorrow. The mind is beyond that, more like the theater of operations that the selfish narrator works in. Learn some form of meditation or other form of mind practice, and above all start using your mind to look at itself. This is a simple exercise that you can do anytime. Exercise your mind looking within at its own nature just as you have been using it all your life to look outside. Familiarity with using the mind to know itself is what Socrates and scores of other mystics,

philosophers, saints, and yogis have been telling us to do for centuries. In other words, stop thinking about it, get off your mental duff, and actually use your mind to investigate itself. This is key. How is that done?

The mind is like a muscle that needs to be exercised and there are plenty of exercises available, many kinds of meditation and mind practices. Learning to use the mind internally is not a passive thing. Use the mind to look at itself, like: right now: look at who is reading this page. Just try it. It is not easy and you can get a mental charley-horse instantly. But here is my point:

That mental charley-horse shows you that the mind is workable and that you are just out of shape or never got in mental shape to start with. Learning to use the mind like a muscle, working the mind like you would run a treadmill is the key to mind practice. Forget about lighting a candle and sitting on a cushion. That is not the kind of mind practice the Zen Buddhists do. Gary Snyder, Alan Ginsberg, and scores of others learned to use their mind as the Buddhist do.

You first have to get your mind on its feet and moving around, making efforts, like trying to focus on your breath or look at who is reading this page. Do something! This is what I mean by mind practice, and meditation is a form of mind practice.

That's enough. I will give you folks a rest at this point. I have tried to point out some ways to complete your drug experience if you are stuck in it. The rest is up to you. The need for many of us who have had unresolved drug trips to learn meditation and the methods of mind practice is not just some alternative option from the East. It is the next step, the necessary step to finish the job and know the mind after becoming confused about it on a drug trip. Sure, you learned something on acid and you probably have parts of it right. But what about the parts that you didn't get right? What about your questions? It is pure arrogance and stupidity to think we have it all figured out.

Sure, we may profess to know something, but there come moments, those three o'clock-in-the-morning lying-in-bed staring at the ceiling sleepless moments, when we still wonder. We owe it to ourselves to finish the job that acid started. The butterfly deserves to fly.

Diligent mind practice (call it meditation or whatever you like) gradually reveals the entire mental landscape that may have been illuminated for a moment way back then. Meditation can reach beyond the limits of what we saw on a drug trip and show us what the mind actually is and looks like. It can replace the partial truths we were imprinted with through drugs with the ancient and well-known map of how the mind actually works. The mind is not unknowable and unfathomable. It is knowable, but we each have to know it for ourselves. No one, not even the Buddha can touch our forehead and enlighten us. That is a myth. It takes work on our part. We each have to enlighten ourselves, personally. That is the whole point. The dharma is a do-it-yourself method only, not a religion.

Meditation is not just some new-age fancy, but an age-old tested method to know the nature of the mind itself. And while it is not easy, it is much easier than the alternative, which is to continue not knowing.

Note: I am sure there are many valid forms of meditation, but I have not tried them all. The ones I know from experience that are authentic and that do work are the various forms of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. Some centers that I know personally are listed at this site:

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The Loss of Substance: LSD

If you want the podcast, here it is:

<http://spiritgrooves.libsyn.com/the-loss-of-substance-lsd>

As I mentioned in Part-1 of this blog, my discussion of drugs upsets some readers, especially drugs like LSD. I am sorry if this makes you uncomfortable. That is not my intention. My intention here is to give justice to the advent of hallucinogenics in the 1960s. I am not advocating taking LSD today or, for that matter, any other mind-altering substance, such as caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, marijuana, and so on.

Anyway, when it comes to drugs, LSD is a whole different story IMO from drugs like marijuana, which I consider more as entertainment, even though I know that some consider it sacred. For me marijuana was never sacred, even though I did my best to consider it so. First time for every drug for me was something sacred. After that, it depended on what it did for me. So please know that I consider LSD as the most sacred drug I have even ingested, regardless of how others may have abused it.

Let me preface my remarks by pointing out that LSD in my opinion was a generational thing, something that had its place in time and, although I am sure they still make it, I doubt that the experience could be quite the same today as it was in the early 1960s when we needed a way out of the ultra-straight 1950s. And before I jump into LSD, let me say a few words about prescription drugs.

If illegal drugs are the tip of the iceberg, then prescription drugs make up the rest of it. For all of the hullabaloo about pot and LSD, almost nothing is said or written about the effects of prescription drugs, although they are ubiquitous. This is gradually changing, I know. I am not

one for any kind of prescription drugs if they can be avoided, and I seldom take even aspirin or Ibuprofen. Tylenol in more than a single dose makes me sick and so do things like Vicodin. I can't use them.

When I see the endless cabinets of pills and drugs that many people use, I cannot help but feel compassion for these folks. Drug after drug, day after day, pill after pill, these drugs may relieve symptoms or be even more useful than that, but I also imagine that they (layer on layer) obscure the crystal-like clarity of the mind we were born with, that same mind that is the one key to any awareness that we have. Drugs, for all their value, can cloud, obscure, and put on hold any opportunity to wake up. Some of you reading this with more experience with prescription drugs than I have should tell this story. I would listen. That being said, back to my own account. Of the drugs I have had, the only ones that I must honestly say actually led to greater understanding of life and myself are the hallucinogens, the psychedelics, in particular LSD.

I have tried several kinds of hallucinogens, including Peyote, plus soaking and chewing up Morning Glory seeds (the 'Heavenly Blue' variety), letting them do their thing in my stomach, then throwing it all up, and lastly, getting high. For obvious reasons I did not do this that often, and for obvious reasons.

I would really need an entire blog or three to go into detail about LSD, its effects, and its residue in the mind stream. Suffice it to say here that of all the drugs I have experimented with (not really that many), LSD is the only one that made me think, that actually expanded my mental horizons in any permanent way. I only took it a few times, and only two of those trips were worthwhile in my opinion, but they were doozies. I will try to explain.

First, a few words about the advent of LSD back in the early 1960s. Before any of us ever tried LSD, we had heard about it. Like all new "highs" and drugs, coming

events cast their shadow, and the shadow of LSD was formidable and scary. Everyone agreed that it was not simply another “high” but, as science claims to have documented, it is a “mind-altering” drug. That alone gave us pause, because we had no idea of what “mind-altering” meant in this context. We thought pot and any old other drugs were already mind-altering, so this brought us up short, but only for a while. An inner urge to get out of the mental straight-jacket of the 1950s overcame any resistance that we had and we didn’t really know what the mind itself was, much less what it would be like if you altered it, so I took LSD on May 5, 1964 in Berkeley, California. I have written about that trip in articles that can be found on my site:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/#&panel1-1>

And sure enough, LSD "was" mind-altering, and for many of us not just for a day or part of a day, but for all time, and for a reason. And here I am pointing out a very important concept, so please, those of you interested, take note. LSD was not powerful just because it was a chemical concoction that somehow altered the mind, which it did appear to do, but mostly because none of us back then knew anything about what the mind was in the first place, and this fact is key. It is said that the great Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche took acid and reported that nothing happened. That should tell us something right there. He certainly knew the mind, so there apparently were no surprises when he dropped acid. This was not true for the rest of us.

It has taken me some thirty-five years of practicing meditation to know enough about the mind itself to get under and beyond the imprint left by LSD way back then, because LSD imprints deep! But I have done that, and can report from my own experience that the mind cannot be altered by drugs or anything else, not in its essence or truth. However, LSD experiences can dig deeper than we can otherwise reach in our day-to-day life experience, and unless we can get back to and beyond

(get our arms around) where the drugs imprinted, we may never know the difference, and be forced to live with life-experience boundaries set by drugs, rather than know the true mind itself. This is indeed sad. Be sure you are clear about this point, please.

Therefore, at least in my case, no amount of psychologizing solved the disturbance that LSD wrought on how I saw the world. With LSD, there is no going back, not because it is an "evil" drug, but because we see true things on it that require a true change in attitude on our parts. And change means a real change of mind, permanently. And this is true because I had realizations on acid, and realizations (as the Tibetan Buddhists tell us) are permanent. That is what LSD can permanently change us. In other words, when you see something that was crooked, straight, you will never see it crooked again. That is what realizations do.

These psychedelic drugs can change our perception, and radically, but they cannot change the nature of our mind itself. They can provide a glimpse of that nature that can require years of adjustment to come to grips with. In truth, LSD opened my eyes and meditation practice eventually stabilized what I saw. However, we have to actually recognize the true nature of our mind, and meditation is the only method I have found that can do that. I have pointed something important out here, but this topic deserves more discussion. For now I will return to the effects of LSD.

What LSD did back then was to remove the separation of subject and object in my mind, at least temporarily. It let me clearly see (once and for all) that what I saw out there in the outer world is a direct reflection of my biases and prejudices in here within my own psychology and mind and that, as I change my mind internally, what I see out there in the 'real' world changes accordingly. What a mind bender that realization was! This is the good or wonderful part of LSD, and it amounted to a huge life lesson for me.

The bad part or downside of LSD is that the experience can be so disruptive and unsettling that it can take years to reestablish any kind of mental stability (put all the puzzle pieces back together again), not because you become crazy, but because the concept of a "Self" you once had is so shattered by the LSD experience (and rightly so) that it takes that long to reassemble itself again. Let me very briefly clarify, if I can, and this is not simple.

As the Buddhists point out, what we call our "Self" has (according to them) no true or permanent existence. This is not to say there is no self or that you ever can somehow lose your self. That is a pure misunderstanding of the teachings. The self will always be there, if only as a narrator and the organizer of our lives, the little voice that says "you have a dentist appointment tomorrow." I like myself, but not "that" much and I used to joke about my self, that is was just "not my kind of people." In other words, I was not THAT crazy about myself.

What is not so understood (IMO) is that the self is not a permanent thing, but rather a composite, an ephemeral collection or montage of things we have gathered around us over time (like a warm blanket) to make us feel like we really are someone, in other words, just another habit. Actually, what we call our Self changes yearly, monthly, and daily, as we forget about this thing or other and identify with some new thing. The idea of a permanent self is a convenient illusion, a comfort blanket that seemingly promises continuity and (by inference) some sort of personal immortality, as in: the immortality of our particular persona. Even a cursory look at our history will show how much the idea of our self changes over time. What was central to our self image when a kid (a new bike) might well be totally different later in life (a new wife, husband, or child), and so on. The self remains, but what we consider important to our self-image is more like a kaleidoscope, ever changing. We

could have ten blogs on this.

My point here is that LSD (and other hallucinogens) shatters the concept of a self into a million pieces, forcing us to face the actual reality of our true nature, which we may perhaps just glimpse. However, this self-shattering experience is so profound that it takes us days, months, and years to put our Humpty-Dumpty Self back together again, if only to cover up our nakedness or emptiness. In my own case, it took years to stabilize myself after LSD, which is not something most folks can afford. And lastly, an air-tight self-image (like most of us try to maintain) is not something that is even helpful. Humpty Dumpty, no matter how carefully rearranged is still: Humpty Dumpty. Of course, I could go on.

In summary, while most drugs I have known are at best a pleasant waste of time, entertaining, and some are addictive and vicious, only the mind-expanding hallucinogens gave me anything I would consider at all valuable in the long term, and even the useful effects of LSD and its kin are better (and more safely) attained today through the various forms of meditation, the true mind-expanding practice. But, as mentioned, this is my opinion, just me. You will have your own story and objects may appear larger in your rear-view mirror than they in fact are.

Knowing what I know now, I would never consider using drugs of any kind, but rather I concentrate on learning to know and use my mind. I have more detailed articles on LSD on my website, if you would care to look for them:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/#&panel1-1>

I am considering looking at psychedelics in more depth tomorrow, if I can get my thoughts together.

Why LSD Was Important in the 1960s

I will try to make this my last post on the psychedelics, at least for a while, and you might think these drugs would be polar opposites to the mind training that I work with now. However, believe it or not, mind-altering drugs like LSD have some natural affinity with Tibetan Mind training practices in that they both can reveal the actual nature of the mind (to some degree), something that other kinds of drugs (like marijuana) don't do or do very poorly. Marijuana is mind-altering, yes, but not really psychedelic, at least as I define the term.

LSD is obviously not merely an entertainment drug or, if it is, as our friend Bill Maher might say, it takes place in "Real Time." LSD entertains us completely, including swallowing the Self whole and without a hiccup. The Self is often the chief target (and victim) of psychedelic insights.

And while meditation techniques tend to reveal the nature of the mind gradually, LSD exposed an entire generation to at least a glimpse of the mind's nature, revealing very clearly the subject/object duality that we are all pretty much lost in. Tibetan Buddhist Meditation practice gradually reveals the entire landscape of the mind's nature, not just a glimpse. My point is that LSD was much more than just another way to get high.

Listen to the podcast, if you wish:

<http://spiritgrooves.libsyn.com/why-lsd-was-important-in-the-1960s-220>

Back in the early 1960s, meditation techniques were taught in only a few places in North America and were mostly unavailable to those of us struggling to emerge from the cocoon-mentality of the 1950s. And back then meditation was not recognized as the transformative force it is today. Just as with LSD, we didn't know much what meditation was all about either.

This is why mind-altering drugs like LSD were so important back in the early 1960s. They unbound our minds, which were too tightly wrapped, and gave us the singular insight that we were essentially pinching ourselves, causing our own suffering. In my case, LSD experientially (not abstractly) first exposed for me the falseness of the duality of subject and object, perceiver and perceived, and made it clear that to a marked degree they were one and the same. I finally saw that, of all people, I was my own worst enemy. What a revelation!

In other words, it was through acid that my generation began to see that our internal biases and prejudices were being projected onto the outward screen of the world like a movie, which we then watched in rapt attention and took it as reality. This was for me a tight closed-loop until I first took acid in May of 1964. I had never been out-of-the-box, not even for a glimpse, and suddenly there I was right there. It changed me forever because it was clear that if I could change inside myself how I saw things, the things I saw out there would change too. I could improve my world rather than be just subject to it, a victim of my own obscurations and prejudices.

Some say that LSD magically appeared at the time it was most needed in history to speed up the mind's opening and jump-start the 1960s. For me it was more than just a materialistic event. I have a clear memory of experiencing something very much akin to a direct-voice transmission from "above" (inside me) to the effect that I had a choice. I could either rapidly open the mind at the expense of losing some of my finer-mesh memories or I could preserve the memories but open the mind much more slowly. This direct-voice actually took place. I chose opening the mind quickly because life without that would have amounted to very little more than an extension of the mindset of the 1950s, and having "finer" memories of that time interested me not at all. The

1950s were prophylactic, like having my mind coated with oil, a film that I could not see or taste through, and I very much needed to breathe... authentic life.

In the beginning of the Sixties my generation felt stifled and constrained by the mores of the 1950s mentality. We needed clarity and some fresh air, a life with fewer filters, with next to nothing between us and reality, so to speak -- no filmy veneer of morality codes. We needed some skin on skin. In addition, we soon found that the front door of society was effectively blocked to us by the extreme conservatism of the times and the boxed-in sense of reality that came with that view. And we wanted out of the box.

Therefore, children of the Sixties like myself came in through society's back door by "inventing" things like the Internet, something not ever envisioned, much less controlled, by mainstream society. And that society was so clueless as to the potential of the Internet that they allowed us to simply walk-in and take over without a fight. They laughed at our long hair and "geekiness," but they did not consider us any real kind of threat because we did not want the kind of power they had. To them we were relatively harmless.

In other words, they just did not correctly value the Internet or see it coming, but we did. We basically invented our own form of society. We found a way, our way, to share power and knowledge in a more democratic fashion. For example, I had email in 1979. Imagine that!

And now I want to look at how LSD impacted our sense of Self back in the day because it is important. The problem (then as now) finally boils down to a lack of familiarity on our part with the actual nature of our own mind and how it works, familiarity that we have never had. It is still true today. And glimpses or peeks at the mind's nature via LSD (figuratively-speaking) had what amounted to a pornographic effect (which was very

disruptive) on the status-quo of our overly-sanitized 1950s sense-of-Self.

It is fair to say that the Self exists in a kind of vacuum, hermetically sealed from anything that would be upsetting. It is a one-way valve, letting the things we like in and keeping everything else out. Functionally, the Self pretty much defines the concept of duality, of me and them. And just like when we crack the seal on home-made canned goods and there is a mighty pop, breaking open the seal of the self instantly lets all kinds of fresh air in (and stale air out), and this initiates an attrition of change (and needed adjustment) that is always long overdue. It is obvious that the arch-conservative Self does not like any change that it does not personally approve. In other words, the Self is a control freak when it comes to keeping up appearances.

The Tibetan Buddhists point out that the true nature of the mind is almost totally obscured by our own ignorance (what we ignore) and confusion, not to mention the endless accumulation of obscurations and bad habits, of which our attachment to the self is probably number one.

Drugs like LSD pop that hermetic seal of the Self very suddenly and all hell breaks loose. Meditation and mind training do the same thing, but very gradually, thus avoiding the shock of re-stabilization that drugs require. Either way, something of the true nature of the mind is revealed, but the violence of drugs like LSD on the self only serves to further confuse the issue and add years to the process of re-stabilization. I can testify to this.

As a counselor, for many years I specialized in those who became destabilized by mind-altering drugs like LSD and could not manage to re-stabilize. They fell through the cracks of society and became casualties of psychedelic insight. Oddly enough, in those folks, the Self manages to get ahold of what was seen while on LSD and seal it off from the further change that such insight usually enables, with the result that the

revelations that the hallucinogens inspired are confiscated, incorporated by the Self for its own purposes, and end up only serving as further proof that he or she is "unique" or special, a uniqueness maintained at the expense of being able to ever openly exchange with others. To put it another way, instead of using the insights of acid to free the mind, the Self can aggrandize those insights to point out how they make the person unique and extraordinary, a perfect trap that leads to a very lonely life.

The analogy that I like is that of finally having a breath of fresh air and then holding that breath to keep from losing the inspiration. Life eventually has to punch us in the gut just to get us breathing again, much like the newborn baby is slapped on the butt by the midwife to help it start crying and thereby breathe.

This solipsistic response to drug-inspired insight ("the boy in the bubble") on the part of the Self can be very difficult to penetrate. The remedy for this that I found effective in counseling is to manage to get the client's attention and prove to them by proximity that they are, in fact, not alone, not all that unique or special, and that others have had the same experience before it ever occurred to them. In other words, their experience is normal and even common. This is good news to the soul, but bad news to the controlling self.

And the self-centered "Self" hates to hear this and fights it all the way, while at the same time the client's inner soul take a deep breath of fresh air and is relieved to know they are not all alone. Once the tight seal of the Self is broken as to their being in any way "unique" from other folks through their "special" LSD experience, the bubble is popped and their isolation is ruined; they begin to come out of it and rejoin the rest of society, albeit sometimes begrudgingly.

This, of course, is what shamans are all about, soul retrieval, and this is essentially therapy, which takes

time. A much more effective way to grasp the true nature of the mind is through the standard Tibetan Buddhist meditation practices. These methods are safe and efficient, but they still take time.

To wrap this up, after years of study and contemplation, mixed with conversations with others from the Sixties, it is clear to me (and to these folks) that the advent of psychedelic drugs like LSD, Mescaline, psilocybin, and so on was a principle, if not "the" principle cause of what we call the 1960s. I know, not everyone took acid back then, but a great many leaders of that generation did and their insights rubbed off on those who did not, just as second hand smoke from marijuana can get you a little high.

And no, LSD did not bring the kind of awareness that Tibetan Buddhist mind training has, but what I saw on acid was a glimpse of the true nature of how the mind actually works. At least it punctured the bad dream I was having, in which I was a victim alone in this threatening world. On acid I saw that I was at least the co-creator of my own world, and that much of what I saw out there that threatened me was projected exactly by my uptight controlling Self from somewhere in-here. Once that bubble was popped and "the boy in the bubble" was free, I could clearly see that there was something that I COULD do to change this world I saw, rather than just be subject to it as a victim.

I now had a differential that could be worked to enact change within myself. In other words, I saw for the first time (and realized!) that the dualism of the subject (me) and the object (outer world) were in fact not separate, but rather were a tag team working closely together to make me a victim of my own prejudice and delusions.

In that night, on May 6th of 1964, when I first dropped acid, the spell of a disembodied lifetime was broken, and I was free to change my conditions. This same illusion of duality and its solution is identical to what Tibetan mind-

training methods reveal about dualisms, down to the finest detail.

The problem with LSD, at least for me, was that once I had the realizations it offered, I had no support network, much less a methodology or graduated path of instruction to organize and repair the shock to the system that the insights on acid revealed. It took me many years to stabilize what I saw on LSD, and it took years of mind-training after that to finish the job.

That being said, those initial insights back in the early 1960s from LSD were accurate and a whole generation (the 1960s) emerged from their stifling cocoons at about the same time. I like to think we were butterflies, not locusts.

Two Points, One Warning

Before some of you run out and drop acid to enable your meditation practice, think again. I suggest that you look two ideas right in the eye, as scary as that might be for some of us. And this first idea comes with a warning, so please take it in:

If you would rather hear this as a podcast, here it is:

<http://spiritgrooves.libsyn.com/psychedelics-and-mind-training-221>

The primary thing that psychedelics did for me, that had never happened before, is that they gave me some actual "realization" that was not just another experience, but something that came and that never went away, even though it was only a taste or glimpse.

In that time of insight I understood, experienced, and finally realized the basic fact why our dualistic form of perception makes the Self so invulnerable to penetration, i.e. that what we see out there in the world and take verbatim as "real" is in fact very much a product of the likes, dislikes, bias, and prejudice that we hold "in here," in our own views and as a result of our own karma. In other words, the subject "me" in here and the "them and you" outside of me (and over there) are not a true dichotomy, not really separate at all, but are integrally related, one to another – a working unity. In other words, dualisms are an inconvenient fiction.

I realized this in real-time on LSD and it remains with me to this day. Most important, that realization punctured the prophylactic bubble of the Self and provided a differential, just like the calculus of the same name, such that the mind immediately became workable for me and I immediately begin to work it, and have ever since. This was an incredible break-through after a life lived without any true insight into my own condition!

As scary as the thought of "mind-altering" drugs are, and

they can be scary, the term mind-altering is a misnomer. Psychedelics alter our perspective and view of the mind, not the mind itself. This is why this topic of psychedelics is so shunned and difficult to entertain for many, and well it should be. The power of the shaman resides there, but also, without guidance, these drugs can easily be (and often are) very dangerous. And psychedelics are no substitute for the gradual results of mind training, but they can provide an authentic glimpse into how the mind works such that we are inspired to work it.

And here is the warning: Yes, some of what I experienced on LSD was what might be called recognition (something akin to realization), a glimpse at how the mind actually works. But even for the greatest yogis (and I was not one of those), recognition is not something that is the end of anything, but just the bare beginning of something, like: real mind training.

I then spent the next decade or so trying to balance what I realized on LSD. I had some parts of the puzzle, but not the big picture that I needed. I would find out later that the greatest sages, the Mahasiddhas themselves, point out that we cannot do this on our own. Period, with no wiggle-room. Recognition of the mind's true nature requires a teacher to point out the true nature of the mind to us, and to work with us. It was not until I set out to find such a teacher and to submit to the practices they instructed me in that all of the puzzle-pieces begin to fall into place, at least enough to satisfy me.

So yes, psychedelics can open the mind and even offer some glimpse of realization. I can attest to this. But that taste will never (not EVER, if you would believe the Mahasiddhas) resolve itself into what is called "recognition," much less enlightenment, WITHOUT having the actual nature of the mind pointed out to us by an authentic master, someone who actually holds that realization in actuality. This is not true just because I say it; I say it because the great Siddhas say it is true.

I beat around in the bushes for decades trying to complete the puzzle that LSD introduced me to. And while that introduction was authentic and provided me with the staying power to keep looking, it was not until I found the Tibetan Buddhists, teachers like the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and my root teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, that I could go further in my practice. Until then I was just one more acid-head who had seen something true, but who was unable to put the pieces together into a coherent picture that I could live with and by.

A glimpse or realization (some light at the end of the tunnel) is what I needed to keep going in my mind practice and my search for authenticity, but it has to be tempered by an authentic teacher, at least in Vajrayana Buddhism. And now for the second point, the preparations for realization, and this is true for all realizations, whether psychedelic or achieved through meditation:

Preparation is imperative! Without it, nothing will happen, except perhaps some experiences. The group mind of those of us who became more aware in the 1960s had been prepared by the mindset of the 1950s in which we grew up, just like a pendulum swings from one opposite to the other. I have talked enough about that in previous blogs. Let me give you an example of preparation.

In the Tibetan mind training, I was surprised to learn when I got to the training for Mahamudra meditation (which like Dzogchen and Maha-Ati, are said to be the pinnacle of the Tibetan meditation tradition) to be told to go and practice again (and more) what was the very basic beginning thoughts that first attracted me to Buddhism, what are called "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma."

These four thoughts were what first interested me in the dharma and now they were the preparation for the highest form of mind training taught by the lineage. And

here they were introduced once again to set the stage for learning Mahamudra properly. That was a surprise. For those who don't know them, briefly the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind" are:

- (1) This human life we have is precious.
- (2) Life is impermanent and death is certain.
- (3) The Law of Karma is unavoidable. Our every action has a result.
- (4) This cyclic world of ups and downs is inherently undependable.

As the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa personally pointed out to me: all four of these thoughts must be kept in mind simultaneously to create the proper circumstances for real insight to occur. This is what is meant by "preparation."

I happen to love and treasure the Four Thoughts, so I jumped in and spent several years going deep into them once again, aided by Mother Nature. The laws of nature are often called the "Lama of Appearances," a true teacher, just like a living lama is a teacher. But this training was fueled by very special circumstances that threw me out of my normal self and into the void of what is beyond the self. Without being thrust into that sense of uncertainty and emptiness, nothing much would have happened, so take note.

And to point out to you just how special those circumstances were for me, consider this. For one entire summer, from the end of May until late fall when it was too cold to go out much, unless it rained or something else required my presence, I was outside in the meadows and woods watching the sun come up. I did this for something like five or more months. There I was, just out there, in nature, soaked by the dew and breathing in the morning brisk air, before dawn (or close to it), watching the sun rise. For me that was VERY unusual, because prior to that time, I can't remember

when I was outside watching the sun rise even once, much less every day for half a year!

My point here is that the circumstances around any kind of recognition or realization have to be, for us, special to the point of unavoidable. We are pushed beyond the ordinary and through a door or passage we would not otherwise pass through. There is a mental, emotional, and spiritual environment that has to come together like a perfect storm to make realization possible. Please don't ignore this requirement. Prepare for it. You too can consider the Four Thoughts that turn the mind away from our everyday distractions.

The same desperation and lack of satisfaction with the world that led to many of the Sixties generation taking LSD is not dissimilar to the kind of special state we have to be in to break-through in meditation practice. And, as I found out, there are different ways to arrive at this state. One of them is to deeply consider the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind. Another, for me, was the particular circumstances that my life took on that led for me getting serious enough to actually get some insight. And I was contemplating the Four Thoughts all that time.

I swear that we are all walking around as if we are going to live forever, which should be a clue that we may have to, but in what form? For me, popping that bubble of the Self and coming down to where the rubber meets the road was essential for my mind training. So there you have my two points:

One, that with or without psychedelics like LSD, we will need an authentic spiritual guide in the flesh to assist us in our realization.

And two, just dropping acid or practicing without coming up with the perfect storm of seriousness that something like the "Four Thoughts" can provide is not enough.

These two have to be combined, the sobering from the Four Thoughts and a spiritual friend or teacher who has

authentic realization. These are my two-cents.

Questions?

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