

Reflections on the concept of *altered state of consciousness*

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For over 25 years I have been lecturing, writing and teaching courses, at CIIS and elsewhere, on altered states of consciousness (ASCs) and their role in psychotherapy and spiritual practices. I came to think of ASCs as one of three paradigms for the psychological study of consciousness, the other two being *stages of consciousness development*, and *levels or worlds of consciousness*. In working with this paradigm of ASCs, I have learned from and been influenced by the research and writings of several colleagues, who are also friends, including Charles Tart, Stanley Krippner, Stanislav Grof, Kenneth Ring, Andrew Weil, Michael Harner, as well as other anthropologists studying cross-cultural variations in consciousness, students of Asian systems of yoga and meditation, and psychiatric researchers in the field of dissociative states.

The concept of altered states came into prominence in Western psychology in the 1950s and 1960s, primarily due to two paradigm breakthroughs. One was the discovery of rapid eye movements (REM) during dreaming sleep, which was the first time a recordable physiological variations could be reliably correlated with a subjective state of consciousness. The second breakthrough was the discovery of LSD and other psychedelic, “consciousness expanding” drugs, which meant that profoundly transformed and transforming states of consciousness, hitherto accessible only to a few individuals, could be induced with fairly high probability in larger numbers of people, given the right preparation, safeguards and set and setting. These discoveries of correlations between variations in neural functions and variations in subjective states of consciousness stimulated an enormous upsurge of research, which continues to this day, with profound applications in fields as diverse as health, learning, creativity and psycho-spiritual growth. One could argue that this approach – the study of associations between brain states and mind-states – has become the dominant paradigm in the scientific study of consciousness.

In my courses using the ASC paradigm, I have found it useful to distinguish between the content of a state of consciousness (the thoughts, images, feelings, perceptions and so forth), which can best be understood by looking at the set-and-setting, or intention preceding entry into the state; and the *trigger or catalyst* that brings about the

shift into a different mode of functioning. Well-known catalysts or triggers of ASCs are drugs, hypnotic inductions, meditative practices, shamanic drumming, music, nature, sex, and others, as well as the normal cyclical variations of brain chemistry that catalyze us into “falling asleep” or “waking up”. It’s also extremely useful to apply the ASC paradigm to understand psychopathological states that are contractive, fixated or dissociative, and have negative and toxic consequences for individuals, families and communities – including drug or behavioral addictions, fear (panic attacks), rage (fits of temper), psychotic breaks or episodes, depression, mania and others.

One issue that produces uneasiness in most people when considering or discussing the concept of an “altered state”, is the seeming implication that “altered” is itself abnormal. How then could we talk about ASCs being therapeutic, creative, or spiritual growth enhancing? In my courses, I’ve attempted to overcome this cognitive prejudice by pointing to the fact that all human beings are extremely familiar with the normal, life-long, profoundly altered variations in state we call sleeping, waking and dreaming.

Some writers have attempted to overcome the negative presuppositions associated with “altered states”, by proposing terms such as “alternate state”, or “non-ordinary state”, or (as in a recently published APA handbook) “anomalous experiences”. But this educational strategy disguises the point that some alterations of state are extremely ordinary, usual and familiar. Should “dreaming” be considered a “non-ordinary state”? How about being “drunk”, or “depressed” – aren’t those rather ordinary states. There is a whole spectrum of states of consciousness, from the familiar to the anomalous extreme, and this is true for both positive, expansive, health and knowledge enhancing states, as well as negative, contractive, unhealthy and destructive states. Whether the state or is normal or abnormal is, in any case, a culturally and historically relative judgement imposed on experience, and thus, an academic question of no particular significance.

I’ve finally come to understand my own lingering discomfort with the concept of “altered state”, besides the fact that it disguises the distinction between ordinary and non-ordinary states. It has to do with the passive construction “altered”, which suggests that something was done to you by an external agency. A drug-induced state seemingly supports this view. But we have to remember – the individual *chooses* to ingest the drug

(except in certain morally reprehensible and illegal situations), for a certain purpose, with the intention to alter consciousness. A person goes to sleep with a conscious intention toward rest and restoration of energies. We may also intentionally incubate a dream for problem solving.

In order to use the expansive, positive states constructively for our own well-being, creativity and growth, we need to be able to recognize the state we're in, and how to navigate through it in order to learn. For example, shamans learn to use the shamanic drumming journey state for the purposes of obtaining knowledge for healing, problem solving and guidance. Yogis and meditators practice their skills in order to gain insight. I believe that this is how Buddhist mindfulness training may be understood. With the negative, contractive states, our main concern, for ourselves and for others with whom we may be working, is to identify the state we're in, recognize how it's affecting us (our thinking, our perception, our behavior), and how we can navigate our way through it and beyond it into healthier, life-affirming states. I believe such an attitude would be consistent with William James' insightful aphorism: "my experience is what I choose to attend to." By becoming more conscious (mindful) of the nature of the state we're in at any given moment, we can deploy attention in different ways, and thus enhance the range of choices we can make, and more fully take responsibility for the impact of those choices on others and in our world.

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