

LSD and the New American Zen Student

ROBERT AITKEN

Ten, or even five years ago, the subject, "LSD and Zen," would have evoked only a comparison of the two experiences. Today, the experiential aspect is still essential, but significant sociological implications have emerged through the extraordinary widespread use of the drug. We may number in the millions the young Americans whose lives have been affected to some degree by experimenting with psychedelics.¹

From our experience at the Maui Zendo, where we are a kind of mission to the psychedelic Bohemia, we would judge that most people taper off after their initial enthusiasm about drugs, and that many stop taking the heavy psychedelics altogether. Even among individuals whose life-style seems directly emergent from psychedelic experience, there seem to be few whose ideal continues over a period of years to "stay high all the time" with drugs.

Thus, while virtually all of the young people who knock on our front door have tried LSD, mescaline, or psilocybin, they inquire about our program because they seek a way of continuing their search without using drugs. Our situation is not unique, except that we are located in a community that has become a kind of Mecca for the long-haired people. The San Francisco Zen Center, with its satellite centers at Tassajara, Berkeley, Mill Valley, and elsewhere, also finds that former drug users make up the greater proportion of new membership. Other groups across the country report a similar situation.

In this article, I propose to examine the needs of young people who seek Zen training after going through psychedelic experiences. I approach this task with diffidence, even reluctance, for there are vast differences in response to the drugs.

* Robert Aitken is director of the Maui Zendo, Maui, Hawaii.

¹ Tart, Charles T., *Altered States of Consciousness: A Book of Readings* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1969), p. 377.

In the new Bohemia as a whole, the spectrum ranges from the pathetic, youthful derelicts whose brains and bodies are ruined by methedrine, through committed acid-heads, witches, a new breed of bindle-stiffs, swingers, runaways, artists, carpenters, teachers, farmers, and yogis. Almost any conclusion could be supported to some degree.

Environmental pressure is a further variable that makes generalization difficult. Suppose that the American government had begun 15 years ago to develop viable alternatives to a war economy. Would the drop-out movement be so significant today? And would those who did drop out with drugs have the same conviction that society is a bummer? We must raise such questions, and accept the likelihood that severe social stress may prompt experimentation to begin with, and may color the drug experiences and subsequent attitudes.

At the Maui Zendo, for the most part, we meet seekers at the yogi end of the scale of the counter-culture. General characteristics of their attitude seem to be, (1) a consuming interest in illuminative religion, (2) a sense of wholeness and essence, (3) a love of nature, (4) a devotion to poverty and asceticism, (5) a sensitivity to one another, and (6) a desire to "get it on," that is, to practice, rather than simply to talk.

These characteristics may be shared to some extent by their brothers and sisters throughout the new Bohemia; even the meth-freaks babble about God and organic gardens. Likewise, some of the self-limiting qualities of the acid-head may be found among our new inquirers. However, the distinctive nature of the new Zen student is found to include the above six characteristics in good measure, whatever his further qualities or handicaps might be.

The interest in illuminative religion includes a remarkable head-start in religious understanding. Most of our new students already have a concept of meditation—many have done some Yoga and are familiar with the preliminary *asanas*, and the idea of control for the sake of freedom does not need explaining.

The sense of sacredness, which Pahnke and Richards designate as one of the phenomena of psychedelic experience, makes religious ritual seem entirely appropriate for our new students.² Moreover, the drive toward maturity which is

² Pahnke, Walter N. & William A. Richards, "Implications of LSD and Experimental Mysticism," *ibid*, pp. 403 ff. Reprinted from the *Journal of Religion & Health*, Vol. 5, 1966.

found in the young has been diverted within, and Zen practice, or one of the other forms of religious training, becomes a suitable vehicle.

Of course these young students share the human problem of distraction, and indeed, for them it is a problem that touches the heart of their experience. LSD and the other psychedelics seem to shatter much of the personality structure, and the impulse of the moment assumes paramount importance.³

In this respect, it is significant to note the observation of René Daumal on his dangerous experiments with carbon tetrachloride, which he took to explore the experience of death. He was not too troubled by the possibility of actually dying, or of damaging his brain, or of shortening his life. The greatest danger, it seemed to him, lay in the attitude toward himself and the world which emerged from his experience:

Everything seemed to me an absurd phantasmagoria, no logic would convince me of anything, and, like a leaf in the wind, I was ready to obey the faintest interior or exterior impulse. This state almost involved me in irreparable "actions" (if the word still applies), for nothing held any importance for me any longer.⁴

The new gypsies blow like leaves in the wind, now in Mendocino, now at San Francisco, then all the way to Maui, then back to the Mainland, always with a convincing reason that may really be no more than a faint interior or exterior impulse. This condition wears off to some extent, and the young person seeks something more stable—Zen training perhaps. But often there is a residue of loyalty to the distractions which once seemed so impelling.

Of all the self-limiting qualities we can observe in our new students, the leaf-in-the-wind syndrome is the most pervasive and general. Thoughts come with emotional force, in "flashes," and unless the young person has learned at last to distrust them, off he will go where the wind blows him. Those who respond to Zen, and cultivate a *samadhi* of self-mastery, have a tool with which to cope with

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 401-402.

⁴ De Ropp, Robert. *The Master Game: Pathways to Higher Consciousness Beyond the Drug Experience* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1968), pp. 34-35, cited by De Ropp from *Psychedelic Review*, No. 5, 1965.

their hypersuggestability.⁵ Gradually, we notice a developing strength, and an appreciation for the doctrine of the moment as a matter of the will.

The leaf-in-the-wind syndrome is a quality of *accidie*, where “nothing is of any importance,” or where the proportion of importance and unimportance is skewed or flattened.⁶ Learning to cope with distractions is a matter of determining that, for 40 minutes, only *mu* shall be important, and everything else, no matter how significant it may seem, shall be dismissed. Reaction is no longer blind, but illuminated with attention, a process Arthur J. Deikman calls “deautomatization.”⁷ The student who then can realize his condition may be able to respond correctly to Bassui Zenji’s *kōan*, “Who is the master?”⁸

Hopeless resignation to a lack of mastery contributes to a fascination with tarot, the *I Ching* and astrology, where everything can be decided from outside. The new Zen student must learn that *karma* is not the same thing as fate. Right now we are free to take any action that seems suitable under the circumstances. In our *zazen*, many possible thoughts wait in the wings for their chance on stage, and we learn to keep all distraction in its place through our choice of one particular, nonreflective, mental action.⁹ By taking ourselves into absolute *samadhi* through our own efforts, we learn that the inner master can “make it happen,” and that other influences are by no means in full control.

⁵ *Samadhi* of self-mastery is Katsuki Sekida’s refinement of the term *samadhi*-power (*jō-riki*). See Sekida, “Samadhi,” *Diamond Sangha*, Jan.-April, 1966, Vol. VI, Nos. 1 & 2.

⁶ Cf. De Ropp, *op. cit.*, pp. 11, 68–69.

⁷ Deikman, Arthur J., “Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience,” Tart, *op. cit.*, p. 31. Reprinted from *Psychiatry*, Vol. 29, 1966.

⁸ Cf. Kapleau, Philip, *The Three Pillars of Zen* (Tokyo: John Weatherhill, Inc., 1965), p. 157.

⁹ Cf. Sekida, “Three Nen Actions and One-Eon Nen,” *Diamond Sangha*, July-Oct. 1968, Vol. 8, Nos. 4 & 5.