

Shulgin Seminar Session 2

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Introduction: Three Programmatic Texts by Shulgin

The material we have prepared for today focuses on three statements of philosophical importance made by Alexander Shulgin. These are found in two of his early texts—[*Some Qualitative Properties of the Psychotomimetics*](#) and [*The Chemical Catalysis of Altered States of Consciousness*](#), both written in the 1970s—and in his famous 1983 [*Drugs of Perception*](#) lecture from the Santa Barbara conference, later reprinted in abbreviated form in *TiHKAL*. While we've suggested some additional readings, these three programmatic texts are of utmost importance. They represent an attempt to define a general model for understanding not only the *quantitative*, but also the *qualitative* effects of various psychedelics.

Framing the Discussion: What, Why, and How

To guide our discussion, I suggest we address three core questions: *What?* *Why?* and *How?* Let me present the handout we've prepared. These questions will help us structure our engagement with Shulgin's texts.

First: *What*—what is the nature of the change induced in the human subject through the use of psychedelics? This is the focus of the qualitative analysis developed in Shulgin's two early texts.

Second: *Why*—what is the motivation for inducing these changes? Why undertake this research in the first place? This question is addressed most directly in the *Drugs of Perception* lecture, where Shulgin reflects on the purpose behind his work.

Third: *How*—how does one actually carry out this research? I propose we explore this question by examining a topic we haven't yet discussed: Shulgin's method of self-experimentation and the research group he assembled to carry out this work.

These are the three questions I propose we ask and attempt to answer today, using these three key texts as our foundation. It was fascinating to see how Sasha conceived of the effects of these substances—particularly in terms of perception and the senses, and thus the interface between external reality and internal consciousness. I think we can explore these themes further.

The 1983 *Drugs of Perception* Lecture: Psychedelics as Tools and Vocabulary

Before we dive into the first question, let's take a brief visual detour and look at some [photos from the 1983 Santa Barbara conference](#), which are archived on the website. These images aren't widely known and show a younger Shulgin alongside other notable figures from the event. There are several interesting photos, including: Albert Hofmann, A young Rick Doblin, Sasha Shulgin with Ann Shulgin, and Jonathan Ott in the background. This is the conference where Shulgin

gave his now-famous *Drugs of Perception* lecture and publicly announced the discovery of 2C-B. In many ways, this event marked his rise to prominence in the psychedelic research community.

The *Drugs of Perception* lecture is, in many ways, his programmatic manifesto, in which he characterizes psychedelics through two core metaphors: as *tools*, and as a kind of *vocabulary*. Shulgin introduces two core metaphors for understanding psychedelics:

- Psychedelics as tools – Instruments for accessing and altering consciousness.
- Psychedelics as a vocabulary – A set of symbolic forms or “languages” through which the mind can communicate—both inwardly and outwardly.

These two metaphors—psychedelics as tools and as language—are central. Psychedelics, for Shulgin, are not just pharmacological agents but means of communication: with one's inner world, with others, with the unconscious, and with the very fabric of reality.

Question 1: *What Happens?* The Nature of Psychedelic Experience

This first question—what is the change induced by psychedelics?—focuses on the transformation in perception, emotion, and cognition. The two early texts emphasize qualitative dimensions: not merely the intensity or duration of an experience, but its character. What is the nature of the state that is entered? How does one's relation to the world, the body, and the self shift? This is where Shulgin begins to articulate a phenomenology of psychedelic states—something that later writers and researchers would attempt to build on in more formal terms. We will return to this later, having discussed the remaining two questions.

Question 2: *Why Do This Work?*

This is the question Shulgin addresses explicitly in the *Drugs of Perception* lecture: *Why* did he spend more than 25 years designing, preparing, and evaluating new psychotropic substances? He traces this quest back to the late 1960s, around the time he first tried mescaline.

Shulgin asks: “Why have I, for the last 25 years or so, conducted a persistent search into the design, preparation, and evaluation of new psychotropic compounds?”

The psychotomimetic model – The idea that these substances mimic psychosis and are thus valuable for studying it. While partially true, this is not compelling enough to explain a lifetime of dedication.

Shulgin proposes two conventional answers, both of which he ultimately rejects as insufficient, even if they are superficially valid.

1. The psychotomimetic answer: The first is that these substances, once called “psychotomimetics,” mimic psychotic states. Studying them, therefore, might help us understand mental illness. While plausible, this answer doesn’t fully capture his motivation. The idea that these substances mimic psychosis and are thus valuable for studying it. While partially true, this is not compelling enough to explain a lifetime of dedication.
2. The biochemical answer: The second standard answer appeals to biochemistry: many psychedelics fall into the categories of phenethylamines and tryptamines, structurally similar to neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin. By studying them, we might learn more about how the brain works. The structural similarity between psychedelics and neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin (phenethylamines and tryptamines) might justify research into brain function. Again, true, but incomplete, not a deep personal motivation.

For Shulgin, the real answer lies elsewhere. He says his goal is to create *tools*—or, more specifically, to develop a *vocabulary*. This vocabulary would allow human beings to consciously communicate with the interior of their own minds. He calls it a “vocabulary of awareness.” Through this metaphor, he expands the notion of communication—not just between people, but between the conscious self and the unconscious, between the physical brain and what he calls the spirit, and even between distinct, fragmented aspects of the psyche.

Psychedelics thus become instruments for bridging inner divisions. They enable communication between the conscious and unconscious mind, the brain and the spirit, the physical and the spiritual, even between the self and transcendence. This is the essence of Shulgin’s deeper motivation: to seek a form of enlightenment through expanded modes of communication.

Reflections from the 70s: Science as Communication

But this is not the only explanation he offers. Earlier, in his 1970s texts, he frames his motivation in more classically scientific terms. There, he argues that altered states of consciousness are part of the full spectrum of human experience, and that to reject or ignore them is to abandon any genuine scientific inquiry into the nature of reality. For Shulgin, *science* must include all possible states of being, or it is incomplete.

Yet even in these earlier writings, the idea of communication reappears. He insists that knowledge is not a fixed body of facts or a set of systematic propositions. Instead, it is a *degree of communication* with reality. Knowledge is not something we possess—it is something we *do*. It is relational, participatory, and dynamic.

Thus, already in the 1970s, well before the *Drugs of Perception* lecture, Shulgin was laying the foundation for his later ideas. He envisioned a kind of *active knowledge*, where understanding

arises not from abstract theorizing, but from lived, perceptual, communicative engagement with consciousness itself.

This claim was already present in Shulgin's early 1970s text, *Some Qualitative Aspects of Psychotomimetics*, where he emphasizes that scientific inquiry is not about assembling a static system of facts or compiling a set of definitive theorems about reality. Rather, science is a quest—a continuous search. In this view, the scientist is not merely a technician or a collector of data, but a seeker, a discoverer. One engages in this pursuit not for practical outcomes alone, but for the sake of questioning itself, for the love of knowledge.

As Aristotle famously opens the *Metaphysics*: “All men by nature desire to know.” This desire for understanding, for uncovering what is yet unknown, becomes the highest aspiration. For Shulgin, this search for knowledge is deeply personal and existential. It is the quest to confront the unknown, to discover, to illuminate what lies beyond ordinary experience. Psychedelics, in this framework, are not merely experimental tools; they are instruments for revealing dimensions of consciousness and reality that remain otherwise inaccessible.

These substances open up not just hidden cognitive states but entirely new ways of relating—to oneself, to others, to the unconscious, and even to reality itself. They offer access to domains that evade conventional education or scientific instrumentation. For Shulgin, psychedelics unveil realms that aren't simply hidden but structurally occluded—locked away until the right key is used.

Urgency and Motivation

One recurring theme throughout Shulgin's writings is a profound sense of urgency. As one speaker noted, he often expressed a feeling that "there is very little time," and that the work must be done as quickly as possible. This urgency wasn't just about the pace of scientific innovation, but about an imbalance in the world: humanity, he believed, had become dangerously overdeveloped in external technological capacities while remaining underdeveloped in internal, psychological, and spiritual understanding.

The inner development lagged behind, and Shulgin saw psychedelics as catalytic tools to help redress that imbalance. They could facilitate a deeper self-awareness, allowing individuals to make more conscious choices about how they use the powerful tools already available in the external world.

This motivation was not abstract. It was deeply felt, and consistently emphasized throughout his work. There's a repeated sense of wonder and necessity: once one realizes that it's possible to fine-tune human consciousness, why *wouldn't* one devote oneself to exploring that frontier?

The Drive to Discover

Shulgin offers many reasons for his work, ranging from poetic to rigorously scientific. One of his recurring metaphors compares the drive for exploration to climbing Mount Everest: “Because it’s there.” But he is quick to clarify—this is not a sufficient reason. It’s the easy answer, and ultimately not the true one.

Instead, he points to the exhilaration of encountering the unknown, of creating something that has never existed before. There is the excitement of being the first: the first to synthesize a new molecule, the first to experience its effects, the first to document a unique state of consciousness. He likens this to artistic creation—the act of composing a new piece of music or painting something entirely original.

In one particularly striking passage, he describes the moment of discovery as a mutual encounter. “You’re meeting something you don’t know—and it is meeting something it doesn’t know: you.” This isn’t just the manipulation of an object by a subject; it’s a kind of dialogue, a relationship between subjectivities.

Of course, he is also fascinated by the mechanisms themselves: how can just a few milligrams of a white powder produce such profound changes in perception, cognition, and consciousness? This mystery—how such a small substance can catalyze such massive internal shifts—is one of the core scientific motivations for his work.

Knowledge as Communication

Already in his early texts, Shulgin presents a radical epistemological claim: that knowledge is not merely a body of information but a *mode of communication*. Science, in his view, is not about forming static theories but about establishing new relationships—with the world, with oneself, with reality. Knowledge becomes a form of connection, of *communion* even, rather than a dispassionate cataloging of facts.

In this sense, psychedelics are not only investigative tools—they are also a *vocabulary*. They form a language for communicating with aspects of the mind that are otherwise inaccessible. This includes communication between conscious and unconscious layers of the self, between the brain and the spirit, and even with what might be termed transcendental or mystical domains. They allow for a dialogue between fragmented parts of the psyche, aiming toward integration, healing, and understanding.

Beyond the Scientific: Personal and Spiritual Motives

Shulgin lists many motivations, ranging from scientific to deeply personal and even spiritual. Among them:

- Psychedelics are tools for learning, for introspection, and for personal inquiry.

- They serve as instruments for therapeutic transformation.
- They offer religious or mystical insight.
- They catalyze internal revolutions—radical shifts in how one understands oneself and the world.
- They provide access to levels of reality that feel “more real than real,” echoing Platonic notions of a deeper, truer reality beyond sensory appearances.

This Platonic idea—of a more fundamental reality beyond what we see and touch—recurs throughout Shulgin’s writings. He speaks of psychedelics as granting insight into these deeper structures, thereby allowing for a reevaluation and reassembly of the self. This reinterpretation, or internal reconfiguration, becomes the philosophical heart of his project.

Question 3: *How?* The Self-Experiment

Having explored the *why*, we now arrive at the *how*. What was Shulgin’s method?

Primarily: self-experimentation. He believed that the effects of psychedelics could only be truly understood by experiencing them firsthand. Unlike many psychopharmacologists who test on animals, Shulgin insisted that these compounds act on domains unique to the human mind—on perception, thought, memory, and emotion.

This belief led him to conduct extensive self-experiments, which he documented with meticulous care. His goal was not only to describe the effects but to explore the structures of consciousness they revealed. These experiments were not solitary, either: he assembled a trusted research group, a circle of close friends and collaborators who would take the compounds together, observe, report, and reflect.

In *The Chemical Catalysis of Altered States of Consciousness*, Shulgin explains that other drugs may act on sensory or physiological systems, but psychedelics act on the *mind*. Therefore, they must be studied *by* the mind. There is no substitute. No machine, no animal model, no behavioral test can replace the subjective depth of human introspection in this domain.

Shulgin’s Method: Self-Experimentation and Scientific Rigor

The drugs that Sasha was most concerned with—psychedelics—act uniquely on the mind. Because of this, he believed the only true way to study their effects was to take them himself. His approach was always to start with the smallest possible amount, something he could reasonably assume to be inactive. Of course, there's no certainty with unknown substances, which is why he always began with minuscule doses. There was simply no other safe way to do it.

Once you're working with a completely unknown compound, you have to begin with the absolute minimum. Even then, you're never fully certain—that's the inherent risk of unknown territory. You don't know until you try, just like Hofmann with LSD. He had no idea that the dose he took would be so active—it was in a completely different potency range than the drugs known at the time.

Another complicating factor: some compounds, like DOB, can have a latency of three and a half hours before the first alert appears. That makes it even more unpredictable. So Shulgin would take a small amount, wait a couple of days to avoid tolerance, then increase the dosage by about 50%—very small, gradual steps. At each stage, he'd carefully monitor for any effects, especially side effects like convulsions. If anything concerning emerged, he'd stop completely.

He was extremely careful. No rushing. No need to explore every possible compound. There were too many fascinating avenues already—why not focus on the ones that seemed promising?

From Self to Group: Stages of Testing

If a compound passed the initial self-experimentation phase and seemed predictable, only then would he give it to others. First, his wife Ann. Then, if both of their responses aligned, he would offer it to his research group. If it turned out to be unpredictable or dangerous, the substance was immediately rejected.

There were entire classes of substances he was wary of. He was primarily interested in psychedelic effects—not just any kind of activity. This becomes clear in *Bucha*, though often indirectly. He never really lays it out as a single, unified statement, but it's there, scattered across the text.

The 2,4,5 Discovery and the Classic Ladies

One of Sasha's major realizations was the power of the 2,4,5 substitution on the phenethylamine ring. At the time, the better-known pattern came from mescaline, which was 3,4,5. But the 2,4,5 pattern turned out to be 10 or even 100 times more potent. This was revolutionary.

Early on, he synthesized DOM (STP), which was drastically more potent than anything like methylene, though he didn't immediately understand why. That led to his creation of the "Ten Classic Ladies"—a set of compounds where he systematically replaced each of the molecule's ten hydrogens with a methyl group. These were named after classical female figures: Ariadne, Beatrice, and others. Some of these compounds were synthesized long ago but still haven't been tested. He mentions in one of the books that some have sat untouched for over 13 years.

Like cannabis, this area of chemistry remained surprisingly underdeveloped, likely because of the taboo. Sasha ventured into many early “hallways,” as he put it, only to find some were dead ends. But he kept returning to what mattered: psychedelic effect.

Disinterest in Non-Psychedelic Compounds

There are places in *Bucha* where Sasha admits he might be ignoring some valuable compounds simply because they weren’t psychedelic. He’d sometimes test a new molecule, find mild intellectual stimulation or empathy but no visuals or deep shifts, and move on. Some reports describe compounds like LF as pleasant—no anorexia, no insomnia, general well-being—but Sasha would still shelve them. His focus was narrow and intense: if a compound didn’t offer a distinctly psychedelic experience, he wasn’t interested.

And again, he often abandoned whole families of substances. [The Aleph series](#), for instance, was unpredictable. One person might be overstimulated at 2 mg, another might feel nothing at 7 mg. If the response was erratic—not only between individuals but within the same person from day to day—that was unacceptable. TMA-6 is a good example: clearly active, but with no visuals, no time distortion. Sasha dismissed it as uninteresting. But then, in a group trial, one participant went to the bathroom and the wallpaper shook hands with him. That was too unpredictable. Sasha wasn’t interested in that kind of chaos.

Summary of the Method

To summarize his methodology:

1. Start Small: Begin with extremely low doses, spaced out over days to avoid tolerance.
2. Observe Effects: Gradually increase dosage, monitor carefully for effects and side effects.
3. Share with Ann: Once a threshold dose is identified and considered safe, test it with his wife.
4. Group Testing: Only after that, test it with a trusted research group (6–11 members).
5. Criteria for Rejection: If the compound showed unpredictable effects, large variability in response, or lacked compelling psychedelic properties, it was discarded.

There was also a philosophical component. In the 1978 *Playboy* article *Future Highs*, it was described that Shulgin would often find inspiration for new compounds within the hallucinations themselves. The experience might reveal a pattern that suggested his next synthesis. He considered this process to be the epitome of informed consent—self-guided, rigorous, and personal.

Peter Stafford, in his review of *PiHKAL*, described Sasha’s technique as “impeccably traditional”: test a new compound every other day, double the dose until an effect is clearly

established, then return to baseline and analyze. This cycle—self, Ann, group—was methodical and consistent.

Sasha believed that unless a compound was physically safe, mentally predictable, and offered more than mere sensory entertainment, it wasn't worth pursuing.

This research group consisted of about a dozen close friends who volunteered over the course of 30 years to participate in Sasha Shulgin's compound tests. This was a key part of his method—not just self-experimentation, but shared experiences that were then discussed, compared, and carefully documented in lab notebooks that have been preserved.

It's important to note the intimacy and trust within the group. These were friends who were open with one another and willing to help in any situation, whether related to a drug experience or everyday life. This sense of trust provided an essential foundation for the set and setting of the experiments—typically taking place in homes or gardens among people who were some of their closest companions.

A key concept in Shulgin's methodology was what he called “double conscious,” a term coined by Gordon Alles, an early researcher in amphetamines and TMA compounds. This meant that both the subject and the researcher knew which substance was being taken and at what dose, as well as any prior observations or effects. This contrasts with the “double-blind” model common in scientific research, where neither the subject nor the experimenter knows what substance is being administered. Shulgin believed that with psychedelics—substances that affect uniquely human aspects of consciousness—this level of awareness was crucial.

Question 1: *What?* Quantitative Differences: The Shulgin Rating Scale

Mark recently shared some helpful notes and videos—particularly from the Beckley Foundation YouTube channel—featuring Sasha and Ann discussing the Shulgin Rating Scale. This scale is often misunderstood as being simply “+1 to +4,” but it's actually more nuanced:

- – (minus): No effect
- ± (minus-plus): Barely perceptible effect
- +: Clear but subtle effects; easily ignored
- ++: Definite effects; not easily ignored, but manageable
- +++: Full engagement; the subject is immersed in the experience
- ++++ (optional/rare): A transcendental or life-changing experience, often outside the boundaries of ordinary states of consciousness

These ratings are not static—they may shift throughout the experience. One might start at +1, rise to +2, and drop back again. It's not a rating of the drug itself, but a reflection of the subjective state at any given point.

Shulgin also noted that +3 experiences were the most revealing—often when the full nature of a compound became clear. And importantly, he didn't want to give his wife something that was either toxic or boring—there had to be something uniquely worthwhile before sharing it further.

Question 1: *What?* The Structure-Activity Relationships (SAR)

Much of Shulgin's work focused on what's known in chemistry as Structure-Activity Relationships (SAR)—exploring how changes to the structure of a molecule affect its activity. This involves asking questions like:

- What happens if we add a methyl group here?
- What if we extend the carbon chain by one atom?
- What if we replace hydrogens with fluorines?

These questions define the maze-like, often obsessive nature of psychedelic chemistry. One small change can turn a compound from inactive to profoundly active—or from harmless to unpredictable.

Sasha wasn't taking LSD every other day—he was testing minuscule adjustments to known molecules, trying to understand the effect of each alteration. The goal wasn't to trip, but to *analyze*—to identify visual effects, cognitive effects, emotional resonance, and physical safety.

Question 1: *What?* Qualitative Differences Among Compounds

Shulgin insisted that psychedelics do not all lead to the same endpoint. While some early thinkers assumed all such compounds led to the same mystical core, Shulgin argued that structural differences often resulted in profoundly different effects. The discovery of MDMA, for example, marked a turning point—it wasn't visionary in the traditional sense, yet it was psychologically active and therapeutically valuable.

He made serious attempts to classify these compounds. His early papers—such as *Qualitative Comments on the Psychedelic Experience* and *The Chemical Catalysis of the Psychedelic Experience* (1970 and 1975)—were among the first to propose a detailed topology or “map of the mind,” based on experiential data.

He drew a major distinction between:

- Phenethylamines (e.g., mescaline, DOM), which he said were more visually oriented, and

- Tryptamines (e.g., psilocybin, DMT), which leaned more toward internal psychological insight and symbolic content.

This dichotomy—visual versus interpretive—was just one of many qualitative distinctions he explored over the decades.

Structure-Activity Relationship and Qualitative Effects

One of the central distinctions in Shulgin's work is that of structure-activity relationships—the study of how changes in molecular structure result in different psychoactive effects. But beyond structural concerns, he also made a number of qualitative distinctions between the effects of psychedelic compounds.

These include categories such as:

- Intoxication
- Introspection
- Escape
- Entertainment

Of these, the one Shulgin valued most was *introspection*—the genuinely psychedelic effect—not mere intoxication or escapism.

Effects of Psychedelics: Domains of Impact

In his early publications, especially the 1970 paper, Shulgin identifies three distinct domains that psychedelics can affect:

1. The senses (e.g., visual, auditory distortions)
2. The body (e.g., physical sensations, proprioception)
3. The psyche (e.g., thoughts, emotions, memories, insights)

This tripartite distinction—senses, soma, psyche—is not entirely self-evident, as the body and the senses are often interwoven. Still, Shulgin felt it useful as a conceptual framework.

Later, in his 1975 paper, he introduces another important categorization—this time based on the quality of recall from psychedelic states.

- Some substances induce amnesia: the experiences or insights gained are not retained or remembered. Shulgin found these compounds (e.g., scopolamine, atropine, certain deliriant) unhelpful in psychonautic or therapeutic research.
- Others induce perceptual or conceptual changes: these are more valuable for insight, transformation, and integration.

- Some compounds also provide access to past memories, even seemingly lost or repressed ones.

Shulgin gave priority to substances that promoted cognitive insight and conceptual shifts, while still valuing those that altered perception or unveiled unconscious material.

The Question of Unity: One Interior, Many Doors

Shulgin was often asked whether all these compounds led to the same place. His answer was characteristically nuanced:

- Yes, in one sense: they all lead to the same *interior*—the self, the deep mind.
- But also no, because each compound opens a *different door*, a unique perspective on the same interior reality.

This is why he stressed the importance of exploring variations among substances: each opens a different portal to what is already within you. The psychedelic journey is not about going somewhere else, but about discovering what is already present in oneself—just hidden or forgotten.

Generalizations vs. Specificity

While Shulgin made certain broad distinctions—such as tryptamines tending toward conceptual and interpretive effects, and phenethylamines being more visual and sensory—he always acknowledged exceptions. The better approach, in his view, was to treat each compound individually, study it deeply, and only then begin to draw patterns.

This careful, individualized study was the hallmark of his life's work. By treating each compound as a unique case, he built a body of knowledge from the bottom up—from specific experience to general insight.

Unified Reality and the Philosophy of Experience

Shulgin also held a metaphysical conviction that aligns with ancient monism: there is only one single, infinite reality, and everything—real or imagined, internal or external—is part of it. This idea recalls the ontological stance of Parmenides and other monists: there is no duality of being and non-being; whatever is experienced, is.

Thus, distinctions like “inner” and “outer,” “subconscious” and “transcendent,” are only different *perspectives* on the same unified field of reality. Psychedelics, in this view, do not create illusions but reveal aspects of a deeper ontological truth.

Primal Amnesia and Anamnesis

A profound theory in Shulgin's thinking is what might be called primal amnesia—the idea that we are born with access to a full reality, but that, over time and for evolutionary reasons, this access becomes inhibited or repressed. This theory echoes Aldous Huxley's "reducing valve" model of the brain, itself inspired by C.D. Broad and Henri Bergson, and ultimately grounded in survival-based theories of perception.

Shulgin suggested that psychedelics act as chemical triggers for anamnesis—a term borrowed from Plato, meaning *recollection*. In this framework:

- The altered state is not "new," but a *recovered* state.
- The insights are not *invented*, but *remembered*—they were always there, occluded by everyday consciousness.
- Psychedelics thus restore access to a forgotten mental territory, offering a cognitive advantage through the dissolution of ego-boundaries, inhibition, and defensive mechanisms.

This *anamnesic function* of psychedelics is what makes them so important—not just for recreation, but for self-knowledge, healing, and transformation. This theme appears already in Blake's dictum, famously used by Huxley as the title for his book *The Doors of Perception*:

"If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is—infinite."

But in ordinary life, perception is narrowed. The mind focuses much like a camera lens: through a small aperture. If the lens were fully open, the film—or in this case, consciousness—would be overexposed. Nothing would be clearly visible. This metaphor of closed perceptual doors illustrates the necessity of limitation: for the mind to remain intentional, directed toward specific objects, and able to perform practical functions, it must restrict its field of perception.

Psychedelic states shift this mode. They open those doors, widening the field of perception beyond what is normally accessible. And this shift has concrete effects, beginning with the senses.

Sensory Effects: Amplification, Distortion, and Alienation

Shulgin identifies a wide range of sensory changes caused by psychedelics. Visual distortions are most commonly reported: alterations of size, shape, color, and motion. These distortions often create a sense of estrangement or alienation—what Brecht and others in the 20th century called the effect of alienation, *Verfremdungseffekt*—where familiar objects appear alien or defamiliarized. This effect, while unsettling, can also have deep cognitive and philosophical implications.

Although vision is primary, other senses are also affected:

- Touch: Rare, but some substances modify tactile sensations.
- Hearing: Certain compounds—especially DiPT (diisopropyltryptamine)—create auditory distortions. With DiPT, auditory frequencies are perceived in a nonlinear, downward-shifted manner, distorting music and environmental sound in unexpected ways.
- Synesthesia: Cross-sensory experiences, such as “seeing” sounds or “feeling” colors, are sometimes reported.
- Taste and Sexual Sensation: CBS is mentioned by Shulgin as enhancing both gustatory and sexual sensations, suggesting a broader, embodied reach of psychedelic sensory alteration.

These changes can be understood in two broad categories:

1. Distortion – A departure from normal sensory processing.
2. Amplification – An enhancement or deepening of perception.

The unpredictability of these effects highlights the need for open-ended inquiry. As one speaker notes, the discovery of DiPT—a compound that almost exclusively alters auditory perception—was wholly unexpected. It exemplifies the value of exploration for its own sake. The goal isn't necessarily to create predictable outcomes, but to see what is possible when the mind is perturbed in subtle, targeted ways.

Somatic Effects: Depersonalization and the Journey of the Soul

Beyond sensory perception, psychedelics induce distinct somatic changes—bodily effects that are not necessarily tied to the five senses. For Shulgin, the most significant somatic transformation is the feeling of depersonalization: a separation of mind from body, or brain from soma.

This detachment evokes ancient imagery—the flight of the soul in various Platonic and Neoplatonic texts, where the soul grows wings and leaves the body to ascend toward higher knowledge. Classical terms such as *psychanodia* (the soul's journey) and *anabasis* (ascent) describe this phenomenon.

Where earlier generations interpreted such language metaphorically, the psychedelic experience gives literal form to these ancient ideas. It demonstrates that soul-flight is not merely an allegory, but an experiential reality—one that can be triggered chemically.

This perceived detachment is not simply about hallucination; it represents a reorientation of consciousness, a fundamental shift in the sense of self. The body no longer feels like the locus of

awareness. One speaker connects this shift with altered time perception, which Shulgin also places within the somatic domain. The body and the sense of temporal flow become estranged, no longer the familiar anchoring structures of daily life.

Open-Ended Inquiry and the Frontiers of Neurochemical Understanding

This entire field hinges on an openness to the unexpected. Shulgin's work, emerging before the discovery of many neurotransmitter systems (like the endocannabinoid system in 1996), was conducted with very limited receptor data—only two serotonin receptors were widely known at the time. Today, there are over fourteen identified, each with distinct functions and interactions.

The complexity of brain chemistry makes generalizations difficult. While patterns emerge—tryptamines tending toward conceptual effects, phenethylamines toward sensory—there are always exceptions. That's why, as one speaker observes, Shulgin's genius lies in his commitment to understanding each molecule individually. Only by cataloging and comparing precise subjective responses can broader theories begin to emerge.

Psychedelics are tools—not hammers with fixed functions, but probes designed to perturb the human mind, subtly and specifically, to illuminate its structure. The goal is not just therapeutic or mystical but cognitive: an increased capacity for mental work, new modes of insight, and a deepened understanding of consciousness itself.

Transcending the Somatic Self: Ecstasy, Death, and the Philosophical Tradition

At the heart of the psychedelic experience lies a profound somatic shift: the separation of self from the body, or what we might call depersonalization. This experience—whether framed as a mystical rapture, a near-death state, or a shedding of personal identity—has long been central to religious and philosophical traditions. It is often described as a kind of *dying before death*, a phrase that echoes the Socratic assertion that “to philosophize is to learn how to die.”

In this state, the individual is no longer rooted in the physical self—no longer identified with the body, the personality, or even the autobiographical sense of identity. What remains is a perceiving subjectivity that seems to emerge from a different, non-somatic domain. This is what makes the experience so radical: it reveals the possibility of a perspective beyond the body, a state of being untethered from the physical organism. Whether we call this *ecstasy*, *ego death*, or *soul-flight*, the phenomenon appears across traditions and texts. It is not a poetic metaphor but a reproducible psychological state, chemically induced yet philosophically resonant.

Mental Effects: Eidetic Imagery and Noetic Insight

Following the somatic transformation, the psychedelic experience unfolds on a mental or psychic level, and it is here that the most dramatic and least classifiable phenomena emerge.

As Shulgin notes, these experiences resist neat taxonomies. They include:

- Closed-eye visuals (CEVs)
- Open-eye visuals (OEVs)
- Eidetic or mental imagery
- Cognitive insights and conceptual reorientations
- Non-sensory, non-bodily awareness

At their deepest, these experiences offer access to a mental domain that feels more *real* than waking consciousness. This "hyper-reality" recalls the noetic world described by Plato and Aristotle—the realm of *nous*, or pure intellect, mind. In the psychedelic state, this realm is not an abstract idea, but a lived experience. The inner vision or *noēsis* described in classical texts—mental seeing, insight without sensory mediation—is reenacted through the psychedelic experience. It is no longer merely a philosophical hypothesis, but an empirically given phenomenon.

The Eidetic Domain: Inner Vision and Cultural Patterning

The term eidetic derives from the Greek *eidōlon*, meaning image or form, and has been used to describe these vivid inner visions. Some researchers proposed classifying the compounds that induce such images as *eidetica*—substances that provoke mental imagery or visualizations that are not bound to external stimuli.

These visual and eidetic experiences can take many forms:

- Geometric patterns, arabesques, or intricate mandalas
- Recollections, often vivid relivings of past events
- Fictional scenes, dreamlike yet emotionally real
- Cultural motifs, such as those found in the Shipibo-Conibo or Tucano traditions

Shulgin and others note that some indigenous visual arts—ornaments, tapestries, ritual designs—are direct replications of these internal experiences. In such cultures, inner visions are not merely private events but shared symbolic languages, woven into the very fabric of social and artistic life. Crucially, both closed-eye and open-eye visuals often disclose another world—a domain imposed upon or coexisting with waking reality. And this revealed world is often perceived as more real than ordinary experience, echoing what William James and other thinkers describe as a hallmark of religious or mystical insight. As Plato might say, it reveals the *ontōs on*, the “really real,” beyond the shadows of sense perception.

Eidetics and The Aleph Compounds

Descriptions of such effects can be found in Shulgin's earliest work and were expanded in the "Lab Book" series, particularly in [discussions of the compound Aleph](#), first explored by Shulgin in 1975. Aleph was remarkable in producing almost exclusively conceptual shifts, without the distracting "entertainments" of color and pattern often associated with other psychedelics, an effect later explored by Shulgin in various tryptamine compounds. Shulgin writes on the Aleph: "Aleph-state is a state is the state, beginning of the alpha-bet" (Labbook 2, p. 300). The name, originating possibly either from the [short story by Borges](#), where it stands for "a point in space that contains all other points. Anyone who gazes into it can see everything in the universe from every angle simultaneously" (which strikingly resembles a description of Shulgin's ++++), or from [the kabbalah](#), where it represents "the infinite nature, and the oneness, of God". This drew a direct line to Aldous Huxley's quest: an entheogen that would strip away surface illusions and guide the mind to its source. For Shulgin, Aleph and similar compounds represented this ideal—tools for direct philosophical inquiry.

The Ineffable: Insight Beyond Language

And yet, despite the specificity of these effects, there remains one defining characteristic of the psychedelic experience: ineffability.

The states it produces cannot be fully described. They elude language, resist paraphrase, and remain irreducible to discourse. Any verbal description is secondary—a shadow of the thing itself.

As several traditions affirm, the highest truths are not spoken but seen—not seen with the eyes, but with the inner eye, the *nous*. The psychedelic state grants access to these truths, but only in forms that demand interpretation, reflection, and transformation. It is knowledge that is not delivered, but revealed—*anagnorisis*, not instruction.

These experiences provoke questions rather than answers. They compel the subject to restructure their understanding of the self, of consciousness, and of reality itself.

Toward a Philosophy of Psychedelic Insight

In this sense, psychedelics are not just substances but tools—for inquiry, transformation, and perhaps even therapy. They offer insights that are:

- Cognitive, in the sense that they provide a kind of knowledge
- Non-discursive, because they transcend ordinary language
- Interpretative, since they must be understood and integrated
- Relational, as they connect the self with something beyond itself

The insight is not a static truth but a process—an encounter with meaning that demands personal engagement. It is a mental event that, while ineffable, serves as a catalyst for revaluation, self-examination, and growth.

Final Remarks and Future Directions

As the discussion draws to a close, the participants reflect on Shulgin's contribution: a vision of psychedelics not merely as biochemical curiosities, but as keys to mental and philosophical exploration. The mention of [Aleph](#), the archival footage of Sasha and Ann, and the continued interest in these questions all point to a rich legacy yet to be fully explored.

Plans are made to reconvene in two weeks, with hopes to further investigate specific compounds and share relevant materials, including [Shulgin videos from the Beckley Foundation archives](#).

As always, the invitation remains open—to inquiry, to reflection, and to experience.