

Psychedelics and Zen: Some Reflections

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In "Reflections on LSD, Zen Meditation and Satori" (*Psychologia*, Vol. V, No. 3, 124-130) I told of certain personal experiences in connection with LSD which seemed similar to experiences encountered in the practice of Zen. At that time I thought that LSD might be a useful aid both to the realization of *prajna* and to the development of meditational practice (*dhyana*). Because of (1) my continuing practice and training in Zen and (2) my observations of persons who have continued to use psychedelic agents for meditational or religious purposes, I am now convinced that drugs like LSD are obstacles rather than aids in the practice of Zen.

About a year after the article on LSD, Zen meditation, and *satori* was written I participated in a *sesshin* under the guidance of Yasutani Roshi. During this *sesshin* my experiences included a moment which the Roshi identified as *kenshō*. I really cannot affirm or deny such an identification, but I can to some extent compare what occurred then with my own LSD-precipitated experiences which I had earlier thought to be similar to *kenshō*.

Even the deepest and most powerful realizations associated with LSD were weak and dim compared to the clarity of *sesshin* events. It is not a case of the former (LSD experiences) becoming dim with time and the latter seeming clearer because more recent. As I now write it is evident in my memory that the experiences prior to the 1963 *sesshin* were *as they occurred* like shadows or indirect reflections when compared to the events of the 1963 *sesshin*. The relation of the 1963 events to many moments of experience subsequent to that time has been strong and clear in a way that has not been characteristic of the relations between the LSD experiences and moments subsequent to them.

When I speak of events or experiences being much clearer it is the clarity itself

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that is most important, not the details of the events. The greater clarity makes evident the interrelatedness of all that happens. Each aspect of all that is now going on is transparent to every other aspect, and all that one has experienced in the past is similarly not separate from all that is presently happening. Every experience or event has no obstruction of any sort between it and all other experiences or events. In the sense of revealing this great clarity the *kenshō* event has influenced my life and consciousness far more than the LSD experiences because it has carried over more into daily life. While there was something like this clarity in some of the LSD experiences the LSD clarity now seems rather pale. The greater impact of the *kenshō* experience is evident not only at the time of the event but also in many moments since.

The on-going contemporaneousness of the clarity, or non-obstructiveness, is most important. It is present *now*, or not at all. While the moment of *kenshō* is an event that takes its place among the other events—even as the most notable of all events—in a person's life-experiences, Zen or the life of Zen is not such an event or "great experience."

Even when one considers experiences as such, however, it may be that there are experiential hindrances introduced by psychedelics. Out of curiosity I have been a volunteer for LSD experiments on a couple of occasions since the *kenshō* experience and have found none of these LSD experiences as meaningful as the ones before the *kenshō*. On each occasion I was more aware than ever before of a strong drugged feeling while the LSD was working. These later LSD experiences were also more peripheral; they no longer had the central meaning earlier ones conveyed. It goes without saying that the later LSD experiences were not at all like the *kenshō* experience.

There are several individuals with whom I am personally acquainted who over a long period of time have continued to use some psychedelic agent or agents for meditational or religious purposes. Each one clearly is attached to the agent(s) as an important factor in producing highly desired experiences. Such a person has a two-edged dependence that is antithetical to genuine Zen practice. He is attached to a type of experience which has already occurred in connection with earlier use of the drug(s) and which he wants to occur again. He therefore depends on the drug(s) and turns to them again and again as a factor that promises renewed experiences of a similar nature. Although it is he who turns as a subject to a particular intentional use of the agent(s) *he does turn to a special object*

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outside himself in order to trigger an experience. This fundamental attitude, even if it seems to disappear in the midst of the drug-facilitated experiences, is reinforced with every renewed use of the drug(s) for the same purpose. The Way of Zen is to go straight forward in all circumstances, depending on nothing.

I am convinced that some events which have sometimes occurred in conjunction with the use of psychedelics may be similar to *kenshō* experiences *as experiences*. What is essential in *kenshō*, however, is not the experiential events but the Reality. In his *Short Cut to Za-Zen*, Kawajiri Hoshin quotes an uta:

What you call satori
Is the satori you have not attained.
When you have attained,
There is no satori.¹

Those who use psychedelics to achieve *kenshō* (or *satori*) or to renew their “enlightenment” are completely misunderstanding the nature of Zen practice and the Way. Regardless of their mental understanding about the Way they are acting as if Zen were a matter of special experiences different from everyday life.

While in a small number of cases psychedelic experiences may have revealed to persons the everyday presentness of the Pure Buddha Land, from that point on the psychedelics are of no value whatsoever insofar as the Way is concerned. Without relying on anything one must walk step by step, moment by moment in the daily reality of the Pure Land.

¹ Senzaki Nyogen's translation of *Short Cut to Za-Zen*, in manuscript.