

# Psychedelics and the Western World

## A Fateful Marriage

Roger Walsh and Charles S. Grob

For half a century psychedelics have rumbled through the Western world, seeding a subculture, titillating the media, fascinating youth, terrifying parents, enraging politicians, and intriguing researchers. Tens of millions of people have used them; millions still do—sometimes carefully and religiously, sometimes casually and dangerously. They have been a part—often a central and sacred part—of most societies throughout history. In fact, until recently the West was a curious anomaly in not recognizing psychedelics as medical and spiritual resources.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the discovery of the powerful psychedelic drug LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide)—together with its chemical cousins such as mescaline and psilocybin—unleashed experiences of such intensity and impact that in the 1960s they shook the very foundations of our culture.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the world's societies are “polyphasic,” meaning that they actively explore and derive their understanding of reality from multiple states of consciousness. Such states may include dreams, drugs, meditation, yoga, or trance—in addition to the normal waking state. By contrast, the West has been primarily “monophasic,” valuing and deriving its view of reality solely from our usual waking state.

Yet with the explosion of psychedelics, suddenly millions of people were boggling and blowing their minds with states of consciousness and kinds of experiences that were, quite literally, beyond their wildest dreams. A Pandora's box of altered states, heavens and hells, highs and lows, trivia and transcendence cascaded into a society utterly unprepared for any of them.

Their effects reverberate to this day, and the Western world will probably never be the same. For better and for worse, psychedelics have molded culture and counterculture, art and music, science and psychiatry, and helped catalyze movements such as those for peace and civil rights.<sup>3</sup> They continue to fuel spiritual practices, to inspire raves and rebellion, to fertilize research on brain and behavior, and to suggest new understandings of consciousness, creativity, and cults.

At the same time, the War on Drugs continues unabated, making thoughtful distinctions—such as the major differences between toxic stimulants like cocaine, and problematic but potentially therapeutic substances like psychedelics—almost impossible. To a large extent, hype and hypocrisy have overridden reason and research.

Yet from the beginning, serious researchers investigated psychedelics. In fact, these curious chemicals have fascinated some of the greatest names in psychology and psychiatry, sociology and anthropology, philosophy and religion. Some of the foremost thinkers of the twentieth century zeroed in on these substances as soon as they emerged, and in a period lasting merely twenty years, an enormous amount of research was done. Some of it did not meet today's more exacting research standards,<sup>4</sup> but the scientific, psychological, spiritual, and clinical implications of the findings were nevertheless remarkable.

In the psychological arena, psychedelics revealed depths and dynamics of mind rarely glimpsed by Western psychologists. They unveiled complexes, archetypes, and early traumas that provided unexpected insights into, and support for, depth psychologies such as those of Carl Jung and Otto Rank.<sup>5</sup> They sometimes facilitated powerful transcendent experiences previously available only to advanced contemplatives. In doing so, they provided new understandings of religion, spirituality, and mysticism, as well as their associated practices such as meditation, yoga, and contemplation.<sup>6</sup>

From these insights emerged new and more expansive reviews of the human mind and the human potential, the most sophisticated and best known of these psychedelically informed theories being those of Stanislav Grof.<sup>7</sup> Clinically, psychedelics showed therapeutic promise for a wide array of difficult problems, such as chronic alcoholism, severe psychosomatic disorders, death anxiety in cancer patients, and post-traumatic stress disorder. They even proved helpful in the most horrendous of all stress disorders: concentration camp syndrome.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, some of these clinical claims must be regarded as tentative since, as described in more detail in the next chapter, many studies were

relatively unsophisticated. Given the enormous power of the psychedelic experience, strong expectation and placebo effects are likely. In addition, there is a saying in medicine which advises physicians to “use a new drug quickly while it still works,” implying that the initial enthusiasm that often accompanies a novel treatment may be therapeutic in itself. Nevertheless, the net effect of over one thousand publications certainly suggests that psychedelics have significant therapeutic potential and deserve further study.<sup>9</sup>

In research studies, healthy subjects sometimes showed considerable psychological and spiritual benefits. For some of these people, including many of those interviewed in this book, the experience redirected their lives and initiated a lifelong spiritual quest.<sup>10</sup> For example, a significant percentage of Western students of Tibetan Buddhism report that psychedelics played a key role in initiating their practice.<sup>11</sup>

All this occurred with a remarkably low casualty rate. This was in stark contrast to the painful panic episodes (or worse) that sometimes resulted from unskillful use—such as among ill prepared, casual users or the unwitting victims of secret CIA experiments—that subsequently filled blaring newspaper headlines.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, clinical and research use of psychedelics resulted in very few complications and no deaths. The most comprehensive review of side effects concluded that “in well screened, prepared, supervised, and followed up psychiatric patients taking pure psychedelic drugs, the incidence of serious adverse reactions is less than 1 percent. It is even lower in ‘normal’ volunteers.”<sup>13</sup> This makes psychedelics—contrary to the public’s media-distorted perception—among the safest drugs in the medical pharmacopoeia, *when used carefully and clinically*.

Yet all this research crashed to a violent halt in the 1960s, banned by the United States government. Thus began “America’s longest war,” a war which most social scientists now agree is unwinnable and does more harm than good.<sup>14</sup> Although these drugs remain widely available on the street corners of many major cities, they are rarely available to researchers for study of their psychological and therapeutic effects. What many investigators regard as one of our most important research tools has largely been relegated to the museum of medical history.

Paradoxically, this makes the original psychedelic researchers a uniquely valuable and, because of their age, endangered resource. In their laboratories and clinics, they observed and recorded, puzzled over and analyzed, tens of thousands of psychedelic sessions. In doing so, they

witnessed an unparalleled variety and intensity of human experience. In fact, probably no group in history has been privy to such a panoply of experience: painful and ecstatic, high and low, sublime and satanic, loving and hateful, mystical and mundane. The entire range of human experience, including some of the rarest and most profound, erupted in their subjects with an intensity seldom seen except in the most extreme existential conditions. Not surprisingly, many researchers reported that not only their subjects, but also they themselves, were transformed by their work.

In the late 1990s, several individuals and organizations realized that these researchers constitute an invaluable resource as an irreplaceable reservoir of knowledge and wisdom. A meeting of these researchers was therefore organized and funded by the Fetzer Institute and the Institute of Noetic Sciences. Given their advancing ages, this was probably the last time such a group would ever meet. The researchers were interviewed individually, and they convened in 1998 to recall and record their discoveries, and to reflect on what they had learned. For three days they talked, and their conversations were recorded. The result was a distillation of fascinating anecdotes, irreplaceable knowledge, and hard-won wisdom—the culmination of half a century of research and reflection on one of the most intriguing and challenging topics of our time. From these, *Higher Wisdom* was born.

## NOTES

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4. See note 1 (Grob 1998).

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9. See note 1 (Grof 1998, 2002); note 5 (Grof 2001); and note 8 (Grinspoon and Bakalar 1997).

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