

Experiences Gradual and Sudden, and Getting Rid of Them

RICHARD LEAVITT

I

There has been a lot of controversy about the comparison of various traditional religious training methods with psychedelic experience, that is, the rather abrupt and undeniably memorable effects produced by certain chemicals, notably LSD-25. There has also been a lot of controversy about the comparison of the methods of "gradual and sudden enlightenment," in the Soto and Rinzai schools of Zen Buddhism. Such discussions provide fodder for journalists, but they do not conduce to enlightenment. Having one finger pointing at the moon is distracting enough, when three or four more get into the act it is sheer confusion. If one meditates "gradually," as Soto Zen students are said to do, the insights which occur during meditation must, nonetheless, occur in individual moments of time, hence, more or less "suddenly." And if one has "sudden" insights, as Rinzai students are said to, they must nonetheless occur during a course of training which may take up to fifteen years, which would seem to be "gradual" enough for most people.

In any case, "experiences," whether sudden or gradual, violent or mild, exotic or familiar, "enlightening" or what you will, are useless in themselves. They cannot be hung on the wall to impress one's friends, although photography unfortunately gives us the illusion that pasted into an album they are somehow more real if they exist independently, separate from the whole fabric of life, like commodities neatly wrapped in little packages. With television, Muzak, and mass tourism, exotic experiences have never been more available than they

Richard Leavitt is a writer now living in Durham, New Hampshire.

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are now; but I do not think that people are more good, true, and beautiful, or that they are more wise, compassionate, and joyful than they have been in the past. The quality of life is not automatically improved because we are able to dose ourselves with experiences, whether they come from swallowing a pill or from sitting on a cushion. What is really at stake is not only the quality of life, but the quality of a lifetime.

II

The word "training" is central, for it is not given us to see ourselves as others see us. Traditional religious training methods are long, painful, and systematic. The student is guided by a teacher, and the training is guided by both the experience of the tradition and by a doctrine. In Zen, at least, trance and psychic phenomena are eschewed; it is by the traditional materials—koans and work—that the student must demonstrate, concretely and repeatedly, not only his understanding of what he is meditating on but also its effect on, in, and through him. His impromptu reaction when confronted, suddenly, with, say, the buzz of a cicada, is more important than any ability to quote scripture. More telling than a reaction to a particular confrontation may be his general actions in the ordinary flow of an everyday life that is usually without conveniently available cicadas. The goal, if there is one, is to realize Truth as it is seen in terms of Buddhist doctrine. Identification and non-identification, the exploration, in feeling and action, of relationships, the placing and the places of awareness, and, before, during, and after, the practice of morality—all these are to show the truth of the Buddhist analysis of how things are, impermanent and empty, subject to certain laws. Psychedelic exploration may reveal these things too, momentarily, but it does not have the systematized frustrations and obstacles, the comparisons, the repetitions, the checking against both theory and daily life that a traditional training system provides. In another sense, there is no goal. The various goals that one may think up along the way—one-pointedness, personal force, "enlightenment," the value of work and discipline, discipline, elimination of the ego, compassion, integration, non-attachment—each of these serves its purpose and is dropped in its turn. One does this sort of practice simply because one does it, because, in the best sense of the words, one has no thing better to do. Saint-Saëns said that he composed music as an apple tree produces apples.

III

Stuck as we are in the Nirmanakaya, it is there that we must do whatever we do, and find whatever Nirvanas we are to find. Intentional suffering, the combination of awareness and identification, effort and obstacles, guided by a teacher and constantly checked against both doctrine and daily life so that there are a thousand different chances a day to say, "What a fool I've been! What a fool I am!"—This is not comfortable, and our chances of seeing it without having our heads constantly bumped against it by a discipline and a disciplinarian are small. Wisdom is hard to define, but it is not a product of youth or haste. Experience takes time. Experiences do not.

"Experiences," whether ecstatic, orgiastic, exotic, or just fun, do blot out, temporarily, that cursed prison-sense of the separate self that is our fate. When things get too lonely, frustrating, dull, or desperate, we can always get drunk, blotto. Anything will do, whisky, sex, business, altruism, or war, if it is frantic enough. But none of these can solve the problem; stronger wine and madder music only lead to bigger hangovers. We can evade the self, but we cannot suppress it. Personal training works differently, though it is hard to find the right word for this. Erode, dissolve, clarify, channel, objectify, extrovert—all these may suggest the direction. To see objectively; putting it that way brings us back to the Buddhist point of view.

There is only one energy, and it is neutral. We, in our brief span upon this bank and shoal of time, are its conduits, pipes through which life flows. It flows for its own great purposes, not ours, and in its own way. If we can know this in terms of personal experience on all levels, physical sensation, emotion, understanding, if we can sense and observe the work of centers, intellectual, emotional, moving, instinctive, and sexual, and know how that energy goes through them and is transformed, sometimes usefully, more often wrongly, then we have some possibility of becoming one with it. There is an act of acceptance to be made. If we can really trust the Dharma, then we can accept whatever happens in us and to us, though it may be pretty depressing at times. And if we can accept what happens, then we can observe it dispassionately, unclouded by grasping, thirst, need, attachment, or self-interest. Seeing how things are, and how they work, impersonally, brings one round again to trust in the Dharma. The process is never linear; all parts interpenetrate.

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Then, gradually, the self may find its proper place and become what it is, its original face, a part of everything, of the life that flows through it unhindered. The cry of "I want," can become "what needs to be done?" and "I don't want" can give way to "Thy will be done." We cease to project and to fight; we learn right action. But right action depends on right understanding, and our chances of finding this on our own are small. A teacher and a training system cause right action and right understanding to reinforce each other until they are really one and the same. Good intentions are not enough. Love, spontaneity, freedom, escape from conditioning, none of these are enough and nothing will work properly unless it is done within that peculiar frame of mind called (because words are so inadequate) "right understanding." It is not so much a frame of mind as the absence of all "frames" of mind, of all dust on the mirror, including the dusts of spontaneity and of freedom. Good intentions are not enough. They, too, are dust. Properly used they can be made into experience. And wisdom may follow, in time, given the right circumstances and the right person.

A traditional training system aims to provide those circumstances. Nothing can guarantee the person; the training can only work with what he is. Despite their repeated contacts with "Higher Reality," some LSD experimenters have been notable fools. And there is behavior in Zen circles to shake the faith of even the most dedicated. Religious training may help one to see the world in terms of a particular doctrine without ever touching a neurosis, or it may aggravate a neurosis. LSD therapy cures some neuroses successfully without bringing people to see the world according to any religious doctrine. Neither is infallible even on its own terms, and their goals are different. But we may look at the matter from a more inclusive point of view.

The Buddha observed that it is a rare and precious privilege to be born in human form. To be born, that is, with the possibilities available to human beings. If the end result of any course of training or experience is that one can live more simply, more awarely, humbly and gratefully in the feeling that whatever happens it is indeed a wonderful gift just to be alive, then it does not matter so much how one got to that point or whether this is labeled religion, health, or what you will. It is the life itself that counts.