

# mysticism and chemicals – two ways to enlightenment

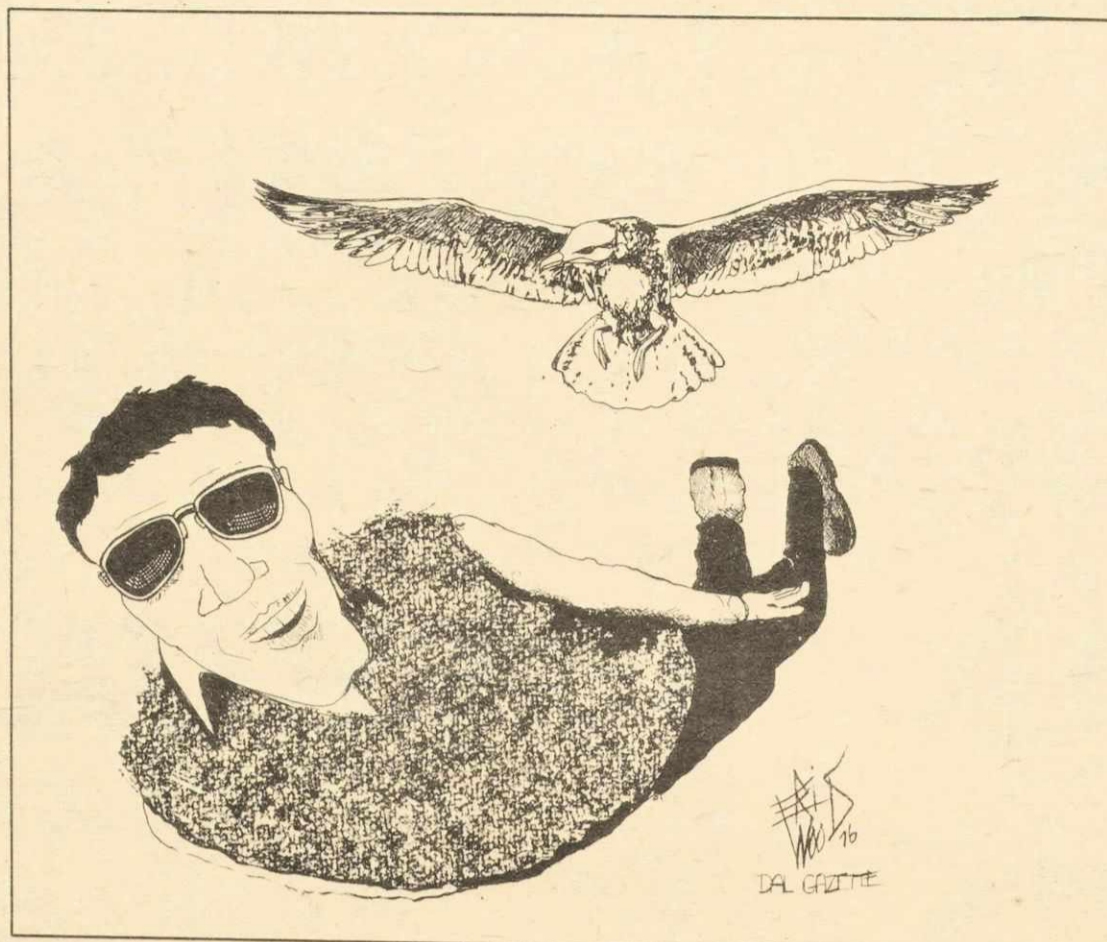
by Gurprit S. Kindra

Within the last decade, newspapers and magazines have come up with sensational writeups on drugs like Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (LSD), mescaline and psilocybin. Reactions have ranged from a strong desire to destroy the "terrible, crippling" drugs to a sincere belief that the keys to instant enlightenment have finally been placed in the hands of mankind. These drugs have the strange and unique effect of bringing the unconscious or the hidden part of the human psyche into awareness. The drugs are commonly called Psychedelic (mind opener) and Psycholytic (mind releasing). The LSD "king", Timothy Leary, has called these drugs "the divine product" and the late Aldous Huxley, (the best known prophet of "chemical mysticism") in his novel "Island", refers to mescaline, which he also calls "Moksha" (Hindu word meaning "liberation"), as a sure means of obtaining a really real religious experience. Such sweeping and controversial claims have brought hard feelings in many theological circles and focussed on the need of a long and sober look at the potential dangers and values inherent in these drugs from the theological, psychiatric and social perspectives. The purpose here is to explore the complex controversial phenomenon and to show the need for an extensive research to solve the "mysticism-chemical" paradox. First lets attempt to clarify the term mysticism, then extend its discussion in conjunction with that of religious experience and expose the underlying complexity of the phenomenon.

Evelyn Underhill, in her book "Mysticism", 1926 labelled mysticism "the science of the ultimate, the science of union with the Absolute and noting else and that". She continued, "the mystic is the person who attains to this union, not the person who talks about it". Not to know about the absolute but to be (to unite with) the absolute is the purpose of the mystic. This hallmark, incidentally, also separates the magician from the mystic. In both cases the person is trying to transcend the sensual world, but the mystic's act is reinforced by a combination of will and emotions with the final aim the union with the ultimate, in contrast to the magician whose will combines with his intellect in pursuit of the knowledge of the ultimate. Magicians want something - knowledge - possibly for further gains, whereas a mystic gives himself up to the Divine, the Absolute, Infinite Love, and the Ultimate and the Initiator Himself. A mystic is a sentimental lover (of the Absolute) making his way toward it riding on his emotions. The mystic also "ends up" with the knowledge that the magician is seeking; the union with the Absolute is certainly also a realization of the Absolute. Now, consider the words Omnipotent, Omnipresent plus the other superlatives, (Divine, Absolute etc.), used above. These catch-words are the ones, or at least amongst the ones, used by most religious people to give some expression to the source of their inspiration as well as the object of their worship; hence the definition of a mystic, "as a person who undergoes intense religious experience". To some people mysticism is a word denoting the supernatural, to others it is simply the state of a sick soul; and yet to some it is a suggestion of occult.

The mystical experience, as stated earlier, is driven by love and emotions and hence is generally intuitive and irrational. We see these elements in the mystical states of St. Paul, George Fox, and John Bunyan. Such mystics characteristically speak of experiencing God, Absolute, One etc. and sometimes attain what they call 'union' with God.

The roots of mysticism are found in almost every religion. The ancient Vedantic Sutras and the Old Testament are literally full of mystical tests. Mysticism, it is claimed by many, is the soul of religion. This is not a far fetched statement consider the fact that mystics are the ones who claim to experience God and therefore affirm His existence - thereby forming a link between God and his religious brethren. Similarly a mystic may be seen as the activist or the leader in the religious movement. The influence of St. Francis of Assisi, a well known mystic, was a powerful one on the



seventeenth century Christian drive.

One of the commonest form of mysticism is nature mysticism. All have had an experience of this sort, at least in the elementary order. This is the result of the contemplation of the wonder and beauty of nature. Dante, Lord Tennyson, John Erigena, Wordsworth, William Blake and Richard Jefferies are some of the poets who expressed nature mysticism in their works. Nature poet William Wordsworth describes his experience in the following lines from "Tintern Abbey":

... I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky and the mind of man,  
A motion and a spirit that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all  
thought

And Rolls through all things...  
Philosopher Immanuel Kant found evidence of God from his contemplations of "the voice of the "conscience within" and "the starry heavens above". Most nature mystics talk about nature as a vital force divinely mysterious and beautiful.

The other form of mysticism is what is claimed to be a really real experience where the realization of the identity or union with God is perceived. In the above lines of Wordsworth this element is missing and this is where nature mysticism and the so called "genuine mysticism" differ. This type of experience is intuitive, highly symbolic and seemingly irrational, so that it is very hard to study. Consider the following description of St. Theresa's experience:

For if I say that I see Him neither with the eyes of the body nor those of the soul - because it was not an imaginary vision - how is it that I can understand and maintain that He stands beside me, and be more certain of it than if I saw Him?

Pascal describes his intense mystical experience in the following shaky and broken phrases:

Fire!  
God of Abraham, God of Issac, God of Jacob  
Not of the philosophers and wise.  
Security, security. Feeling joy, peace.  
Deum, meum et Deum vestrum.  
Thy God shall be my God...  
Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.  
Such experiences baffle the psychologist who is at a loss to study them.

Religious texts show that the mystic state is the Divine gift of God bestowed on his exceptionally faithful and loving devotees. This concept is hyper-sensitive for most religions, for their entire philosophy rests on the belief that God exists; this belief is affirmed and strengthened from time to time

by the mystic vision. A doubt cast on the validity of mystic vision is, to some people, like doubting the existence of God. Imagine the controversy and the general unrest in religious circles, when some people began to claim that the same mystic experience is attainable instantly with chemicals, and that too without even a thought of God!

Are the two experiences really identical, or even close? Mysticism, as shown above is a religious experience of the highest order. Mr. Zaehner, a staunch and somewhat intolerant opponent of chemical mysticism, after extensive, but biased, work on the subject suggests that the real and non imposable divine experience is identical with that of a drug taker; in itself, the divine experience has no moral value. "St. Theresa's experience", states Zaehner, "differs in this that it effected a total transformation and sanctification of character, which no preternatural agency could bring about". Concluding, Zaehner admits that "this is the only method we have of judging between divine and natural mysticism". However, earlier in his book Zaehner has admitted similarity between a drug user's experience and that of a natural mystic. Zaehner's implication that a divine experience effects a total transformation whereas chemicals do not, cannot be swallowed without a grain of salt. In the first place out of literally hundreds of "divine mystics" Zaehner can pinpoint only Teresa's case of "total transformation". Secondly it should not be a quantitative question of total or partial transformation, but of transformation or not transformation and of real voluntary transformation or drug forced unreal transformation. Finally, if a drug can produce some transformation, a heavier dose or a more chemically potent drug holds promise of a total or near total transformation. The argument that a "little mysticism" is better than "no mysticism" does hold weight.

During peak experience (which A.H. Maslow defines as "secularized religious or mystical or transcendent experience") "zeal" or drug induced, the person experiences transcendence of his ego, self, and the object world. As a result the "peaker" is beyond the realm of morality. Zaehner confirms this. Why should the means of attaining this soul-appetizing state matter? This is the situation that provoked Aldous Huxley to suggest the use of Peyote slices in place of the "sacramental bread and wine" in his book The Doors of Perception! Peyote, he argues, is cheap, readily available, without any "compensatory hangover effect", and potentially more effective than wine in terms of transcendence.

The question still remains, if mystical experience is qualitatively the same as drug induced mysticism, both resulting in the

same sort of religious experience, without any problems of morality, etc., then why shouldn't the "Catholic King" in the Vatican experience and advocate instant "chemical gratuitous grace"? And on the subject, why believe more than the accepted religious mystics like St. Teresa, St. Paul, Gazzali, and many others, who have stated that during their mystic state, they underwent the most intensive religious experience? Also consider intellectuals and authorities like Dr. Huxley and Prof. Timothy Leary who term their drug induced experiences as "A profound transcendent experience" and the giver of "The Beatific Vision, Sat Chit Anand". What about the roster of two college deans, a divinity college president, three University Chaplains, an executive of a religious foundation, a religious editor and several distinguished religious philosophers, who took LSD in an experimental programme, and according to Prof. Leary, "...reported intense mystical-religious responses and more than half claim that they have had the deepest spiritual experience of their life"? According to the earlier advanced definition of a mystic (as the person who undergoes intense religious experience) at least half of these experimenters clearly fall in the category of mystics! If such is the case then what is to be looked for is not the Godhead, nor the nirguna or the Satuna Brahman, but a molecule of LSD! Consider the seemingly wasteful lives of the great ones like Gautam Buddha, St. Paul, St. Teresa and the countless monks and yogis who reduced themselves to skeletons undergoing all kinds of physical pain, while awaiting enlightenment. Were they too naive or just unfortunate to have "come" in the wrong age when chemicals were unknown? Undoubtedly such thoughts have haunted every serious religious thinker; hence the perennial drugs versus mysticism controversy.

At the heart of the theological dilemma lies the question of what exactly constitutes mysticism. Are they so called "really real" mystical experiences supernatural in character, that is, caused by God? Is the phenomenon grounded on purely natural forces? Consider the argument of Timothy Leary and perhaps Huxley who maintain that all mystical experiences are nothing but natural psychological phenomena. According to this view, as pointed out earlier, there would be no difference between the mysticism of Teresa of Avila, Plotinus, or that of Leary and Huxley.

Christian theologians continue to affirm that Christian mysticism is caused by God alone. A well recognized author Louis Botryer, in his book "Introduction to Spirituality", 1961 writes, "no mysticism, no Christian mysticism in any case, is worthy of the name if it pretends to be the product of any method whatsoever, which a man might master by appropriate techniques". Note that these theologians distinguish essential mystical experience and drug induced experiences not by denying the possibility of the presence of the supernatural (for this would imply an underestimation of God) in chemical experiences but by generally associating them with natural forces.

All Christians are called to perfection. Recall the words of Jesus Christ "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6) "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word and my Father will love him and we will come and make our abode in him". (John 14:23) These statements "confirm" that no one can achieve this ultimate union with God except by love of Him (which requires a prior belief in Him) - and by accepting Jesus as the only source through whom such union is attainable. This I would consider a thorny problem for Christian theologians for they can't deny that a non-christian monk's or a yogi's mystic state is caused by God.

Christian theologians have to grant that God is not restricted in bestowing (if it is the case) mystical state on saintly persons or Christians. Teresa of Avila has suggested in her "Way to Perfection" XVI, that God may grant such experiences to anyone He wishes regardless of the subjects disposition. This consideration would include even non-believers in which case, however, only evidence of the occurrence could attest it.

## Mechanism and Psychology of Mysticism.

Physiological investigations indicate that all unusual psychic experiences such as those referred to as mystical are accompanied by changes in the chemistry and rhythm of the organism. The changes can be brought about by some of the ascetical practices, as well as by the direct ingestion of chemical substance. Around 1952, researches of two scientists, Abram Hoffer and Humphry Osmond, showed the remarkable similarity in the chemical composition of mescaline and adrenalin. It was also discovered that adrenochrome, a product resulting from the decomposition of adrenalin in the human adrenal glands can produce effects similar to mescaline. The importance of this discovery was enormous, due to the direct implication that each human being is capable of manufacturing a chemical in minute doses which can cause changes in the organism's consciousness. Are the mystics, when sitting in a contemplative "Samadhi", working towards the release of this chemical? Also, are mental disorders caused due to an unwarranted and/or over release of adrenochrome? Nothing certain can be stated. Contemporary Christian theologians would immediately object to the very validity of the first question on the ground that such empirical comparisons do not have the capacity to interpret the presence or absence of a supernatural element. In other words what they are saying is that the supernatural element is beyond empirical analysis.

Swami Ramakrishna, whom Huxley considered his spiritual master, in his book on Raja-Yoga (rasi) sets forth the following description on which the physical theory of Yogic contemplation is built.

"According to the Yogis", he says, "there are two nerve currents in the spinal column called Pingala and Ida, and a hollow canal called Sushumna running through the spinal chord. At the lower end of this canal is the Lotus of the Kundalini". They describe it as triangular in form, in which, in the symbolic language of the yogis, there is a power called "Kundalini" coiled up. When the Kundalini awakens, it tries to force a passage through this hollow canal, and as it rises step by step, as it were, layer after layer of the mind becomes open and all the different visions and wonderful powers come to the yogi. When it reaches the brain, the yogi becomes detached from the mind and body and the soul is set free". Note the resemblance between the Yogi power Kundalini and the chemical power adrenochrome. It is a personal observation that the majority of the hard drug users as well as the self proclaimed mystics experience shivers at the base of their spine prior to the "trip". Sometimes these shivers are accompanied by extremely violent body shivers which gradually die down and at the end of which, it is claimed, the selfless soul perceives Unity or in the drug takers terminology, "the trip" through the Universe begins. W.H. Clark, in his famous book "Psychology of Religion" (1969), quotes one incident where such body motion is exhibited by a mystic "...She exhibited extraordinary trembling, lively movements and a transport of joy".

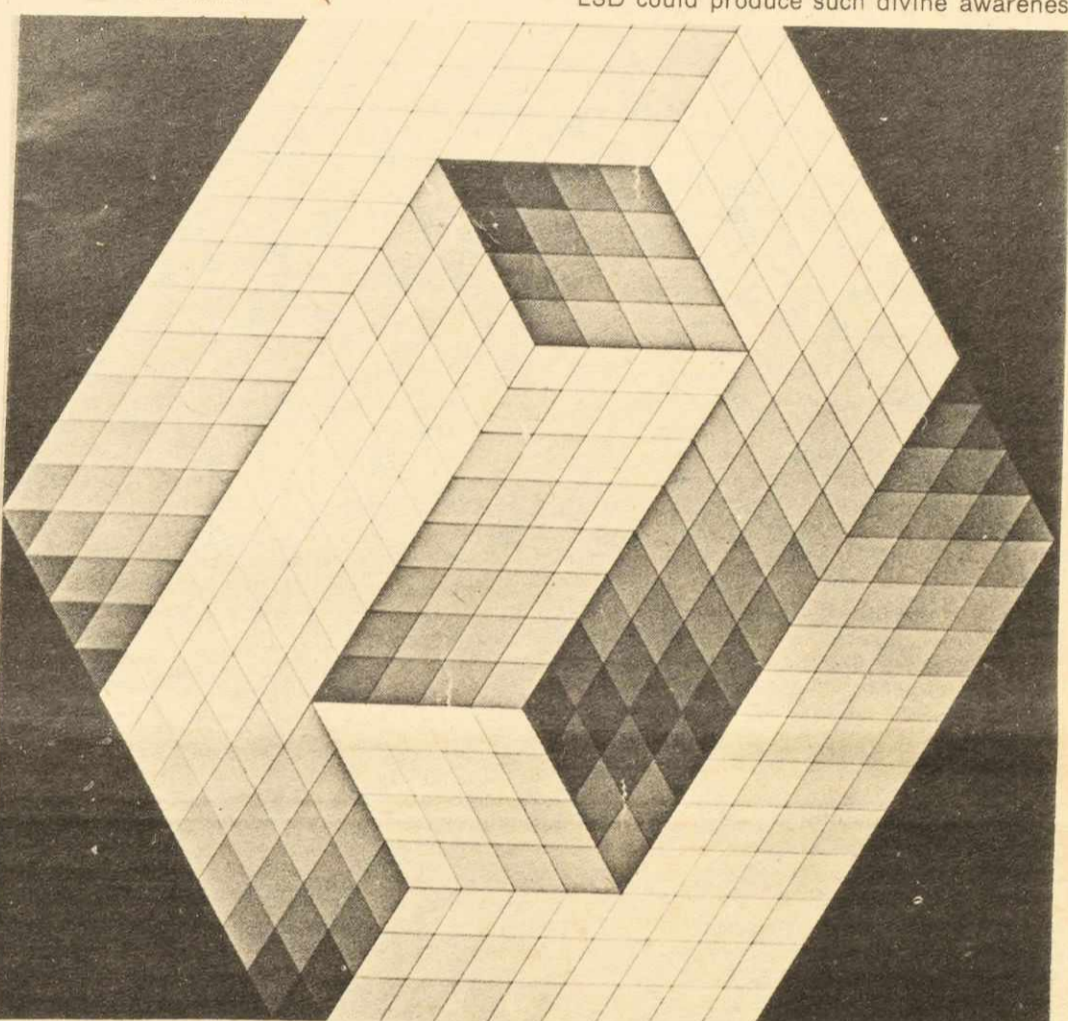
The hypotheses of chemical control in usual states of consciousness, have been further extended by Cambridge philosopher, Dr. C.D. Broad who is of the opinion that the human brain and nervous system work to eliminate rather than produce. Dr. Broad and particularly Timothy Leary are convinced that each person at this moment is capable of perceiving things that happened millions of years ago! Now the function of the brain is to cut down the feed-in of this massive but largely irrelevant information. Impossible, not if one remembers that the coiled DNA in every cell of the body is the carrier of "coded" information handed over from generation to generation going right back to the time of the original "conception". This DNA chain of complex protein molecules took over us as uni-celled organisms at the moment of our conception, and planned every stage of our development, in accordance with the genetic blueprint handed to us by our (respective) father and half by our (respective) mother.

Each man, therefore, according to Huxley, is a "mind at large". In our everyday life this "mind at large" is under the constant suppression of our brain - which

allows us to experience only a trickle of consciousness - which is totally relevant and essential for our biological survival.

The "Kundalini" or adrenochrome of the mystics and the synthetic LSD and mescaline of ingestion moves towards the brain (characterized by the shivers of the subject) reaches the grey matter and by virtue of its chemical properties short circuits the ten billion cells therein, and as a result, removal of the suppression mechanism is effected. Now the infinite number of circuits of these ten billion cells begin to process the infinite information trickling through and the subject is enlightened on finding himself face to face with reality, truth or infinity.

The vision of Divine light, that the mystics so often speak of, could be the super-perception (remember, "the Mind at Large") of the tremendous amounts of the actual energy involved in reception of infinite information.



Dal Photo / Walsh

It is no wonder then, that most mystics and drug users are awed, wonderstruck, humiliated by their ignorance and bent with reverence for the Initiator after their terrific experience. This theory however crazy it may seem (remember the famous at one time termed absurd theories of Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, Darwin and Einstein?) is largely inconsistent with the facts.

Ineffability and passivity - the two main characteristics of a mystical experience also point towards the credibility of the above theory; for who wouldn't be left speechless and totally passive, awed and wonderstruck upon being bombarded with information right from the time of Creation? Consider the following quote in one of Timothy Leary's works.

The drug induced experience involved (a) astonishment at the absolutely incredible immensity, complexity, intensity and extravagance of being, existence, the "cosmos call it what ever you will. Otological shock I suppose. (b) The most acute sense of the poignancy, fragility, preciousness and significance of all life and history. The latter was accompanied by a powerful sense of the responsibility of all for all... Intense affection for my family... Importance and rightness of behaving decently and responsibly.

This statement we see is of an extremely responsible and mature nature involving acute sensitivity and awareness, far from the "irrational babblings" of "dope addicts", that some self-styled theologians and psychologists speak of.

Research on the subject on a strictly scientific basis yields similar results. Dr. J. Houston of The Foundation for Mind

Research in his published report states that his experiments established a pattern of phenomenological descent into the depths of the human psyche. He found that, the subject, under proper guidance, is capable of re-enacting any historical event with abnormal awareness and even recapturing the very evolutionary sequence of life. This, Dr. Houston believes, is possible because "the psychic system has an anatomical prehistory of millions of years as does the body... It may be for this reason, then, that the activated psyche can be called upon to remember states which to us seem to be unconscious... We may add to this the theory that the psyche contains all the contents of time, history being latently contained in each individual".

Regarding the "newness" of the knowledge of this psychological phenomenon, some simply refuse to accept the idea that LSD could produce such divine awareness.

Thanks to Cate Young for her bizarre poster.