

Psy-Trance Gatherings and Mystical Experiences

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In this paper, I will explore some differences and commonalities between seemingly dissimilar altered states of consciousness (ASCs). First, an overview will be provided on the relatively uncommon state of consciousness referred to as mystical experiences.¹ By nature, these experiences are difficult to categorize and describe, however, there are spiritual, philosophical and scientific theories that attempt to explain the general characteristics of mystical experiences. These explanations are helpful in understanding the expanded states of consciousness commonly associated with psychedelic trance gatherings. A psy-trance gathering can be considered as a subset to the broader and connotatively misconstrued term, *rave*. These gatherings are rituals carefully and purposefully crafted to synergistically combine modern advances in computer technology with archaic methods of consciousness expansion. The participants are provided a ritualistic, communal atmosphere for the collective expansion of both individual and group consciousness. Methods used at these events have been used throughout the ages in indigenous cultures for spiritual ascension², including trance dance, rhythmic drumming, and ingestion of psychedelic substances. I suggest that psychedelic trance gatherings are modern experiments that are capable of catalyzing mystical experiences.

¹ I say mystical experiences are *relatively* uncommon in comparison to the ASCs experienced by most people, such as sleep, depression, or sexual activity, which are very common.

² Using the term *ascension* in reference to spiritual experiences is a commonly used metaphor, but should still be recognized as a metaphor. Many others exist, including *wholeness, light, awakening, rebirth* etc. See Ralph Metzner's *The Unfolding Self* or George Lakoff's *Metaphors We Live By* for a more detailed analysis of the use of metaphors in human conception of reality, in general, and more specifically, of transformative experiences.

Expanded vs. Constricted States of Consciousness

The study of ASCs can be divided into two categories: expanded states of consciousness and constricted states of consciousness. These categories are metaphorical in nature and based upon a specific model of consciousness. Consider consciousness as a field where activities such as thinking, sensing, or dreaming takes place. This field may be thought of as a sphere, or bubble, of awareness. Our state of consciousness within this sphere is based on the concept of attention. A person's sensory receptors are continually open to their respective stimulus energies, which includes an enormous amount of information at every moment. William James noticed that most of the time, only one of the many streams of sensory input seems to fill our minds, while the others fade to the periphery of consciousness (James, 1890). At any given moment, a person is aware of some small wedge of the total sphere of consciousness. This theory supports the concept of expanded and constricted consciousness.

Expanded consciousness includes ordinary awareness and more, that is, the original wedge gets wider, or more obtuse. Constricted awareness is within ordinary awareness – the original wedge gets smaller, or more acute. Theoretically, the wedge of consciousness can expand to the full 360 degrees of the sphere. This pure awareness might be associated with the conscious expansion to humanity, Earth (Gaia consciousness), or universe (cosmic consciousness), and may also be associated with Jung's collective unconscious. Pure awareness may also be associated with the Buddhist conception of enlightenment. Note that it is impossible for a lower state of consciousness to know a higher state of consciousness, since we are always bound by our current state of consciousness. This short-term limitation makes expanded states of consciousness

mostly ineffable, relying on poetic descriptions or mythological stories for transference. Some examples of constricted awareness are depression, hypnosis, concentration meditation, and the effects of drugs such as alcohol, stimulants, and depressants. Examples of expanded consciousness include mindfulness meditation, mystical union, and the effects of drugs such as cannabis and psychedelics. Note that this is just a model of consciousness, helpful in the study of ASCs. Taking a model too seriously can distort our perceptions of the thing we are modeling – like a fish trying to study water, it is impossible for us to look at consciousness from a meta-perspective. It would then seem that looking at consciousness from the perspective of expanded states of awareness is the more informed and inclusive view for mental investigation. For this reason, I will focus mostly on expanded states of consciousness in this paper.

Mystical Experience

Because mystical experiences are expanded states of consciousness outside the realm of ordinary discourse, they are difficult to precisely characterize or describe. Mystic comes from the Latin *mysticus*, of mysteries, and from the Greek *mystikos*, from *mystes*, initiate. Throughout the ages, philosophers, religious scholars, and practitioners of different spiritual traditions have tried to define specific characteristics and types of mystical experience. As a result, there is a common core of essential traits that remains invariant from one context to the next.

William James identified two essential traits of mystical experiences. The first is the quality of ineffability, meaning that the experience eludes any adequate account in words and can only be truly comprehended by those who have “known it” first hand. This

trait also applies to feeling states, and most expansive states of consciousness. The second characteristic of mystical experiences, according to James, is that it possesses a noetic quality, meaning that it is experienced as a state of “deep, authoritative knowledge or insight unknown to the discursive intellect” (Wulff 2000). Other qualities associated with mystical experiences are those of transiency and passivity. Transiency means that there is a tendency for the experience to fade within a relatively short period of time, leaving behind an imperfect recollection, though an enduring sense of its importance. Passivity means that after the experience sets in, one is no longer in control and is perhaps even in the grasp of superior power (Wulff 2000).

Through his study of Christian, Islamic, Judaic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist mystical sources, religious scholar Stace identified the “very essence of all mystical experience” as:

- a. The disappearance of all the physical and mental objects of ordinary consciousness and, in their place, the emergence of a unitary, undifferentiated, or pure consciousness.
- b. Located neither in space nor in time.
- c. A sense of objectivity or reality.
- d. Feelings of peace, bliss, joy, and blessedness.
- e. The feeling, in varying degrees, of having encountered the holy, the sacred, or the divine (sometimes identified as “God”).
- f. Paradoxicality, apparent violations of the usual laws of logic as illustrated by a consciousness that has no object.
- g. Ineffability. (Wulff 2000)

It is difficult to scientifically study mystical experiences due to the fact that they are nearly impossible to replicate in laboratory settings. The most systematic empirical study of mystical experiences and their after-effects was performed by Pahnke (1966) in what was called the Good Friday Experiment. Pahnke took twenty protestant divinity students as his participants in a study to show that psilocybin, the primary psychoactive ingredient in psychedelic mushrooms, could act as a catalyst to produce mystical states reported by the classic mystical traditions. Based on Leary's studies, set and setting were carefully controlled.³ The experiment took place in a basement chapel under the main cathedral during a Good Friday church service. The sermon was played live through speakers downstairs. The experiment was a double blind study where half the participants received psilocybin and the other half a placebo. After the experiment, both groups completed a 147-item questionnaire based on the following nine categories of mystical experiences influenced by Stace's phenomenology:

1. Unity
2. Transcendence of time and space
3. Deeply felt positive mood
4. Sense of sacredness
5. Objectivity of reality
6. Paradoxicality
7. Ineffability
8. Transience
9. Persisting positive change

³ Timothy Leary, while a psychology professor at Harvard, came up with the idea that states of consciousness, especially altered states induced by psychedelic substances, are determined by our set (*inner* mental intentions, emotional states, etc) and setting (the *outer* environment, or atmosphere we are in).

The results of this study were astounding. There were huge differences between the psilocybin group and the control group, with the psilocybin group significantly closer to the classic mystical experience. Six months later, all twenty members of Pahnke's study completed a lengthy follow up questionnaire. The psilocybin group that reported more mystical results during the experiment also had significantly more "enduring positive changes in their attitudes and behavior – toward themselves, others, life, and the psilocybin experience itself – than those in the control group" (Wulff, 2000). These results are often rejected by religious authorities as not being a genuine mystical experience due to the fact that it was induced by a psychedelic drug. More will be discussed about the connection between psychedelic substances and mystical experiences in the second half of this paper.

History of Psychedelic Trance Gatherings

Psychedelic trance is a genre of electronic dance music (EDM), which emerged during the 1980s in the beach town of Goa, India. This former Portuguese enclave, 400 kilometers south of Bombay, was a popular destination for white, traveling hippies toward the end of the 1960s. Hippies smoking copious quantities of hash and highly involved with local spiritual traditions started producing "full moon parties" on the beach, which first became amplified through sound systems in 1975 with the arrival of portable electricity. The parties first began with psychedelic rock music. In his essay, *Goa trance and trance in Goa*, Arun Saldanha says that the scene in Goa is one where "hedonism and spiritualism have therefore always existed, not side by side, but implicated in each other, thereby propelling the scene forward" (Saldanha 2004, 274).

In the early 1908s, the rock music was gradually abandoned at these gatherings, and electronic tracks were played exclusively. Disc jockeys would take the weirdest and most psychedelic bits from songs and loop them with other songs. Music lovers would take tapes from these parties back to their home cities and make even more psychedelic⁴ music in that style. The best of these new tracks made it back to Goa and became “hits” during the following season, which is basically how the modern psychedelic/goa trance movement began. These gatherings soon spread all over the world, the most famous gathering spots being Germany, France, Britain, Sweden, Israel, Thailand, Japan, Australia, Portugal, South Africa, Brazil, Hungary, and Russia.

Today, parties still thrive on the same principals. DJs collect the most psychedelic music available, which is driven by a steady kick drum, and seamlessly blend tracks together for a never-ending stream of mind-expanding music. Next, we will examine the essence of the modern psychedelic trance scene, including the music, dance, décor, and philosophy. The origins of this movement give some perspective on its original purpose: to use cutting edge technology and tribal ritual to celebrate earth, life, and spirit through rhythm and dance.

Psy-trance and Entrainment

The music is the defining element of a psy-trance gathering. Psy-trance music is specifically designed to alter one’s consciousness. This effect is achieved using a variety of techniques. Psy-trance is characterized by a steady kick drum, which beats at 135-150 beats per minute. A DJ keeps this beat constant through her entire set by adjusting the

⁴ Psychedelic music is a somewhat subjective term, but it has come to mean music that seems to expand or warp consciousness resembling or mimicking the effects of psychedelic substances.

tempo of each track to blend it into a continuous stream of music. This continuity allows the flow of dancing and consciousness to go on uninterrupted, encouraging the participant to lose herself within the music. More will be discussed on this later.

Almost all shamanic and indigenous cultures have been using rhythmic drumming to alter consciousness for thousands of years. Anthropologist Michael Harner devoted his life to the research of shamanic cultures and development of a theory that he calls “core shamanism”. The result is a method to alter consciousness through sound and intention for the purpose of obtaining knowledge and healing from the “spirit world.” Harner’s discovery was that a steady monotonous drumbeat of 205-220 beats per minute creates an environment for the shamanic practitioner to intentionally travel mentally into another world. This world is reportedly populated by various spirits that can be real, mystical, human, animal, or alien--each with different lessons to teach. Harner says,

“The repetitive sound of the drum is usually fundamental to undertaking shamanic tasks in the SSC [shamanic state of consciousness]. With good reason, Siberian and other shamans sometimes refer to their drums as the ‘horse’ or ‘canoe’ that transports them into the Lowerworld or Upperworld. The steady monotonous beat of the drum acts like a carrier wave, first to help the shaman enter the SSC, and then to sustain him on his journey.” (Harner 1980, 51)

The phenomenon is usually referred to as sonic driving and is based on a universal principal called entrainment. Andrew Neher conducted studies in the early 1960s resulting in two papers entitled “Auditory Driving Observed with Scalp Electrodes in Normal Subjects” and “A Physiological Explanation of Unusual Ceremonies Involving Drums.” He concluded that drumming produces changes in the central nervous system

affecting the electrical activity in “many sensory and motor areas of the brain, not ordinarily affected, through their connections with the sensory area being stimulated.”

Mutual phase locking, or entrainment, is a universal phenomenon in nature, which explains sonic driving. George Leonard says,

“In 1665 the Dutch scientist Christian Huygens notices that two pendulum clocks mounted side by side on a wall would swing together in precise rhythm. They would hold their mutual beat, in fact, far beyond their capacity to be matched in mechanical accuracy. It was as if they ‘wanted’ to keep the same time.” (Leonard 1978, 13)

Entrainment can be observed in all oscillating frequencies in nature. Leonard continues, “Whenever two or more oscillators in the same field are pulsing at *nearly* the same time, they tend to ‘lock in’ so that they are pulsing at *exactly* the same time.” He believes that this is due to the fact that nature seeks the most efficient energy states, and cooperative pulsation requires less energy than opposition.

New advances in physics, and specifically in the field of superstring theory show that all of reality is made up of vibrating lengths of one-dimensional strings (Greene 2003). This theory implies that everything in nature, including the human organism, is in essence an oscillator. Even before superstring theory, Einstein showed that all matter is actually equivalent to energy, which is a form of vibration. This is further illustrated by the fact that entrainment can be found to affect everything in nature. People entrain to their environment as shown by rhythms of the sun, moon, seasons, day, sleep-cycle, work-cycle, etc. Two sleeping people will have synchronized breathing and heart rates; female roommates will have synchronized menstrual cycles. Entrainment can be found in

language rhythms as well as between brainwaves of people in good conversation. Boston scientist William Condon has shown that the brainwaves of students listening to their professors lecture, or churchgoers listening to their preacher will oscillate in “harmony” with each other (Berendt 1983, 117). This universal principal is especially prevalent in music.

Music is one of the few experiences that can touch a person on all levels of consciousness. It is a powerful sensory stimulus that can work simultaneously on the body, mind, and spirit (Cottrell 2000). Low frequency sounds are most effective for sonic driving, or entrainment, because, as Neher states, “the low frequency receptors of the ear are more resistant to damage than the delicate high frequency receptors and can withstand higher amplitudes of sound before pain is felt” (Harner 1980, 52). Psy-trance gatherings are usually held outdoors with extremely large sound systems, frequently as many as 50,000 watts. These towers of sound make the music audible for miles, yet standing only a few feet from the giant speakers will not allow the bass to be heard, but more *felt*. This is because the sound waves of a bass drum can be fifty feet long and pass through the body of a dancer allowing her to physically feel the sound waves vibrate throughout her body. These high-energy oscillating frequencies easily entrain the listener’s brainwaves and entire organism.⁵

As mentioned earlier, psy-trance usually moves at 135-150 beats per minute (bpm)⁶ with a high hat cymbal between each beat. This beat frequency essentially creates

⁵ All organisms (and reality as a whole) are made up of fractal levels of cyclical oscillations or frequencies. In an organism, these oscillations include heart rate, breathing rate, brainwaves, cell vibration, nuclear vibration, one-dimensional string vibration, and frequencies within subtle energy systems. All have entrainment potential.

⁶ It is interesting to note that the repetitive beat of 135-150 bpm at psy-trance gatherings corresponds to the first sound all animals hear. In humans, for nine solid months all sounds are muffled by the constant rhythm of our mother’s heartbeat.

a danceable 135-150 bpm with sounds that oscillate at 170-300 bpm, which corresponds to about 3-5 cycles per second. What is essential to the understanding of psy-trance music is that this frequency entrains our organism to the corresponding theta brainwave frequencies.⁷ Theta brainwave states are the twilight, half sleep, imagery state of consciousness where the customary censorship of the conscious mind is absent.

According to Leonard,

“The waking dreamer, in fact, sometimes seems to have access to all the wells of memory and creation, perhaps to some sort of group consciousness. Elmer and Alyce Green of the Menninger Foundation have reported a number of extraordinary psychic experiences during the theta state.” (Leonard 1978, 5)

This theta state is where many prominent thinkers, artists, authors, scientists, and mathematicians receive their inspiration.⁸ There is much to be explored about the mystical possibilities of theta brainwave states and its relation to set and setting, but details are beyond the scope of this paper.

Psy-trance music is specifically made to entrain its listeners and manipulate brainwaves (St. John 2004, 25). The producers and DJs of psy-trance music are fully aware of “where” the listener is in terms of brainwave frequencies, since they have the ability to entrain brainwave frequencies to the fundamental bass line. The constant bass line can paradoxically feel as though it is both moving and completely motionless in

⁷ The brain fluctuates between different brainwave frequencies throughout the day with greater than 13 cycles per second corresponding to thinking, active, waking state of beta range. The 8-12 range is called alpha and is a relaxed, eyes closed, almost meditative state. Theta is 4 -7 cycles per second. Less than that is called delta, which corresponds to stage I, or REM sleep.

⁸ During my studies of pure mathematics, I could actively work to solve a single problem all day, but more often than not, I received insight to solve the problem after lying down to bed, almost asleep, where I was not consciously thinking about it. This seems to be universal for this type of thinking. A more scientific study of these states can be found in Michael Murphy and Steven Donovan’s *The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation* (1999).

time. This is because the inner rhythm of each person's body is moving at the same tempo as the unchanging bass line. For example, if a listener is entrained to a tempo of 140 bpm, it can be compared to moving in a train at 140 mph. Another rhythm overlaid on the fundamental beat moving at 70 bpm will subjectively feel like it is moving backward, i.e. looking out the train window and sensing the 70 mph train moving backwards. Moving rhythms of harmonic tempos are used to create a multidimensional movement of sound relative to an entrained listener or dancer. New patterns and rhythms emerge out the intersection between other rhythmic levels making the perceptual time and movement variations even more complicated. Polyrhythmic drumming from Africa has used this same principal in its religious ceremonies for many thousands of years. The difference is that psy-trance has unlimited sound potential through the use of computers. Different instruments in electronic music can melt into each other or split apart. Sounds can contain complicated substructures looped within a small fractal level of time within a beat. It is like African polyrhythmic drumming with added dimensions and unlimited sound capabilities.

Connectedness

Music catalyzes one of the most powerful aspects of psy-trance gatherings, which is a feeling of oneness or group consciousness, largely due to the entrainment factor. A twenty-hour psy-trance set at 140 bpm entrains the entire gathering not only to the music, but also to each other. The result is a group of people who feel "in-tune" or "in synch" with one another as they move, speak, and think in entrained response to the continuous bass line. Different ethnographers have identified the "rave" experience as:

“Synchronistic ‘phase locking’ (Rushkoff 1994:155-7); a ‘desubjectified state of ... rapture’, a collective and singular body approximating Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘Body-without-Organs’ (Jordan 1995: 129; see also Schutze 2001); a feeling of ‘an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole’, which Malbon, drawing on Freud, calls an ‘oceanic experience’ (Malbon 1999: 107) ...”
(St. John 2004, 29)

Anthropologist Tim Olaveson, studies raves as religious movements. After distributing questionnaires at more than twenty rave events, he found that the most frequently reported theme was a feeling of “connectedness”. He states that the catalyst for religious experiences seems to be the “phenomenological experience most consistently reported by ravers of an intense sensation of interpersonal and sometimes universal connection between participants, often described as ‘connectedness’, ‘unity’, or ‘love’” (Olaveson 2004, 87). It is important to note that this feeling is also commonly associated with mystical experiences of many religious traditions. (See the lists of characteristics at the beginning of this paper.)

Psy-trance and Synesthesia

Another consequence of the combined elements of the psy-trance gathering is the perceptual effect known as synesthesia. According to the American Psychological Association, synesthesia refers to “a curious phenomenon of perception in which sensory images or qualities of one modality, such as vision, find themselves transferred to another modality, such as taste or hearing” (Marks 2000, 121). This phenomenon is important because humans define their reality based on a fairly inaccurate web of sense

perceptions.⁹ We perceive only a small spectrum of colors and sounds that are actually just frequencies of electromagnetic energy that the sense organs pick up, encode, and send to the brain where they are assembled into the colors or sounds we perceive (Coren, Ward, Enns, 1999). Even physical matter is actually only compressed forms of energy made up mostly of space, yet we perceive it differently. Subjective perceptions of things such as color are completely invented in our minds, since our senses only pick up specific frequencies of light. With synesthesia, a person experiences his senses from a different perspective, which is no less accurate, and thus gives a fuller, more multidimensional look at the nature of phenomenal reality.

Psy-trance gatherings use many different techniques to purposefully induce synesthesia in the participants. The most common case of synesthesia can be referred to as *visual hearing*. This may be the case because of the high level of neural activity in the auditory nervous system (Marks 2000, 127). Visual hearing is a type of synesthesia where sounds are the inducing stimuli and the resulting consequence are visual sensations. Researchers have found correspondences between types of sounds and the images they produce. For example, there is usually a direct correspondence between the pitch of the sound and the lightness, or brightness, of the associated visual image. There is also a relationship between pitch and the spatial features of size and shape. Low-pitched sounds generically produce photisms with rounded, relatively large shapes (angularity), whereas high-pitched sounds produce photisms with more angular shapes and smaller sizes (inverse relationship). There is also a direct correspondence between loudness and brightness (Marks 2000, 129).

⁹ I say inaccurate because there is much in our reality that our senses are incapable of perceiving, including things like heat, which snakes can “see” due to their cold-blooded nature. Another example is the ultraviolet spectrum, which insects “see” on flowers, etc.

Binocular hearing helps identify the location of objects in space, allowing music producers to subjectively move sound around the entrained listener. Through visual music, impossible visual paradoxes can occur just through the use of a different phenomenological medium. Even sound illusions such as Shepard's tonal staircase¹⁰ can be formed through complicated electronic equipment. Psy-trance is a technological innovation using our understanding of perception and cognition to manipulate brainwaves and the perceptions of time and space in its listeners. This form of music purposely crafts spacetime into a psychedelic soundscape through synesthetic principals as well as leading the listener/dancer through this soundscape by use of entrainment. Psy-trance gatherings are defined by music that is continuous for many hours on end resulting in an ongoing feeling of a flowing and morphing sonic environment instead of a disparate collection of songs. This journey through sound is controlled by DJs who function as guides to an "unfamiliar and powerfully charged synaesthetic realm" and in this sense have been described as "techno-shamans"¹¹ (Des Tamacchi 2004, 136).

Dancing

Dance is an integral factor at these gatherings, and is the reason why most refer to them as parties. To explore the wide historical and spiritual aspects of dancing in general is beyond the scope of this paper, but specific aspects will be emphasized here to illustrate the wider psy-trance culture. Rhythm and dance have always been a part of religious ceremonies in indigenous cultures throughout the world. From shamans and

¹⁰ Shepard's illusion is a tonal staircase that seems to continuously rise in pitch. In fact, the series ends where it begins and the continuing rise in pitch is an illusion due to fractal mathematics combined with electronic sound production (Coren, Ward, Enns, 1999, 350).

¹¹ See my paper "Shamanism, Entrainment, and Psychedelic-Trance" (Kelch, 2004) for more on the connections between psy-trance and shamanism.

African Orisha priestesses to whirling dervishes, they all use rhythm and dance to achieve higher states of consciousness. The morphogenetic field of rhythmic trance dance for spiritual ascension is deeply ingrained within every human being.

A group called Techno Cosmic Mass is a new form of spiritual worship using electronic music and dance in the San Francisco Bay Area. The group states on its website that

“Dance takes us out of our heads and down again and connecting to the earth again. Joy results. Dance demands breathing and so it fulfills ancient teachings that connect breath with spirit. This connection is found not only in the Biblical story of the Creator breathing the divine breath into the clay to make it a living human but also in the ancient languages of Africa where the word for ‘dance’ is the same as the word for ‘breath’ which is also the word for ‘spirit’. (‘Breath’ and ‘Spirit’ are the same word (ruah) in Hebrew as well.)”¹²

Psy-trance music is thick with various overlapping layers of swirling 4/4 rhythms. Amplified to physically vibratory volumes, the dancer has a rich tapestry of sounds to move through. This freedom of physical expression bridges mind and body through musical interpretation. The body becomes another instrument as well as a vessel for the flow of energy created intentionally through the music. The long duration of parties and all-night dancing result in participants developing a sense of a merging in unison (Tramacchi 2004, 137). This state is commonly referred to as a *flow* state, about which much has been written.

Prolonged dancing in itself can be sufficient to induce mood-altering biochemical changes and altered states of consciousness. All-night dancing activates the body’s

¹² www.technocosmicmass.org

“endogenous opiate system, whereas endorphins are secreted from the pituitary gland, resulting in an increase in delta and theta waves and the symptom of euphoria and analgesia” (Takahashi 2004, 154). Trance dance facilitates the dancer to entrain to the music, which is tuned to theta brainwave frequencies and results in feelings of unity with other dancers that is commonly described.¹³

Psychedelics and Psy-trance

Along with rhythmic drumming and trance dance, psychedelic substances have been a part of indigenous religious ceremonies for centuries. Use of psychedelic substances, primarily LSD or empathogen MDMA at psy-trance gatherings is commonplace, but not universal. Most indigenous cultures that used psychedelic sacraments for religious purposes did so throughout a night filled with rhythm and dance. Examples of this practice include the Native American peyote ceremony, the African Bwiti iboga ceremony, and the many shamanic mushroom and ayahuasca ceremonies. Even the modern peyote church and South American ayahuasca churches still use rhythm and dance to aid in all night psychedelic sessions.

The connections between psychedelics and spirituality have been known since man ate his first psilocybin mushroom.¹⁴ The term entheogen was coined in 1979 to refer to plants and chemicals that awake or generate mystical experiences (Forte 1997). Many books have been written relating entheogenic or psychedelic use with mysticism. Some of the most prominent findings have been connections between psychedelic insights and

¹³ It is important to note that these feelings of unity cannot be solely explained through group entrainment, but should be thought of as a catalyst.

¹⁴ Some, including anthropologist Terrence McKenna, believe that mushrooms helped catalyze human evolution to a spoken language.

Buddhist teachings, resulting in the growing popularity of eastern mysticism in the west during the LSD-saturated 1960s (Badiner and Grey, 2002) This search for meaning behind messages revealed through LSD use led many hippies to India in search of spiritual insights, where psy-trance was born.

At the beginning of this paper, a connection was demonstrated between psychedelics and mystical experiences with the Good Friday Experiment. In the early 1990s, Dr. Rick Strassman conducted clinical research approved by the DEA in which he injected sixty volunteers with DMT¹⁵, one of the most powerful psychedelic substances known. Strassman believes that this is the “spirit molecule” released and responsible for rare states of consciousness, including near death experiences, dreams, and mystical experiences. Strassman connects DMT with the pineal gland, considered by the Hindus to be the site of the seventh chakra and by Rene Descartes to be the seat of the soul (Strassman 2001).

At psy-trance gatherings, psychedelics are used in conjunction with trance dance. Psychedelics promote entrainment as well as heightening synesthesia effects. The effects of LSD and MDMA also aid the collective consciousness felt at psy-trance gatherings. The constant beat works as it does in shamanism, to supply the mind a “vehicle” to travel along as it maneuvers through mental dimensions. The psychedelic trance music is designed to create more meaningful psychedelic visions. As Eric Davis eloquently describes,

“...the music’s sonic after-images and timbre trails disintegrate conventional spacetime and allow shimmering micro-perceptions to emerge on the melting

¹⁵ DMT is a plant-derived chemical found in the South American brew ayahuasca, and is also naturally manufactured in the brain of all mammals, including humans.

border between soundwaves and internal sensations. Portals appear, resonating geometries that seed further cognitive and somatic shifts, while the relentless and essentially invariant rhythm ... at once anchors and fuels the voyage” (Davis 2004, 260)

Much more can be said about psychedelics, rhythm, dance and consciousness. What is most important in respect to these forms of consciousness expansion and psy-trance gatherings is that they are all used in conjunction with each other, co-creatively. As Leary emphasized, however, the most important part of an altered state of consciousness is the set and setting. The set has already been established as seeking expanded states of consciousness and unity through personal and group transcendence. A few words about the settings of psy-trance gatherings are important.

The Setting of Psy-trance Gatherings

Psy-trance gatherings are usually held outdoors, far into the wilderness, which often means hours by car from any nearby city along dirt roads leading to remote areas of the forests, mountains, or deserts. The events are usually timed for specific astrological events, from full moons and lunar eclipses to important Mayan calendar dates. The night sky is the focus when the party begins sometime after midnight. The darkness of the night, combined with UV lighting effects, glowing geometric fractal tapestries and piercing lasers, help aid in synesthesia and entrainment. Projectors are often set up displaying the most cutting edge digital fractal imagery with iterated modes where loops extend and morph with themselves while traveling through programmed kaleidoscopic, psychedelic worlds. It is the visual equivalent of the psychedelic trance music. Psy-trance

décor draws on psychedelic, sacred geometric and spiritual imagery with glowing images of Om's, Shiva's tridents, Buddha, Ganesh, psychedelic fractals and geometric mandalas. The air is rich with burning sage and incense, and candles usually light an altar of crystals and religious imagery in front of the DJ booth.

The chilly night ends with a warm sunrise over a still-dancing party, signaling the halfway point of the gathering. The surrounding natural environment is revealed to all the dancing participants, who begin to don sunglasses and shed too-warm layers of clothing. The music shamanically shifts to fit the mood of morning and post-peak psychedelic states, yet the beat never stops and the gathering may continue for many more hours – never really climaxing, but spiraling in a crescendo into higher plateaus of intensity.

Some Closing Remarks

The modern psy-trance movement is an experiment of consciousness and a ritual celebration of spirit, earth, and body. There is a strong morphogenetic field surrounding all humans creating a need for all-night trance dance, rhythms and spiritual ascension. Osho states that while “raving ... the dancer becomes the dance.” The list of traits describing mystical experiences given at the beginning of this paper could just as easily be confused with the list of subjective feelings associated with psy-trance gatherings. Many researchers are now studying rave culture as they come to recognize that it is highly meaningful and a spiritual practice for many people. Psy-trance gatherings are a synergistic combination of archaic techniques of consciousness expansion combined with intentional use of technology to alter consciousness, all taking place in a natural setting to the timing of significant cosmic events. It is archaic and modern wisdom merging for

consciousness ascension in a time when paradigms are evolving. Psy-trance gatherings are the new paradigm.¹⁶ Most gatherings attempt to spread the messages of ecology, interconnection between people and nature, and universal compassion. Psy-trance gatherings do not guarantee a mystical experience, however, they provide a ritualized setting along with ancient and modern technologies for consciousness expansion leaving it up to the participant to have the right intention to catalyze spiritual experiences. I will conclude with an interview of a twenty-four year old raver from Toronto by anthropologist Tim Olaveson (Olaveson 2004, 91-92):

MC: If I could have one wish, and it would be coming from my experience with raves, I would give everybody what I have been able to experience. One night. And they could take that information and do whatever they want with it. But, I can't believe that it's possible to live life and, not, wow, not have experienced that. Like, I fell fortunate ... And now I feel lucky, I feel lucky enough to have tasted it even. Because, Tim, like, there are moments, I mean, the world *stops*.

Tim: Is it the most intense experience you've ever had in your life?

MC: Oh my gosh. I can't believe I'm going to say this. Yes. I knew right away but I had to think about it just to make sure, because I kind of didn't believe it.

¹⁶ The new paradigm culture is sometimes referred to as the remix culture, where interconnection of authorless arts combine for the benefit of the whole. The principals of ecology, permaculture, and interconnected fractal levels of reality are themes of this new paradigm.

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