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A Psychospiritual Context for the Therapeutic Use of Psychedelics

Richard Spurgeon, M.A.

This article is an adaptation of the thesis I wrote for my M.A. in Psychosynthesis Psychotherapy at the Institute of Psychosynthesis in London in conjunction with Middlesex University.<1> It describes the potential therapeutic benefits of working with psychedelics within a psychospiritual context, and highlights other factors which help to

ground and integrate the contents of these experiences.

THE THESIS I WROTE for my M.A. in psychosynthesis psychotherapy arose from my experiences during my five year journey as a trainee psychotherapist. Its title was "In the Footsteps of Prometheus--integrating deep experiential techniques with psychosynthesis psychotherapy." The thesis explored the potentials and pitfalls of Holotropic Breathwork and the therapeutic use of the psychedelics (particularly MDMA and psilocybin). It attempted to build a psychospiritual framework for their integration with the more traditional approaches to psychotherapy, using the maps and models of psychosynthesis. I had found that my own psychological and spiritual development had been profoundly catalysed and deepened through the combination of these deep experiential techniques with the ongoing psychotherapy that I was receiving. From my own experience it seemed clear to me that these tools held tremendous psychotherapeutic and spiritual value. Inspired, I began to read all I could on the subject (and was particularly influenced by the work of Stan Grof), joined MAPS, and continued my own self-exploration with these tools.

The psychospiritual context

At the core of my thesis and of this article is the belief that a psychospiritual context is of enormous benefit to any therapeutic work with psychedelics. The psychospiritual perspective holds that our essence is spiritual in nature, and that life is a process of development and unfolding in which psychological and spiritual aspects are deeply entwined. Thus, while holding this context, therapeutic work at the psychological level of egoic-self identity or personality can be as important as (and is often far more appropriate than) work at any "higher" or spiritual level of being and identity. There are various useful psychospiritual models, of particular value are Ken Wilber's spectrum of consciousness and the egg diagram and the triphasic model<2> of psychosynthesis.

Work with psychedelics, at whatever level of dose, needs to be contained within safe forms and structures, including a firm context and clear intention. These are fundamental in terms of creating the "set" which will enhance the positive outcomes of the experience. A clear context makes the experience more manageable, while clear intention makes a valuable and insightful experience more likely. Holding the context of self-discovery within an ongoing psychospiritual journey gives meaning to whatever experiences an individual has to face in terms of their own history, their present life situation, and their potentials and future development. The contents of the experience are understood as primarily a reflection of the individual's own psyche (though there may well be other,

wider implications too). A dark, painful and difficult experience is therefore seen to be as valuable as any other sort of experience--and perhaps more so, as it may help the individual face the unconscious material that he or she most needs to work with. Holding this psychospiritual context is the key to the integration and grounding of the unconscious material which is brought into consciousness.

What is also of great value is an ability to surrender to a Greater Power, God, Spirit, etc., and to trust this fully. This helps anchor one's own experience and context in a much wider and more embracing spiritual context, and enables a much deeper commitment to, and faith in, the process itself. The therapeutic use of psychedelics

My thesis describes six main benefits of using psychedelics within a psychospiritual therapeutic context. Different substances have different effects--so I can only speak in generalities here. These benefits are also dose dependent. My own experience has helped me to understand the validity of the differentiation between work with low ("psycholytic" or soul-loosening) doses and high (or "psychedelic") doses. Both are valuable, yet each is very different in its therapeutic effects. The actual dosage needed to create the required effect will differ from individual to individual. Work with smaller doses is gentler on the body and mind, and the unconscious material accessed is more easily integrated. This is because the psychological material that comes into consciousness is nearer the surface, and it is therefore easier to accept and to work with psychologically. It is mostly of a biographical, psychodynamic nature, though the actual content may often be unexpected. The three main benefits at the psycholytic level

To enable deeper insight into present psychological issues and give a preview of the next steps in psychological work. When the context for the experience is to further one's psychospiritual development, then these psychological benefits seem assured. Each time I have taken psychedelics within this context, I have gained important insights into my own process and psychological make-up and have been given a foretaste of the next stages of therapeutic work. The power of these insights is that they are not just intellectual; they are normally experienced as realisations which include the body, feelings and mind, and thus cannot easily be ignored.

To allow a temporary disidentification from mindsets, maintaining cycles, and self-identifications, leading to a greater awareness of patterns of behavior, and the experience of deep-level psychological freedom and "I" consciousness. The experience of stepping out of identifications and habitual ways of seeing ourselves and the world can be tremendously liberating. It is true that we will soon return to our old ways as the influence of the psychedelic wears off, but once we have had the experience of being more than that aspect with which we are identified, we can see ourselves and our lives from a different perspective. We become more able to free ourselves from those aspects as we begin to disidentify from them. As we do this, we are increasingly able to connect with our "I"--a locus of identity that is not identified with any particular content of consciousness, and which is a center of awareness and Will.

To loosen up or release blocks in entrenched, deeper level psychological "infrastructure," thus facilitating and catalysing therapeutic work. Within an intentional therapeutic context, psychological defenses and structures are loosened and psycho-energetic blocks can be released. This catalyses ongoing development by enabling previously inaccessible unconscious material to enter into consciousness and be worked upon. The amount of dose is directly related to the degree of loosening up of psychological "infrastructure." This loosening is the reason that experimentation with psychedelics can be psychologically destructive for individuals whose sense of self is poor and fragmentary and who actually need to maintain or build up their ego structure in order to function adequately.

In comparison, the more powerful "psychedelic" doses can open individuals up to transpersonal and collective experiences--from the depths of suffering and darkness to the heights of Love and Light. Occasionally, intense spiritual experiences can be life-changing, in and of themselves, due to the sheer power and authenticity of their numinosity. These experiences can give the "big picture," indicating a much wider or deeper "spiritual" context for the life events and personality structure of the experiencing individual. However, the enormity of the experience can also be a drawback. The content of an experience may be so far removed from the everyday reality of the individual that it is next to impossible for them to integrate and ground it in their ordinary life. This may result in the experience being repressed or split off, or in the individual making a rash decision to follow a seemingly "spiritual" path, while splitting off from other more worldly aspects of their psyche. Either way, the result is not integration, but splitting.

Potential benefits of psychedelic doses

To allow the bringing to consciousness and working through of deeply unconscious psychological material held at bodily, bioenergetic or "soul" levels. Powerful doses of psychedelics facilitate the release of bodily-held tensions and energies, which can be worked through in the experience itself when the setting is well-structured, safe and holding. Any energetic or bodily tensions that do not work themselves through in the course of the experience can be worked with and released with the aid of focused bodywork techniques. This level of bioenergetic work is both powerful and effective, but needs to be complemented with ongoing emotional, mental and spiritual therapeutic work to integrate and deepen any releases or insights. Work with powerful doses also opens us to "soul" knowledge and perspectives (like "past life" experiences), in which we can access understanding and experiences which do not come from to this particular lifetime and which are held at much deeper and ordinarily inaccessible levels of consciousness.

To facilitate the experience of other realities apart from everyday "consensus reality," thus experientially validating the realities of the realms of psyche and Spirit and their importance. With the appropriate set and setting, the use of psychedelics as "sacraments" can be extremely effective (hence the use of the term entheogen). Psychedelics enable individuals to enter altered or non-ordinary states of consciousness which transcend our everyday, consensual reality. For many individuals, the experience of these states may be literally life-changing. The depth of experience that one can access in altered states can alter forever one's cognitive maps and worldview. This can be a profoundly important experience, validating what may have previously only been theoretical concepts.

To connect with inner wisdom, the Inner Teacher, the voice of the Self, and beyond this, the Divine Itself. One of the most profound elements of this form of inner work is the connection we can make with a source of inner wisdom and knowing--far beyond that of our ordinary everyday awareness and knowledge. This experience can validate our theoretical and conceptual beliefs about a deep inner self, soul, Inner Teacher or Self, and, in some of the most profound experiences, can give us a direct experience of the Universal Self, of the unmanifest face of God Itself, or of the pregnant fullness of the Void. In this connection with the inner wisdom, we get a sense of a co-operative venture between ourselves (in our ordinary consciousness) and these "other," deeper inner aspects of our essential being. There are times in psychedelic experiences when the different roles of this partnership become clear. We experience our place in the scheme of things. We see quite clearly how there is a profound purpose to all that happens to us in our life, and that the source of this is deep in the realms of Spirit. This results in an extraordinary inner trust in the process of our life in general, and of the often intense and difficult process of the psychedelic experience in particular.

Despite these important experiences, and the benefits and insights they can bring, working with "psychedelic" doses is not about finding an easy answer or a short-cut to enlightenment. They take us deep into ourselves and throw light on our life journey. They show us what we most need to see--whether our conscious everyday self wants to see it or not. The experiences can be intensely painful and full of suffering, as often as joyful and ecstatic. So those who are not willing or able to confront their inner darkness should not be tempted to explore this route to self knowledge. The truth can be a painful and difficult burden with which to live.

The value of support networks

Anyone consciously undertaking work on themselves with psychedelics needs a strong enough sense of self to psychologically handle the depth and power of the realms into which they are journeying. In the states of consciousness accessible through psychedelics we can experience much that is collective, rather than personal, and it is the nature of the process that we temporarily identify with and take literally these aspects during the experience. What is important, after the event, is to psychologise the symbolic meaning of the experience. Whatever experiences we encounter will always be relevant to us personally, no matter how cosmic or collective the experience. "Objective" reality is always seen through the tinted lens of our own subjective nature and conditioning.

An individual taking psychedelics may face extraordinary encounters and identify with powerful energies, beings and images. This is why it is so useful to have people around--like a therapist, partner, men/women's group, spiritual guide or community--who can act as external points of reference in relation to what can seem like overwhelming experiences. An attitude of discrimination is important both during and after these powerful inner experiences, lest we are swept away by their intensity and seeming veracity. Participants may also return with what seem like valuable insights and vital knowledge. However, the proof of the pudding, as they say, is in the eating. What value do these experiences really have? How are they integrated into the individual's life? This is the purpose of integration and the role of Will.

Will, integration and action

Psychedelic experiences can result in a great increase in awareness--we open ourselves up to receive from the unconscious--but this needs to be balanced with some form of outer expression in terms of action. Too much awareness can become a block to true self-expression and actually becomes counter-productive. What does an individual do with all their insight and awareness? How does it inform their actions in the world? In psychosynthesis, this is the function of the Will. The Will is about creating boundaries, accepting limitations and making choices--central tasks in the process of actualising potentials and self expression. One of the problems with psychedelics, though, is that they are so attractive to some because they seem to offer everything, the All, without much effort. But this attraction is illusory. A lifetime of experience, whether psychedelic or not, does not necessarily lead to wisdom. It is what we do with the experience that counts. For with increased consciousness comes the responsibility for its expression. No matter how profound the insight, or how numinous the experience, it needs to be lived in the context of our own life journey.

It is easy to get caught up in the glorious pyrotechnics of psychedelic experience, when the real work is in the grounding of these in the interpersonal, relational task of living our lives--within our own community of relationships and culture at this particular historical moment. This is the role of praxis--putting into practice in our everyday lives the insights and discoveries we gain through inner work--and this calls for us to engage our Will in relation to our growth in consciousness. In this process, a psychospiritual psychotherapist can be of tremendous assistance. To have our process held, mirrored, challenged, and witnessed by someone we can deeply trust can be an immeasurably valuable part of the process of change and transformation.

Conclusion

The psychospiritual context challenges the view that life is some sort of cosmic error or samsaric illusion, seeing instead that the complex and multi-dimensional nature of reality is the vehicle via which we develop and evolve through self-discovery and self-expression. Working therapeutically within this context with psychedelics temporarily allows us to go beyond the restrictions of everyday consciousness. In trusting and letting go to this process, we connect with the natural and innate healing mechanisms of the psyche, under the aegis of the Self. But fundamental to this process is the Return. We must integrate and ground the insights and consciousness we gain through these experiences in the ongoing challenge of self-development and action in the world. This is where work with psycholytic doses of psychedelics is of particular value. Smaller doses bring to the surface psychological material that is more easily integrated, and the step between where an individual is (in terms of their psychospiritual development) and what arises is not so great. Thus from a psychospiritual therapeutic context, work with regular psycholytic doses, punctuated by an occasional psychedelic dose, seems likely to offer the best outcome.

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Notes

Psychosynthesis is an approach to understanding psychological and spiritual development originally formulated by the Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli (1888-1974).

The Triphasic Model has been developed by Joan Evans and Jarlath Benson at the Institute of Psychosynthesis in London. This model articulates the developmental journey from the viewpoint of psychosynthesis--with three stages (autistic/fusion, symbiotic and separation) at three major levels (ego development, "I" emergence, and Self realisation).

Richard Spurgeon, M.A.

E-mail: rspurgeon@synthesis.demon.co.uk