

Psychedelic Sundays: Entheogens



Psychedelics are re-emerging into public awareness in a big way. Scientific studies that were once taboo or illegal are now being performed and shared around the world. These studies show that most psychedelics are not only safe and non-habit forming, but also have incredible healing potential when used in the proper context. This puts psychedelics at the forefront of cutting edge research on treating conditions like PTSD and addiction.

Psychedelics are slowly losing their stigma in popular culture thanks to television, films, podcasts, and YouTube videos that portray them in a non-sensationalized and positive light.

What is the Meaning of Psychedelic? Different Terms for Entheogens and What They Mean

Hallucinogen. Entheogen. Psychedelic. These words are used to describe Mind-altering substances like psilocybin, ayahuasca, and ibogaine, and while they are very similar, they do have some important and illuminating distinctions. Each of these terms describes the effects of consciousness alteration in a slightly different way, with some pointing to dangers and frivolity, and others describing revelation or even contact with the divine. The true meaning of psychedelic and these other words gives us a fascinating insight into how we relate to and understand these compounds and the visionary state they produce.

Psychedelic

The word psychedelic was coined by the pioneering doctor [Humphry Osmond](#) in 1957, who was among the first medical professionals to use psychedelics like lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) for addiction recovery treatment and the study of schizophrenia. Osmond chose this word based on the synthesis of two greek words- “psyche” meaning “mind,” and “delos” meaning “manifesting,” meaning the word psychedelic literally means “mind manifesting.” This catch-all term served very well for describing substances that didn’t just affect the body but manifested amazing and mysterious changes in consciousness itself. To this day, it is still the most popular and widely used term for describing consciousness-altering substances, and it remains the preferred term with many leaders in the field of psychedelic research.

Hallucinogen

The term hallucinogen is often used interchangeably with psychedelic, but they have important differences. Hallucinogen, of course, refers to substances which produce hallucinations, which are defined as perceptions of visible or other sensory phenomena that seem real but are not actually there. While some psychedelics can produce hallucinations, hallucinations themselves can come from a variety of causes including sleep deprivation, addiction withdrawal, mental disorders, and so on. The important distinction between a hallucination and a psychedelic experience is that hallucinations in and of themselves are disruptive and have little to no value to the person experiencing them, while psychedelic experiences (which may or may not include hallucinations) have the connotation of being inherently valuable in that they help to reveal hidden aspects of the true self, rather than being random. For this reason, most psychedelic advocates prefer the term psychedelic over hallucinogen.

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Entheogen

While the term hallucinogen sits on the side of the spectrum most likely to devalue a psychedelic experience, the term entheogen sits on the opposite end, boldly declaring that psychedelic substances can quite literally bring you closer to the divine. The word “entheogen” was coined in 1979 by a team of ethnobotanists and mythologists including Gordon Wasson, Richard Schultes, Carl Ruck and others, and is derived from the greek words “entheos” meaning “full of the divine,” and “genesthai” meaning “to come into being.” This team wanted to create a word that was distinct from the term hallucinogen — due to its somewhat superficial and negative connotation — but different from the word psychedelic which had a strong stigma attached to it, especially right after the 60s.

The term entheogen, which translates to “bringing forth the divine within,” was a way to clearly describe [consciousness-expanding substances that were part of the perennial traditions of shamanism](#) and visionary journeying that cultures across the world have practiced since time

immemorial. Infusing their new word with this sacred context helped to open up the discussion about how substances like LSD and psilocybin that rocked the 60s were not just dangerous party drugs, they actually were part of a visionary healing tradition that was as old as humanity itself. Today, while many psychedelic advocates use and appreciate the term entheogen, some scholars and researchers avoid the term because they are reluctant to attach ideas of divinity to the psychedelic state and would rather focus on the measurable therapeutic benefits of these substances rather than open a controversial can of worms.

What's in a Name? Choosing Between Psychedelic, Hallucinogen, and Entheogen

The names that we have attached to consciousness-expanding substances like psychedelic, hallucinogen, and entheogen are important in what they say about our understanding of their value and proper use. When people use the term hallucinogen, there is little to no recognition in that word for the therapeutic and beneficial applications for these substances. On the other hand, those in line with the mystical traditions of the world may prefer to use the term entheogen because of its specific denotation about their inherent sacredness. And for those who are somewhere in the middle and want to describe these substances in a more clinical way but still honor their efficacy at bringing forth powerful personal transformation, the term psychedelic offers the best of both worlds.

Psychedelic Meet and Greet

Introduce ourselves and tell a personal psychedelic tale.

Entheogenic Education

“IS IT TOO MUCH TO HOPE that a system of education may some day be devised, which shall give results, in terms of human development, commensurate with the time, money, energy and devotion expended? In such a system of education it may be that mescaline or some other chemical substance may play a part by making it possible for young people to “taste and see” what they have learned about at second hand...in the writings of the religious, or the works of poets, painters and musicians.” —Aldous Huxley (Horowitz & Palmer, 1999)

Today, while the renaissance of psychedelic studies in the 21st century is largely focused on the assorted medical or therapeutic possibilities for these “plants teacher” and substances, it behooves us not to overlook the broader non-medical potential they may have for learning and cognition. The historical and cross-cultural foundations of entheogenic education and explore how psychedelic substances—used in careful ways and supportive contexts—might fill a gap in the learning outcomes and psychosocial effects of modern school-based education, in particular fostering the emotions of wonder and awe and their relationship to creativity, life meaning, and purpose.

THE ORIGINS OF ENTHEOGENIC EDUCATION The notion that some psychoactive plants can help humans learn important things about the cosmos and their place in it is a belief held by many different cultures. At the roots of modern Western culture, for example, the Indo-Aryan Vedic scriptures make abundant reference to the spiritual or mystical importance of a plant or fungus known as soma. Referred to in both cosmic and biological metaphorical terms, partaking of soma was venerated as the highest form of spiritual understanding one could achieve, a prime example of entheogenic learning (Wasson, 1968). Likewise, the ancient Greek mystery religion of Eleusis culminated in the ritual consumption of kykeon, surmised to be some kind of psychoactive preparation that could reliably induce mystical states of consciousness and a kind of learning that was celebrated among all classes of Athenian society (Wasson, Hofmann, & Ruck, 1978). Even within the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Semitic origin myth recounted in the book of Genesis allegorically suggests an instance of entheogenic learning, whereby eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge inspired human self-consciousness and divine awakenings.

In the Americas, there have been more enduring examples of entheogenic educational practices, some of which managed to survive into the modern era despite repression by Euroamerican colonial religious and government authorities. For example, the traditional Mazatec uses of psilocybin mushrooms were continued by people like curandera Maria Sabina, who said of early encounters with her “little children” (a phrase she used to refer to the mushrooms): “I felt that they spoke to me. After eating them I heard voices. Voices that came from another world. It was like the voice of a father who gives advice... Sometime later I knew that the mushrooms were like God. That they gave wisdom”. Similar educational value has been accorded to the peyote cactus, as a Mexican indigenous Huichol person relates: “Peyote is for learning; those with strong hearts will receive messages from the gods”.

Among Amazonian indigenous and mestizo peoples, the visionary entheogenic brew ayahuasca has long been esteemed as a plant teacher (Luna, 1984), a categorical testimony to the educational value of its psychoactive effects. Mestre Irineu, the spiritual founder of the Brazilian ayahuasca religion Santo Daime, in his early formative experiences reportedly “learned that the daime [i.e., ayahuasca], besides being a visionary drink, also had special healing powers and that it contained a professor, a teacher, capable of revealing secrets about the spiritual world”. From a more academic perspective, cognitive psychologist Benny Shanon notably proffers a “schooling” metaphor for the sustained practice of ayahuasca drinking, and reports that he has heard the same characterization of a sense of systematized learning from other experienced ayahuasca drinkers.

Claims of mind expansion, cognitive enhancement, and creative insights among modern psychedelic researchers and enthusiasts further support the concept of entheogenic education. Perhaps most famously, Timothy Leary advocated the benefits of LSD and other psychedelics for mind-expansion and the democratization of mystical experience. However, cognitive, creative, and spiritual development were significant themes in the academic work of many early psychedelic researchers and aficionados in the 1950s and 1960s. More recently, others—including scientists, artists, musicians and business leaders—have likewise attributed

some of their most important intellectual and creative insights to their uses of entheogens or psychedelics.

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The educational value of entheogens and psychedelics may be their capacity—when used respectfully and circumspectly—to reliably evoke experiences of wonder and awe, to stimulate transcendental or mystical experiences, and to catalyze a sense of life meaning or purpose. The careful and elaborate ritual traditions of various indigenous entheogenic practices with plant teachers have long betokened how entheogenic education can be realized in practice. Most notably, such traditions typically emphasize the importance of context and intention, with stringent protocols for who may participate, what kind and how much of a psychedelic substance they take, and under what circumstances the experience occurs. Deploying these kinds of powerful cognitive tools for educational purposes in the 21st century will require equivalent care and attention to implementing these kinds of proto-harm reduction conventions. Exploring and extending the possibilities of entheogenic education may be an important way for humans to adapt, flourish, and psychologically thrive even as we face unprecedented challenges—such as ecological limits to growth—in the nottoo-distant future.

Set, Setting, and Psychedelics in 20th Century Psychology

“Too much of the psychedelic therapy literature reads like the Middle Eastern story of the blind men, each allowed to touch part of an elephant, an animal that none of them knew existed. Each man concluded that his part of the elephant—the tail, a tusk, a leg—was the whole animal.” —Psychedelic research pioneer James Fadiman, PhD

The effects of LSD and the other psychedelics, far from being invariable, are fundamentally and crucially determined by the set and the setting in which the experience takes place.

THE SET-AND-SETTING

It is difficult to think of many other concepts which are as fundamental and widely accepted in the study of psychedelics as “set-and-setting.” The concept, which was first proposed by Timothy Leary and his group at Harvard, claimed that the character of a psychedelic experience is determined first and foremost by the user’s character, expectations and intentions (Set), as well as by the social and physical surrounding in which the drug experience takes place (Setting). Leary went as far as to claim that 99% percent of the specific response to LSD is determined by set-and-setting.

LSD’s action is thus primarily not psychotomimetic, psychotherapeutic, creative, or even spiritual—but just what it is: mind-manifesting. It acts as a mirror and magnifying glass to its user’s state of mind.

The evidence strongly supports the claim that set-and-setting conditions had played a crucial role in shaping the results of 1950s and 1960s LSD research, and in molding the contours of the psychedelic controversy. The implications of this theory exceed the boundaries of 1950s psychiatric research significantly. They teach us a valuable lesson about how psychedelics function as a technology, and about the way psychedelic drugs interact with societies and cultures.

Four Principles of Psychedelic Harm Reduction

1. Create a safe space
 - If someone is having a challenging experience try to move them into a comfortable, warm, and calm environment. If possible try to avoid noisy or crowded spaces. Ask what would make them most comfortable. Offer blankets and water.
2. Sitting, not guiding
 - Be a calm meditative presence of acceptance, compassion, and caring. Promote feelings of trust and security. Let the person's unfolding experience be the guide. Don't try to get ahead of the process. Explore distressing issues as they emerge, but simply being with the person can provide support.
3. Talk through, not down
 - Without distracting from the experience, help the person connect with what they are feeling. Invite person to take the opportunity to explore what's happening and encourage them to try not to resist it.
4. Difficult is not the same as bad
 - Challenging experiences can wind up being our most valuable, and may lead to learning and growth. Consider that it may be happening for an important reason. Suggest that they approach the fear and difficult aspects of their experience with curiosity and openness.

Resource Sites

1. [MAPS – The Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies](#)
 - The Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit research and educational organization that develops medical, legal, and cultural contexts for people to benefit from the careful uses of psychedelics and marijuana.
2. [The Beckley Foundation](#)
 - The Beckley Foundation is a UK-based think-tank and NGO founded and directed by Amanda Feilding. Its purpose is to pioneer psychedelic research and drive evidence-based drug policy reform.
3. [The Zendo Project: Psychedelic Harm Reduction](#)
 - The Zendo Project provides a supportive environment and specialized care designed to transform difficult psychedelic experiences into valuable learning

opportunities, and even potentially offer healing and growth. In turn, our work reduces the number of drug-related hospitalizations and arrests.

4. [Erowid Foundation](#)
 - Erowid is a member-supported organization providing access to reliable, non-judgmental information about psychoactive plants, chemicals, and related issues. We work with academic, medical, and experiential experts to develop and publish new resources, as well as to improve and increase access to already existing resources. We also strive to ensure that these resources are maintained and preserved as a historical record for the future.
5. [HEFFTER RESEARCH INSTITUTE](#)
 - Advancing studies on psilocybin for cancer distress and addiction
6. [Botanical Dimensions](#)
 - Botanical Dimensions is a nonprofit ethnobotanical preserve on the Big Island of Hawaii, established to collect, protect, propagate, and understand plants of ethno-medical significance and their lore, and appreciate, study, and educate others about plants and mushrooms felt to be significant to cultural integrity and spiritual well-being.
7. [Psychedelics Times](#)
 - A hub for new developments in the science and application of psychedelics for healing and therapy

Articles

1. [What is the Meaning of Psychedelic? Different Terms for Entheogens and What They Mean](#)
2. [Entheogenic Education: Psychedelics as Tools of Wonder and Awe](#)
3. [Coming Out of the Psychedelic Closet](#)
4. [The American Trip: Set, Setting, and Psychedelics in 20th Century Psychology](#)
5. [History of Psychedelics: How the Mazatec Tribe Brought Entheogens to the World](#)
6. [The Creative Process and Entheogens](#)
7. [Human hallucinogen research: guidelines for safety](#)
8. [Entheogens: What's in a Name? The Untold History of Psychedelic Spirituality, Social Control, and the CIA](#)
9. [5 Myths About Psychedelics That We Need to Stop Spreading](#)
10. [Want To Stop Climate Change? Science Suggests Psychedelics Will Help You Love Nature](#)