

“Ordinary Mind is the Way”

ALAN WATTS

In talking about experiences under the influence of lysergic acid (LSD-25) and other psychedelic chemicals, everyone must speak for himself. It is very hard to generalize, because the quality of these experiences depends only partially on the chemical reaction: of special importance are the mental state of the person taking such chemicals and the circumstances under which the experiment is conducted, that is to say, the set and the setting.

Therefore, so far as I am concerned, I have found experiments with psychedelics both like and unlike what I understand as the flavor of Zen, and find them more akin to the approaches of Vajrayana. I say “approaches” advisedly, because I am sure that the culmination of Vajrayana, as exemplified in *zog-chen* meditation in the Nyingmapa school of Tibetan Buddhism, is essentially the same as Zen. If there is any difference one would have to be experiencing nondualistic differences!

As I have experienced them, the changes in consciousness stimulated by LSD go through a more-or-less regular pattern. There is first a slowing down of the sense of passing time. This moment becomes of supreme importance, and one seems able to savor its nuances¹ to the utmost. In this state of mind, the future-oriented strivings of ordinary people seem to be somewhat insane: they appear frantic—missing the whole point of life—and for such people one feels sorrow rather than contempt.

Next there are subtle changes in sense-perception. Colors become intensely bright and vivid. Sounds, especially of music, acquire astonishing resonance.² Light seems to come from inside things—not to shine upon them from outside—and the whole world acquires that peculiar luminosity which is normally seen at dawn and twilight. Both to sight and touch, objects seem to undulate or

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¹ 色 or 風 as in 風流 ² 感

breathe, and it is difficult to decide whether this is a hallucination, or whether one has merely ceased to ignore some constant and normal input arising from the natural fluidity of our organs of sense. Perhaps a world sensed by a breathing organism should seem to breathe, except that ordinary consciousness screens out this impression because of its very constancy. At this stage, and for some time later during the total 8 to 10 hours of the experience, closing the eyes will reveal extraordinary visions of highly colored, arabesque-like designs which, for me, have raised the question that I may be seeing patterns of energy related to the basic structure of my nerves.

In the stage following, the “influence” passes into the thinking process, as if the chemical were spiralling through different levels of one’s being to get at the inmost center. Here, the discriminating mind is confounded because it becomes completely clear that all so-called opposites imply each other and go together in somewhat the same way as the two sides of a single coin. Yes indeed, form is very much emptiness, and emptiness is very much form! And the same goes for “self” and “other,” as also for what you *do* voluntarily and what *happens* to you involuntarily: it’s all the same process. Before, you may have known it intellectually, but now it comes to you with full clarity and certainty that because you can’t experience the feeling “self” without the contrast of the feeling “other,” (or of solid without space) these supposed “opposites” imply each other mutually, and this leads on to recognition of the *ji-ji-mu-ge* principle that every identifiable thing or event implies and “goes with”³ all others, whether past, present, or future.

But here there is a danger-point in the experience, especially for those who have not had previous training in Zen, Yoga, or some similar discipline. It may appear, on the one hand, that you are the helpless victim of everything that happens, a total puppet of fate. How can you trust it? What guarantee is there that you will be able to think and behave rationally five minutes from now? On the other hand, it may appear that you yourself, like God, are doing and are personally responsible for everything that happens. Paranoia or megalomania may result from siding with either aspect of this experience—in other words, from failing to see that these are two opposite ways of looking at the same state of affairs, the state of *tzu-jan* or *shizen* [自然] in which everything is happening “of itself.”

³ 相生

THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

This, then, is liable to be the point at which the inexperienced experimenter with psychedelics is in real danger of a psychotic episode. He may get the feeling that there is absolutely nothing to be relied upon, for if all comes from impersonal fate, how is that to be trusted? And if all depends upon his own self . . . well, "when I look for it I can't find it." Nothing in this whole universe is more unreliable than ego.

But if this stage is passed without panic—and the passage requires an attitude of profound faith or letting-go to you know not what—the rest of the experience is total delight, *sat-chit-ananda*, *mahasukha*, *sambhoga*. For there follows what, in Buddhist terms, would be called an experience of the world as *dharmadhatu*, of all things and events, however splendid or deplorable from relative points of view, as aspects of a symphonic harmony which, in its totality, is gorgeous beyond all belief. And it is here that one may often have an apprehension of consciousness itself, of Mind, of the current inside the nervous-system, as vivid, electric-blue light such as is described in the Tibetan *Bardo Thödol* or in Hakuin Zenji's vision of total transparency.

But, in my own experience, the most interesting thing seems to happen just at the moment when the effect of the chemical wears off and you "descend" from these exalted and ecstatic experiences into your ordinary state of mind. For here, in "the twinkling of an eye," there is the realization that so-called everyday or ordinary consciousness is the supreme form of awakening, of Buddha's *anut-tara-samyak-sambodhi*. It is so simple, so self-evident, so clear that nothing which makes any sense can be said about it. The *problem* vanishes, for the problem was the ever-impossible one of representing reality consistently in the forms of ideas and words, or of looking for something beyond and above this eternal here-and-now. This is where Zen language makes perfect sense. The ultimate meaning of Buddhism is MU!—or "the-sound-of-one-hand"—or my old worn-out sandals.

Of course, if you arrive at this by using LSD you remember it quite clearly, but the true feeling of it passes off. It is thus that many of us who have experimented with psychedelic chemicals have left them behind, like the raft which you used to cross a river, and have found growing interest and even pleasure in the simplest practice of *za-zen*, which we perform like idiots, without any special purpose.⁴

⁴ 無事

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

Perhaps we are not overly impressed with the “attainments” and the “spiritual status” of great Zen-masters, but we deeply appreciate their ordinary way of life.⁵

⁵ 平常心是道