

DRUGS: THE ALTERATION OF THE SELF - PART 1
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By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Conscious-Altering Drugs

Note: This article is not for everyone. It will make the most sense to those who have experienced a consciousness-altering drug trip and had trouble forgetting it or stabilizing afterward. Here goes:

LSD was virtually unknown in the early 1960s, although rumors were all around. The word on the street was that acid (as we came to call it), unlike any drug we knew up to them, actually could alter the mind itself. Of course, most of this was pure speculation because few of us had yet taken or had real experience. We trembled at what that might mean, but of course were still intrigued. Not everyone rushed out to try it. It was that down side that gave us pause, that acid could permanently alter and damage the mind. What could that mean, "permanently alter?" That phrase alone kept many drug enthusiasts at bay.

I know from personal experience that LSD is a very powerful drug, one capable of altering consciousness not only temporarily, but in many cases for a long time afterward - years. No argument. What I want to discuss here is the fact that part of the problem with consciousness-altering drugs like LSD is not only the drugs themselves, but our own lack of knowledge and familiarity with the context and nature of the mind itself and with the various states of the self and consciousness.

Let's start off with the Eastern view that the true mind cannot be altered, but the "self" can be. Here in the West we tend to think of the mind, consciousness, and the self as the same thing. And I am not simply engaging in semantics here, so those of you with a history of hallucinogenic drugs bear with me. You should be able to understand what is coming. I have something to say. What 'is' true is that LSD and other hallucinogens are 'self'-altering drugs, consciousness-altering drugs, which is another matter altogether from 'mind-altering', one we will discuss.

Westerners have little to no idea about the actual nature of the Self and little interest in learning. We have an interest in ourselves, of course, but not an interest in 'the' Self and what it actually is or is not. And it is as simple as that we have never bothered to even look, and tend to think of our personal self not only as a permanent thing, but also as an entity that will continue on after death to heaven, hell, wherever, or perhaps not continue at all. Not continuing at all also has its problems. In other words, the nature and fate of our self is mostly unknown to us. Just as we tend to think of a river as something that is permanent and always there, philosophers have pointed out that we can never step in the same river twice, and some have said that you can't step in the same river even once.

The Self is like that river. While we like to think of it as a constant, as the very heart and center of us, and assume that it has been always with us or that it is us, even a brief analysis will show that the new bike or 45-record we thought was the center of our life when we were young is different than the new wife or child that became our center later on. What makes up our self is constantly changing, but we prefer (it is convenient) to consider it as a constant. As far as we know, the self has always been with us. And we are attached to it.

It is the 'attachment' to this sense of a having a self as center that is the constant and not what actually makes up that self – the memories and components. The fact is that the content of the self is ever-changing, while it is our attachment or connection to that content (whatever it currently happens to be) that remains the same. This miss-take can be a problem.

It is the Self that is most often changed with consciousness-altering drugs. LSD and other similar drugs threaten the constancy of the self not only because these drugs tend to fracture it into the components it is made up of, but also (and primarily) because drugs can remove the glue which holds our self together, which is our attachment. It is the attachment to the self that is shattered on some LSD experiences. Such an experience can plunge us into realizing (however momentarily) that the self is in fact not so permanent or constant, but rather actually is impermanent and ever changing, i.e. that the self is a bunch of stuff we hang on to or like to have around us. These consciousness-altering drugs shatter that life-line of attachment we have had to our self and, without that continuing attachment, we are left holding a bunch of memories and identifications that do not add up to anything we could call permanent if we thought about it, which we don't. The thought of an impermanent self is terrifying to most of us, although this is what yogis dream of: non-attachment. Drugs can break that umbilical cord of attachment and fracture what we call our self, at least for a time.

What for yogis is the product of a lifetime of training and a gradual revelation through years of mind practice happens to drug-users all at once. Like a lighting flash, the curtain of the self is suddenly pulled away and behind it is nothing at all except our own peering to see. The self is revealed as empty of everything but our attachment to it. It is the attachment or lack thereof that we discover. Drugs like LSD fracture the attachment or glue that held the self together and we are left holding a small universe of the isolated memories, imprints, events, etc. of our life, but no longer with a center or 'self' to make them appear coherent. We lose coherence. Although this is precisely what meditators work for, with drugs this is usually too much, too soon, and can be for many a life-shattering experience – even devastating.

When the great Tibetan adept Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who had a lifetime of mind practice, took LSD, he reported: "Nothing happened!" That tells us the whole story right there. It is not just the drugs that are the problem; it is also the lack of any introduction to the mind itself, much less any actual mind training on the part of most of us. The mind and the self were already well known to Trungpa Rinpoche, so nothing changed. Although Trungpa had a self like the rest of us, he apparently was not attached to it. There we have a clue.

Back in the day those who took LSD were often faced with what might at first seem like a

complete loss of self, a glimpse at their own mind, and no familiar landmarks to guide them. Most of us had never previously been introduced to the mind and its landscape through any form of mind training. We had no guide, no manual, and no prior experience in these areas. In fact, the imprint or what we saw on acid (which often was startling) instantly became the only limits and landmarks we had, and they could be frightening. Let me reiterate that last concept.

Having no mind training or familiarity with the actual nature of the mind, no formal introduction or mind training, LSD (or its equivalent) itself became that introduction to the mind, just not a thorough one. LSD or any epochal experience strikes deep in our consciousness and leaves an almost indelible imprint. Often we measure time or our self from that point, just as people used to ask “Where were you when President Kennedy was shot?” We all knew precisely where we were because the event had imprinted itself into our memory and was permanently stuck in our consciousness.

In the same way, when LSD reaches deeper into our mind than we have even been, it by default becomes our limit. It is then as much as we know of the mind and, when we look for deep experience, we will always end up back at that point and that experience with whatever earlier point we had already forgotten. We will measure time and experienced from there. I don't want to belabor this point, but it is crucial to this discussion to understand the importance of this fact.

Our LSD experience then becomes our introduction to the mind, rather than years of mind training, meditation, mind practice, and the like as in some Asian countries. Needless to say one night's acid trip is more like a lightning bolt's view of our mental landscape than the gradual dawning of that landscape that meditation and mind practice might bring. On acid there is a lot we did not get or see clearly in that drug trip, not to mention questions that sit unresolved in the back of our mind. It is the difference between a one-shot glimpse and the gradual deliberate training of the mind. I hope you see my point.

The LSD trip itself set the limits of our knowledge of the mind for us rather than a teacher or guide – tough love. This then was our introduction to the mind and it often leaves us staring directly into whatever we imagined or most feared. No wonder it was hard for some of us to get our self together after a trip. But it was also liberating, and we will get to that.

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