

Mind-Altering Substances

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Sundari: You asked what I think about the use of hallucinogenics with reference to Vedanta. As always, Vedanta is unambiguous about this, as it is about everything. I have never used drugs but I have witnessed many people use them, and most of them made claims about their power to produce insights, a common belief that is fervently held by many users of mind-altering substances. I saw the negative effects and the distortions these people started believing in after long-term use of whatever drug. I saw how the gap between the real and the apparently real widened for these people. Many of them never made it out of that gap.

The simple fact is that whatever outside means you use to help you gain what you already have will in the long run become an obstacle. There is no short cut to – and no chemical solution for – self-inquiry. The very impetus to imbibe a mind-altering substance is dualistic by its very nature. How can you gain something you already have, by whatever means? If you are looking for peace of mind, it is a well-known fact that all drugs, whether used sparingly or repeatedly, make the mind *tamasic* (dullness/denial). They seem to produce *sattva* (peace) if your mind is very *rajasic* (agitated or extroverted) when you take them, but it is not true. All mind-altering substances produce *tamas* masked as *sattva*.

The *tamas* slows down the mind and you experience relief and temporary clarity, but it is not *sattva*. The best drugs can do for you is to give you some idea that reality is not how it appears to be to “normal” sense perception. This is often why drugs, just like any far-out so-called “spiritual” experience, become a trap because you start believing that you have to do something to achieve this “altered state.” And then you go chasing after the experience. Awareness is not a state; it is who you are, and nothing will give it to you because you already are it. You just don’t know this and you have bought into many erroneous beliefs about what “enlightenment” is. This is true for everyone who starts to seek, because ignorance is the nature of the *dharma* field (the world we live in) and it is hardwired. Most of us are all loaded with stupid ideas when we come to Vedanta, and it is in your very best interest to drop everything you think you know. If you are serious about self-inquiry, then the first qualification you need, apart from a burning desire for liberation from bondage to objects, is faith in the scripture. The scripture is Vedanta and the subject matter is you, awareness. The scripture requires that you suspend all your beliefs and opinions – put them on the shelf. Once you have exposed the mind with great dedication to self-knowledge (the scripture) and committed yourself to self-inquiry, then you can look at your beliefs in the light of self-knowledge and not the other way around. If you try to make Vedanta fit into what you believe, you are not qualified for it. Put liberation on the back burner; maybe you will come to it later when you are tired of trying to make *samsara* work for you and have suffered enough.

It is true that everyone reacts to drugs differently and if used recreationally and infrequently it is no big deal. But you need to be very honest with yourself because a lot of users use the supposed “spiritual” insights to justify the use of drugs when the real reasons they are caught up in drugs is to escape from subjective problems. This type of person is not really interested in freedom and definitely not interested in cleaning out the sewer of the subconscious mind. India is full of phoney *sadhus* who

shout “*BOM SHIVA SHANKARA!*” when they hoist their *chillums*, and it all looks very romantic and spiritual – but basically, they are just pleasure-seeking drop-outs too lazy to do honest spiritual work. It is similar to the Tantric people who basically want to have sex and cook up a spiritual reason for it.

I am not saying that one can't gain insights while using mind-altering substances, whatever they are. If you have read James' autobiography you will see that he had many mind-blowing experiences on them. However, to rely on them is dangerous and builds very strong *vasanas* – binding habits, or conditioning. If you are going to use your drug of choice for recreation, that's fine, but don't imagine that you can use it for self-inquiry; you are fooling yourself.

Even if you do have some far-out experiences, they are just that, experiences. All experiences end, and unless the knowledge that they are meant to impart has been assimilated – in other words, that you are already whole and complete, non-dual, ever-present, unchanging awareness – all that the experience will give you is a big driving desire (*vasana*) to have another experience. It is a vicious circle and it will take you nowhere. If you knew that you are whole and complete, why would you seek an experience to experience this when you are experiencing it all the time?

If you are serious about Vedanta, this is where the fooling around stops. Vedanta requires that the mind is qualified or self-knowledge will not stick; you will not develop the qualifications chasing experience. Vedanta is for mature people who have firmly established that they need knowledge, not experience, to set them free of bondage to objects. This is the very foundation of Vedanta, and if you have not understood that self-inquiry will not work for you.

To begin self-inquiry, you need to have firmly established that there is nothing “out there” to gain; if you still believe that you can make the world (*samsara*, or the hypnosis of duality) work for you or that it has something to give you that you don't already have, you are not ready for Vedanta. Which is no big deal; there is no right or wrong and no judgment in this. Just be honest with yourself. If you get on the Vedanta bus, you must forget about experience and get serious about self-inquiry.

~ Chat soon and take care, Sundari