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ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Summary of Talk to the AHP, 17 Feb. 1982.

Probably the best-known definition of 'altered states of consciousness' is the one given by Dr. Charles Tart in the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology for 1971.

"A state of consciousness (SoC) is here defined as an overall patterning of psychological functioning. An **altered** state of consciousness (ASC) may be defined as a qualitative alteration in the overall pattern of mental functioning, such that the experimenter feels his consciousness is radically different from the normal way it functions."

This definition makes it clear that ASC's are defined in subjective terms, and not according to any physiological criteria - though changes in physiological correlates may well be associated with different ASC's.

Based upon this subjective definition, we have the following list of different states of consciousness:

Normal waking	Alcoholic intoxication
Hypnagogic	Psychedelic drugs
Dreaming	Hypnosis
Deep sleep	Trance
Meditation, samadhi	Psychotic states
Peak-experiences, release, satori	Near death

The sleeping states were the first to be researched scientifically. Changes (from the normal waking state) in every conceivable physiological function, have been measured: EEG rhythms, skin resistance, pulse rate, temperature, consumption of oxygen, etc. On the subjective level there are two types of dream which are relatively unusual in our western culture. They are called "lucid" and "high" dreams; both are very vivid. A lucid dream is one in which the dreamer has a dual awareness. He is aware

of the contents of the dream, and he is simultaneously aware of the fact that he is lying in bed in a room. He can control the contents of the dream and can waken himself whenever he wishes. Training in the ability to experience lucid dreams is part of the spiritual practices in some cultures. A high dream is one in which the dreamer is aware, while dreaming, of the experience of a high like that of an LSD trip.

The hypnagogic state is the drowsiness experienced when falling asleep. With this state we associate **theta** brain rhythms, which are much slower than the **beta** rhythms of normal waking. This hypnagogic state can be very creative, because the blocking effect of critical, analytical left-brain thinking is in abeyance, leaving more freedom for the imagination to roam, and for messages to get through to conscious awareness from the unconscious. The theta state is also the one in which self-healing by the use of visualisation techniques, is most likely to be effective. People can learn how to get into this state and stay there, by using bio-feedback methods (described by Elmer and Alyce Green in 'Beyond Biofeedback').

There are two main transcendental states: samadhi and release. These are both described as ego-less and peaceful, and consequently tend to be confused with each other. However they differ in two main respects, namely (1) how you get there, and (2) the physiological correlates, electrical skin resistance in particular. Samadhi is reached by practising a known meditation technique; while doing so the skin resistance goes steadily up to a very high reading. Release happens as the result of a sudden insight or new awareness, and is unplanned and unexpected; at the moment of the insight the skin resistance drops suddenly, and stays down as long as the altered state lasts, with an absence of the small jerks that are normally present.

Samadhi is the state of Cosmic Consciousness aimed at by Hindus. It is an experience of the Hindu's ultimate goal of union with God. Buddhists, on the other hand, do not believe in God. Their concept of Cosmic Consciousness is total release from all suffering and desire. The Buddhist experiences Nirvana while in the state of release, or 'satori' as it is known in Zen.

Maslow's research into peak-experiences during the 50's, did not distinguish between these two states, so the confusion between them amongst western researchers may have originated from him. This is in spite of the fact that subsequently he recognised that he was dealing with two states, which he chose to call 'plateau' and 'peak' experiences. Recently athletes have reported entering a transcendental state during training. When in this state their performance is at its best, and they do not tire.

The term 'state-specific' has been coined to refer to experiences shared by people who are in the same state. LSD provides the easiest illustrations of this concept. Participants on a trip find that communication takes place on a more intuitive level than normal; they share a common experience of the changing nature of the physical environment. Music and art can be state-specific, e.g. the psychedelic music and art of the late 60's.

LSD removes the mind's censoring mechanism, which normally protects us from material in the unconscious which we would be unable to confront. For this reason an LSD trip can be an insightful experience; but it can also lead to insanity. Under expert guidance, patients undergoing analysis can find LSD useful, e.g. the work done by Dr. Stanislav Grof in releasing patients from the effects of the birth trauma and from their fear of death (described in his book 'Realms of the Human Unconscious').

Dr. Raymond Moody's book 'Life After Life' describes the experience of a number of people who died clinically and survived. Their accounts bear a remarkable resemblance to the stages of 'after-death' described in 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead'; which leads one to suspect that maybe this is indeed what death is like. Whatever the truth about death may be, the people who have had this experience, all report that they have lost their fear of death because they now know it to be a beautiful and peaceful state to enter.

In our Western society, subjective descriptions of most altered states tend to be regarded with scepticism or disbelief. In fact altered states are more common than is popularly realised. Let

us hope that awareness is increasing, so that people who have these experiences need no longer feel that they are nature's freaks.

Roslyn Langdon

A JOURNEY

It had been suggested to me by my spiritual teacher that it was time I made arrangements to accompany him on one of his boat journeys across the seas: and here I was ten months later, on a Polish cargo boat bound for South America. I wasn't looking forward to the journey; in fact I was distinctly apprehensive. I had a strong feeling it was going to be a difficult experience. We were ten students from Canada, Switzerland and England taking up the whole passenger quota. We had sole use of the passenger lounge for our classes each morning, afternoon, and evening, and were set daily meditational exercises and bioenergetic exercises to practise.

The apprehension persisted. I feared the sea becoming rough, the Teacher's wrath and my teeth needing attention! (I had tried without success to see a dentist in Hamburg before boarding the boat). The biggest problem for me was the food. As a vegetarian I had been warned that I would have to get used to eating meat, and I had begun to break myself in slowly several weeks before the journey. Polish food is particularly heavy, and we were being served meat twice, sometimes three times a day. How ironical considering the situation in Poland! I did my best to eat what I was given, but felt permanently bloated and uncomfortable. After ten days I moved to the Teacher's table and I soon realized that here was where my personal teaching would take place. The attitude to food, acceptance or rejection, style of eating, table talk, all reflected the present mental state, early conditioning and early relationship with the mother - how much emotional nourishment there had been. He could read us like a book.