***psychedelics & meditation:***

***potential synergy & personal exploration***

*“A person is a spatially and temporally limited piece of what we call the ‘universe’.*

*He experiences himself and his feelings as separated from the rest, an optical illusion of his consciousness. The pursuit of liberation from this bondage is the only object of real religion.”*

*Albert Einstein*

Research studies and academic reviews on psychedelics are emerging all the time. Searching in my own personal database today turns up over 950 papers, mostly published in the last five years. I also regularly contribute to a free *Psychedelic Health Professionals (PHP) Network* newsletter which gives details of a further four recently published psychedelic research articles every week. As Guy Goodwin, Oxford emeritus professor of psychiatry, has commented *“Remedicalising psilocybin and related drugs is the most interesting project in contemporary psychiatry.”*

I am trained as a medical doctor and as a psychotherapist. I went up to university in the late 1960’s, so it’s no surprise that I’m intrigued by the re-emergence and therapeutic potential of psychedelics. I have written and lectured a good deal about these topics – see for example on my own website at [*goodmedicine.org.uk>good knowledge>psychedelics*](http://goodmedicine.org.uk/goodknowledge/good-knowledge/psychedelics) or on the *Psychedelic Health Professionals’* site at [*psychedelicnetwork.org.uk>lectures-and-tutorials*](https://psychedelicnetwork.org.uk/lectures-and-tutorials/). Over two years ago, I helped found the *PHP Network* and we’re currently in the process of setting ourselves up as an educational charity. Do visit the *PHP* website for information about a wealth of opportunities we provide including the weekly newsletter, podcasts, journal clubs, a linked book club, orientation/integration groups, supervision, lectures and also (legal) psilocybin retreats in the Netherlands.

However, what I would like to focus on in this short article is something a bit more specific – the potential synergy between psychedelics and meditation. I will say a little about the fascinating research developing in this area and talk a bit about my own personal exploration. I hope these two rather different lenses will complement each other in helpful ways.

So, first here is a brief update on current research in this area. At the moment, the most clearly identified predictor of good long term outcome after psychedelic use in healthy subjects is the depth of the mystical or peak experience they have while taking the substance (Elsey 2017; McCulloch, Grzywacz et al. 2022). The recent paper *“Psychedelic experiences and mindfulness are associated with improved wellbeing”* (Qiu and Minda 2021) comments *“The current study aims to examine the relationship between psychedelic use, mindfulness, and multi-faceted wellbeing as an outcome. Hierarchical regression was used to quantify these associations on a large sample of people (N = 1219), who engage in both meditation practices and psychedelic use. These results show that both mindfulness and mystical experiences each predict substantial increases in wellbeing. Psychedelics were found to be an important moderator of mystical experience to explain improvements in wellbeing.”* In another study, Pedersen and colleagues (Pedersen, Copes et al. 2021) interviewed 50 psychedelic users and wrote – *“we document how they draw on archetypical mystical narratives, comprising three key dimensions: (1) the transcendence of time and space; (2) deep euphoria; and (3) the perception of being at one with ‘a larger whole’.”* Both one’s personal tendency to ‘absorption’ and the ‘porosity’ of one’s background sociocultural beliefs contribute to the quality of these experiences (Luhrmann, Weisman et al. 2021).

There are a whole series of good recent articles about the similarities and differences between meditation and psychedelics (Millière, Carhart-Harris et al. 2018; Garland and Fredrickson 2019; Eleftheriou and Thomas 2021; Payne, Chambers et al. 2021; Qiu and Minda 2021; Radakovic, Radakovic et al. 2021; Simonsson and Goldberg 2022) and I am aware of five papers that have explored potential synergies between these approaches more directly (Griffiths, Johnson et al. 2018; Dakwar, Nunes et al. 2019; Smigielski, Kometer et al. 2019; Azhari, Hu et al. 2020; Grabski, McAndrew et al. 2022). The Azhari, Dakwar and Grabski studies report on improved substance use disorder outcomes through combining mindfulness-based approaches with ketamine, while both the Griffiths and the Smigielski papers used psilocybin to augment meditation outcomes.

The 2018 study by Roland Griffiths and colleagues at John Hopkins was a ground-breaker in this field – *“Psilocybin-occasioned mystical-type experience in combination with meditation and other spiritual practices produces enduring positive changes in psychological functioning and in trait measures of prosocial attitudes and behaviors”* (Griffiths, Johnson et al. 2018). The paper’s abstract reads *“Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences with participant-attributed increases in well-being. However, little research has examined enduring changes in traits. This study administered psilocybin to participants who undertook a program of meditation/spiritual practices. Healthy participants were randomized to three groups (25 each): (1) very low-dose (1 mg/70 kg on sessions 1 and 2) with moderate-level ("standard") support for spiritual-practice (LD-SS); (2) high-dose (20 and 30 mg/70 kg on sessions 1 and 2, respectively) with standard support (HD-SS); and (3) high-dose (20 and 30 mg/70kg on sessions 1 and 2, respectively) with high support for spiritual practice (HD-HS). Psilocybin was administered double-blind and instructions to participants/staff minimized expectancy confounds. Psilocybin was administered 1 and 2 months after spiritual-practice initiation. Outcomes at 6 months included rates of spiritual practice and persisting effects of psilocybin. Compared with low-dose, high-dose psilocybin produced greater acute and persisting effects. At 6 months, compared with LD-SS, both high-dose groups showed large significant positive changes on longitudinal measures of interpersonal closeness, gratitude, life meaning/purpose, forgiveness, death transcendence, daily spiritual experiences, religious faith and coping, and community observer ratings. Determinants of enduring effects were psilocybin-occasioned mystical-type experience and rates of meditation/spiritual practices. Psilocybin can occasion enduring trait-level increases in prosocial attitudes/behaviors and in healthy psychological functioning.”* This is such an interesting and helpful paper that is well worth reading in full. The authors concluded *“psilocybin was administered in the context of undertaking a nonsectarian program of meditation and other spiritual practices that emphasized integration of spiritual values in daily life. The study showed robust interactive positive effects of psilocybin dose and added support for spiritual practices on a wide range of longitudinal measures at 6 months including ... (the previously mentioned self-reported changes as well as) ... rating of participants by community observers. Analyses suggest that the determinants of these effects were the intensity of the psilocybin-occasioned mystical experience and the rates of engagement with meditation and other spiritual practices.”*  The researchers also noted *“Overall, these results suggest that both mystical experience* (induced by high dose psilocybin) *and spiritual practices* (involving meditation) *contribute to positive outcomes, with mystical experience making a substantially greater contribution.”* This is worth noting – that beneficial outcomes seemed particularly due to psychedelic-induced mystical experiences with meditation practice providing additional but less significant contributions.

The other currently reported study that particularly speaks to this potential meditation/psychedelic overlap involved giving psilocybin or placebo to experienced meditators on day four of a five-day mindfulness retreat (Smigielski, Kometer et al. 2019). The researchers noted that *“Compared with placebo, psilocybin enhanced post-intervention mindfulness and produced larger positive changes in psychosocial functioning at a 4-month follow-up, which were corroborated by external ratings, and associated with magnitude of acute self-dissolution experience.”* They also highlighted that *“Meditation seems to enhance psilocybin’s positive effects while counteracting possible dysphoric responses.”* Associated functional MRI scans were reported in a further paper (Smigielski, Scheidegger et al. 2019) where the authors wrote *“The analysis of functional connectivity identified psilocybin-related and mental state–dependent alterations in self-referential processing regions of the default mode network (DMN). Notably, decoupling of medial prefrontal and posterior cingulate cortices, which is thought to mediate sense of self, was associated with the subjective ego dissolution effect during the psilocybin-assisted mindfulness session. The extent of ego dissolution and brain connectivity predicted positive changes in psychosocial \*\*functioning of participants 4 months later.”*

And this overlap between psychedelics and meditation is not just about ego dissolution. The experience of awe (wonder, reverence) seems to be of real importance too (Hendricks 2018; Hornsey, Faulkner et al. 2018; van Elk, Arciniegas Gomez et al. 2019; Chen and Mongrain 2020; van Mulukom, Patterson et al. 2020). Other significant benefits of both psychedelics and mindfulness include compassion for self and others (Kamboj, Walldén et al. 2018; Fauvel, Strika-Bruneau et al. 2020; Yela, Crego et al. 2020; Elsey, Wuestman et al. 2021) and increased value-directed activities (Donald, Bradshaw et al. 2019; Teixeira, Johnson et al. 2021).

There is so much more I could write about overlapping meditation/psychedelic research, but what I would like to do now is to share some personal experience. I very much agree that *‘The plural of anecdote is not data’,* but sometimes personal experiences and qualitative studies can act as scouts scoping out the countryside and suggesting territory that might later be worth exploring further both by individuals and by the slower moving heavy artillery of randomised and other formal research trials. I want to comment on five areas here: firstly, and a bit more fully, how I personally have found psychedelics and meditation enhance each other; then secondly the value of trying different settings/activities when using psychedelics; thirdly the question of whether one trips with a sitter or friend or group or alone; fourthly the potential helpfulness of using some form of recording device to make notes during the trip; and fifthly a brief discussion of ways I have found helpful for personal integration.

My personal psychedelic experience involved a number of LSD trips in the late 1960’s and early 70’s. Then after a long gap I took a series of legal psilocybin truffle trips in the Netherlands. I have visited the Netherlands on a whole series of occasions and, of course, other psychedelic drugs are readily available there too. I am not a hugely experienced ‘psychonaut’ but I have ‘journeyed’ on various psychedelic substances thirty to forty times in my life. I have also meditated regularly for over fifty years, have gone on a series of meditation retreats, visited a variety of monasteries and ashrams, and for a while taught meditation. I’m very fortunate – self-assessment using the *Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ)* (Barrett, Johnson et al. 2015) suggests I am nearly always blessed with *“a full mystical experience”* when I trip. This seems rather a high frequency and I am very confident that long meditation experience helps me greatly to approach these journeys in a state of humility, calmness and surrender. Probably too, secure childhood ‘attachment’ and a fortunate life course/situation also contribute. Intriguingly, I suspect that tracking ‘ego-dissolution’ through most of my trips (see charts and other details below) also helps me navigate deeper. As has been said “What gets measured, gets managed”, although “managed” is rather a poor description for what feels more like nudging the prow of the boat repeatedly into the centre of the river when on a trip.

Besides ‘ego dissolution’, it seems probable that another good predictor of long-term benefit in general population participants is intensity of positive emotions – for example, love, beauty, reverence and gratitude – experienced at times during the trip (McCulloch, Grzywacz et al. 2022). I personally have found that including these qualities in one’s initial trip intentions and then using practices like breath focus, compassion meditation and gratitude practices during the trip itself, can often deeply enhance these experiences.

How have I personally found psychedelics and meditation can enhance each other? Talking with a friend recently, I said *“Maybe one way of looking at it is that, if one went on a week’s meditation retreat say, you might reach places that you very rarely, if ever, reach in your daily practice of meditation. But somehow having swum out into that bigger lake enriches your daily practice. It gives it a context; it changes how you see it a bit. I think psychedelics are like that for me.”* For most of us, high dose psychedelics are very likely to produce profound learning opportunities. As the meditation teacher Sam Harris put it so memorably (riffing on a well-known remark by the ethnobotanist Terence McKenna) *“If you teach someone to meditate or to do yoga or to go on pilgrimage to some holy mountain, nothing is guaranteed to happen. Yet if you are given 5 dried grams of magic mushrooms or DMT or some other potent psychedelic, whoever you are, a freight train of significance is going to be coming your way in a matter of moments.”*

Nowadays, both when taking psychedelics and when meditating, I use the same process of *‘letting go of everything’.* This involves a psychological process of surrender which seems so centrally important (Russ and Elliott 2017; Russ, Carhart-Harris et al. 2019) and this is mirrored in repeated physical release of the body and its boundaries (Dambrun 2016). I’m reminded of the poet e e cummings’ wonderful words: *“Seeker of truth – follow no path – all paths lead where – truth is here.”* On high dose psilocybin nearly three years ago now, this truth/experience hit me pretty much like a train in what was then the deepest spiritual experience of my life.

And this is interesting. I do feel that psychedelic experience has deepened the surrender, depth and dissolution of my regular meditation practice ... and has done something similar for dance and love making and when in relationships or in nature. But more important, I suspect, is not just the effects while engaged in various activities, but also what feels like a shift in my internal structure. So again, speaking with a friend, I said something like *“I’m already so very fortunate in my life situation (relationships, work, health) – it’s a bit like living in a rather beautiful house. What it feels psychedelics have done is to open all the doors and windows ... I feel both bigger and smaller ... softer, emptier, more loving.”* It’s a wonderful thing to feel and I hope there is at least some truth to it!

So, ego dissolution feels central to psychedelics’ benefits. This is the territory highlighted by the Einstein quotation at the start of this article ... *“liberation from this bondage (of apparent separation) is the only object of real religion.”* Savouring and simply being present is another related potential benefit – both while meditating and in life more generally. Over 50 years ago, at university, during a particularly special LSD trip, I wrote *“Everything is and almost bursts with being so”*. Huxley described this so well in his book *“The doors of perception”.* And so central as well to exploration of psychedelics and meditation is *“the river of kindness”* that has been a repeating theme in trips over these last years.

So, psychedelics have infused my day to day meditation practice and vice versa. And most importantly, both psychedelics and meditation for me underline the centrality of letting go of everything, of savouring, gratitude and being present, of opening the doors of the heart even further, and of support for living more fully what feels true. And I am not any kind of saint and I tumble into all kinds of self-centeredness and other foolishness very regularly, and I think I am also less dismissive of the so-called ‘ego’ and find these internal ‘executive structures’ are often a helpful, kind caretaker.

As well as these comments about how I personally have found psychedelics and meditation enhance each other, I also want to say a little about settings, company, note-taking, and integration. As for settings and activities, I understand that most recent research on psychedelics has involved lying down with eye mask and playlist. This is fine, but other settings and activities are very well worth exploring too. Being in nature, dancing, relating to others and for me especially, meditating while on psychedelics are further ways of going forward with these practices. There is some evidence that psychedelic experience may especially affect activities that one practises while taking the psychedelic – so Kettner et al, in their paper *“From egoism to ecoism”* (Kettner, Gandy et al. 2019) comment *“The frequency of lifetime psychedelic use was positively correlated with nature relatedness at baseline. Nature relatedness was significantly increased 2 weeks, 4 weeks and 2 years after the psychedelic experience. This increase was positively correlated with concomitant increases in psychological well-being and was dependent on the extent of ego-dissolution and the perceived influence of natural surroundings during the acute psychedelic state.”* If psychedelics especially nourish nature-connectedness when one has been out in nature during the trip itself, it seems likely that psychedelics may especially infuse meditation practice if one meditates while tripping. This is certainly my experience and the way I personally spend most of my time when on psychedelics. On a high dose, it can feel that sitting and walking meditation are too difficult and one just wants to lie down. Lying down is fine, but with a little practice sitting meditation and some walking meditation are likely to come more easily as well.

Thirdly, what about tripping with others or on one’s own? A metaphor I think of here is the similarity to walking in the Scottish mountains. I have often been into the mountains with friends, I have trained with guides to learn how to look after myself in these potentially dangerous environments, and I have had many journeys into these wonderful hills on my own. All have been precious and being on my own or with others lead to overlapping but different experiences. Going into these potentially wild, mountain regions without planning, maps, knowledge and fitness would be foolish (especially if on one’s own). To me, it seems much the same for journeys into the psychedelic mountains.

The fourth area I want to say a little about is the possible use of a recording device – for example a mobile or a dictaphone – while one is tripping. The first time I tried this, it felt clunky, difficult and, at times, a bit sacrilegious. As with other challenges, I am surprised how quickly one can learn to ‘function’ while tripping. Yes sometimes, I’m blown so out of time and space that there isn’t a functioning component of myself to operate a dictaphone, but mostly I can manage. This is made much easier because I usually trip sitting meditating, not lying down with a playlist. I typically record a brief set of comments – maybe a minute or less – roughly every half hour. Usually this includes off-the-cuff 0 (none) to 100 (extreme) estimates of ego dissolution, emotional intensity, and challenge. After the trip I transcribe all the comments and sometimes make a chart of particularly ego dissolution changes over the course of the trip. I find working with the recorded comments when I come to integrate my experiences to be wonderfully helpful.

And lastly, I want to say a few things about post-trip integration. Psychedelics induce neuroplasticity (de Vos, Mason et al. 2021; Lepow, Morishita et al. 2021) which potentially makes the process of taking lessons from trips into one’s life a good deal easier. I nearly always go into a trip with one or more intentions. There is some evidence this promotes better outcomes (Haijen, Kaelen et al. 2018), as long as the intentions are held lightly and paralleled by an openness to possibly finding that the trip’s major lessons may be unexpected and surprising (Russ, Carhart-Harris et al. 2019; Wolff, Evens et al. 2020). I use the recordings I have made as a major help with integration. I may – in the first day or so afterwards – describe the trip to a friend and record the description so that I can revisit what I have said. Quite frequently I draw the trip as a picture. I may well write a poem about it. I sometimes commission artworks to remind myself of key lessons. I may well incorporate these lessons too into meditation practices that I use several times daily. In altered states of consciousness, I can revisit the feelings of the trip (Lynn and Evans 2017; Amigó 2021). I may well make action intentions too. Some are fairly well known like gratitude and appreciation practices and nature walks. Some will be more idiosyncratic and specific to the messages of the trip. I’m a great believer in the remark made to me by a psychedelic guide and friend *“If you don’t change, you don’t change.”* Wanting to alter long-standing personal patterns is common and typically ineffective (Miller, Baranski et al. 2019; Baranski, Gray et al. 2020). As Hudson wrote in his well-titled paper *“You have to follow through”* (Hudson, Briley et al. 2018) *“Participants provided self-report ratings of their personality traits and were able to freely accept and complete weekly “challenges” — prewritten behavioral goals that would pull their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in line with their desired traits ... only actually completing challenges (i.e., performing trait-typical behaviors) predicted trait change over time. Thus, merely wanting to change does not appear to be sufficient to evoke trait growth; successfully changing one’s personality traits may require actively and successfully implementing behaviors to change oneself.”*

In this piece on psychedelics and meditation, I have mentioned much of the recent relevant research in this area – see the references below. I have also said a bit about my own experiences, as sometimes this more qualitative approach can throw up useful leads and insights. I have also attached a couple of charts. One illustrates four trips using psilocybin truffles. These are the quantities that we use on the *PHP Network* retreats that we run in the Netherlands, so it’s encouraging to see the high *Mystical Experience Questionnaire* scores. The second chart illustrates that MDMA can also induce strong mystical experiences too, especially with the right kind of set and setting. I mentioned that sometimes I write poems after trips and I’ve attached one – *‘Prayer’* – that links with MDMA and another – *‘Asking Three Times’* – that links with psilocybin. To close this article, I would like to quote the final section of the psilocybin poem:

*And the blessing:*

*This is the countryside where the outbreath is infinite.*

*This is the direction of letting go.*

*This is the last staging post ... where we can meet our brothers & sisters*

*as they take off the last of their egos ... smile ... smile ... at each other ...*

*at our good fortune ... as we step forward to swim out into nothingness.*

*Going beyond space & time ... on the shore and beyond the shore ...*

*giving up all these molecules and atoms into the universe ...*

*and realising that’s how it already is ... we don’t own this space.*

*There are no walls ... they’re illusions. Boundaries ... they’re illusions.*

*Swimming out into the vastness, until there’s nobody swimming.*

*This is the countryside where the outbreath is infinite.*

*Swimming out into the vastness, until there’s nobody swimming.*

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