

The LSD Experience and Zen

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There has been much talk in recent years about a Zen experience through LSD, or about LSD as a promoter of Zen experience, because a certain similarity is seen between LSD experience and the so-called “demon-region” (*makyō*; 魔境), a psychological state sometimes encountered during intensive Zen practice. This view considers Zen to be an experience—“experience” in the sense of the occurrence of a definite psychological state—and holds that if a similar state could be produced by LSD, LSD would have positive significance for Zen. It even asserts that the psychological state that is produced is a kind of Zen.

When the *makyō* that occurs in Zen practice is taken as a psychological state and isolated from its Zen context and objectified, it does indeed seem to reveal some psychological, neuro-physiological, or else psycho-pathological attributes similar to those of LSD experience. But if *makyō* has a meaning in the total context of Zen practice, it is not because of the production of an abnormal psychological state itself. For Zen, it is not that *makyō* has religious meaning as a mystical vision. The total context of Zen practice is solely and utterly concerned with “the realization and illumination of the Self” (己事究明). What is significant for Zen is not *makyō* itself, but rather the self-concentration, the kind of intensive self-concentration, that sometimes gives rise to *makyō*. If the practitioner clings to the inner state that is thus produced and goes no further, he makes a fatal blunder. Rather, he should cast it aside, obliterate it simply and immediately as a state that still belongs to the dimension of “form,” for the Zen way is the way to the awakening of the “formless” Self. The inner strength that casts off *makyō* has its source in the self-surmounting climax and purification of the same power that has just brought forth the *makyō*. As long as *makyō* results directly from Zen practice and then is immediately resolved in Zen

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practice, that is, as long as *makyō* is negated through further Zen practice and is elevated to and preserved in the inner strength of practice, *makyō* can have proper significance in the Zen context. Stated otherwise: as long as the practitioner is unable to say to himself, "*Makyō* means nothing." "Don't speak in a dream!" *makyō* has nothing to do with Zen. A conscious attempt to bring forth *makyō* artificially is from the outset nothing but unadulterated perverseness. LSD may produce some psychological conditions similar to *makyō*, but it cannot furnish the power itself which brings forth *makyō*, to say nothing of the strength that casts *makyō* aside.

From the Zen standpoint, it is already a crucial deflection from the "realization and illuminating of the Self" for the practitioner to interest himself in his psychological condition while engaging in Zen practice. Through such an interest he has to look back at a state that has been produced and is forced to hold fast to that state and remain within it. In this way, he must be seized and imprisoned by a conscious I that objectifies itself. Zen, however, has nothing to do with any psychological condition or state whatever, but with freedom from conditions. Accordingly, it is highly significant in the history of Zen, that Zen practitioners very rarely describe or write down their own inner experiences, as is often the case with mystics, with their "extraordinary," "exceptional" experiences.

To cast off and relinquish all once attained, all once gained, all once given—in this act Zen penetrates to the awakening of the formless Self, the awakening to the Self as the non-objective "Master of seeing and hearing." "The master of seeing and hearing" does not attach to that which is seen and heard. He will not be captured or restrained by them. When Zen says, for example, "a stone lantern jumps into a wooden pillar," "the Buddha hall runs out the temple door," it is a matter of expressing freedom from an objectifying consciousness, and not of an objectively visible scene, or the description of a dream-like vision present before one. It is the non-objectifying *prajñā*-wisdom that enables such words to be spoken. It is not a question of any conceptually constrained manifestation. What happens to one through the taking of LSD is, however, none other than a conceptually restrained manifestation of "the Buddha hall runs out the temple door," and that is nothing but a kind of pathological phantom.

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

A Japanese psychologist with a personal interest in Zen, who has himself experimented taking LSD, has said that if one takes LSD he can truly have the experience of "the Buddha hall runs out the temple door." Indeed, his valuation of LSD holds that LSD dissolves our ordinary frame of ego and of the world, and enables us to return to the primitive or primordial base-experience. Such identification of LSD experience with Zen rests, it seems to me, upon a double misunderstanding, namely, both a misunderstanding of Zen sayings and a misunderstanding of LSD experience.

On the one hand, what Zen sayings give expression to is from the beginning understood here as something conceptually bound, that is, they are misunderstood. This conceptually-bound reality of the misunderstood Zen saying is then seen in the LSD experience.

On the other hand, the significance of the LSD experience is unfittingly overestimated as the primordial experience, that is, misunderstood anew, since the LSD experience from the beginning is described by citing various Zen sayings. It is not understood in itself, but is given a falsely enhanced interpretation on a horizon foreign to it—the horizon of Zen. In reality, however, the characteristic of LSD experience lies in the overwhelming abnormality of things that appear in the consciousness. Overcome by the boundless abnormality of the "seen and heard," the taker of LSD is totally absorbed in the phenomena of his consciousness. This is in complete contrast to the awakening to the "Master of seeing and hearing" (that is, one's true Self) that occurs simultaneously with a breakthrough beyond the conceptual consciousness. The LSD experience, on the contrary, moves about in constant fetters within the confinements of the consciousness. The crucial matter inherent in the consciousness becomes far more perspicuous with the LSD experience, which acts as a magnifying glass, because of the abnormality of the contents of the consciousness. The awakening to the "Master of seeing and hearing" does not mean that "the Buddha hall runs out the temple door," for instance, is made a professed content of the experience.

In speaking of the "experience," Zen would say there is nothing to be experienced. For Zen, grounded in nothingness, "the Buddha hall runs out the temple door" is none other than "eyes horizontal, nose vertical"—the immediate affirmation of things as they are. In the LSD experience, however,

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this “eyes horizontal, nose vertical” is destroyed in the basic dimension of perception.

Zen is no substitute for LSD experience, any more than the latter would be a substitute for Zen. It would be absurd for one to try to elicit in Zen practice without recourse to drugs an experience similar to that produced by taking LSD. LSD experience does not properly fit into the Zen context. If there should be some gateway from LSD to Zen, it could only exist in a disillusionment with the LSD experience that enabled one existentially to ask himself, “*Who* is it really that takes the LSD?” One must, however, at the same time ask Zen, “How can Zen rid the LSD user of LSD?” Zen really has no need for LSD, because it includes LSD without requiring the actual effort of drug-taking. Look! The Buddha hall is running out the temple door! Look there! The ink bottle resounds and becomes a dragon!