

# Practical Campbell

## *Mysteries Sacred & Profane*

*Magick potions are the stuff of myth and faery tale – but might they be more than metaphor? In this Practical Campbell essay, Stephen Gerringer (Bodhi\_bliss) ponders the role sacred plants have played in religious history and what they reveal about the mythic imagination, along the way plumbing Joseph Campbell's thoughts on everything from shamanism to the psychedelic sixties.*



# Joseph Campbell

## Foundation

The Foundation was created in 1990 in order to preserve, protect and perpetuate the work of one of the twentieth century's most original, influential thinkers.

[www.jcf.org](http://www.jcf.org) • 800-330-Myth

© 2007 by Joseph Campbell Foundation.

This article is intended solely for the education and entertainment of the reader. Reproduction, alteration, transmission or commercial use of this article in any form without written permission of the Joseph Campbell Foundation is strictly prohibited. Please contact the Foundation before reproducing or quoting extensively from this article, in part or in whole

# PRACTICAL CAMPBELL

## Mysteries Sacred & Profane

*Aldous Huxley's [The Doors of Perception](#) (1954), describing his own visionary experiences under the influence of mescaline, opened the way to a popular appreciation of the ability of hallucinogens to render perceptions of a quasi, or even truly, mystical profundity. There can be no doubt today that through the use of such sacramental revelations indistinguishable from some of those reported of yoga have been experienced.*

Joseph Campbell, [The Inner Reaches of Outer Space](#), p. 90

In the mid-1960s, Joseph Campbell was shocked to see royalties from [The Hero with a Thousand Faces](#) jump up “one full decimal point.” This happy mystery was solved when he learned that his classic work on the hero’s quest had become “a kind of TripTik®” for the LSD experience!

Campbell seems an unlikely candidate for hippie patron saint (Robin Larsen, in [Fire in the Mind](#), recalls Joe complaining about “hippies and liberals” during the Vietnam War); even more surprising is the thought that this dignified, dedicated scholar might somehow be associated with the drug culture.

At the same time, Campbell enjoyed friendships with Albert Hofmann, the Swiss chemist who first synthesized LSD in 1938 (and who celebrated his one-hundred-and-first birthday last month - still going strong); Huston Smith, a noted religious studies scholar involved in early psychedelic research at Harvard; Alan Watts, celebrated author and mystic who was no stranger to LSD; Stanislav Grof, known for his research into the nature of consciousness (including observation and documentation of thousands of LSD research sessions at the Psychiatric Research Institute in Prague and the Maryland Psychiatric Research center in Baltimore), and a frequent collaborator with Campbell at Esalen seminars; and, the last years of Joe’s life, the Grateful Dead, who occupied the epicenter of psychedelic counterculture for over three decades.

Just a note about terminology: many researchers (R. Gordon Wasson, Richard Evans Shultes, Huston Smith, etc.) prefer *entheogen* (“God-containing” or “God-enabling”) over *psychedelic* (“mind-manifesting”), which is accurate but carries baggage from the sixties, or *hallucinogen*, which inaccurately portrays the experience as hallucination alone. I tend towards *psychedelic*, as it’s the most familiar term, and *entheogen*, for variety’s sake (usually when emphasizing mystical aspects), using *hallucinogen* only when discussing common perceptions.

Joseph Campbell seems one of the few in his circle who didn't partake of psychedelics at some point -

a conscious choice on his part - but he remained open-minded, not at all inclined to discount the experiences of those who did.

Of course, the drug culture of the sixties faded into oblivion; Campbell's encounters through the seventies and eighties were with serious practitioners in psychology, anthropology, biology, and other fields who approached the subject of psychedelics not as a lark, but as one tool among many that expand our understanding of the nature of consciousness. Campbell certainly valued the research and insights of these recognized experts, whose observations often paralleled his own.

But what might those parallels be? Perhaps a case could be made regarding insights into the nature of human consciousness, but what possible light could the study of hallucinogens shed on mythology?

That question can't properly be answered without a brief survey of the role sacred plants have played in human culture. Then, examining the archetypal elements, we'll recognize a form emerging from this seemingly formless experience; that shape should lead us to the contemporary resurgence of interest in shamanism, and, finally, to the familiar motif Joseph Campbell sees in this turn toward psychoactive substances - part of a larger pattern reflecting a shift in Western culture of mythic proportions.

## What A Long Strange Trip It's Been!

Psychoactive plants were already entwined with the family tree well before the bifurcation of our particular branch (*Homo sapiens*). Terence McKenna, in [The Food of the Gods](#), points out the psychoactive mushroom *stropharia cubensis* appears to have been part of our ancestors' diet in east Africa over a million years ago. In low doses this mushroom increases visual acuity, which could prove a crucial advantage when hunting, enhancing the ability to track prey over vast vistas of veldt – a “competitive edge,” in Darwinian terms.

In higher doses, however, *stropharia cubensis* **alters** consciousness – leaving open the possibility that sacred mushrooms played a role in the evolution of “human” consciousness.

*Hippie sapiens?*

Open to question as that may be, we do know teacher plants have long been associated with shamanic rites, particularly vision quests. Shamans access transcendent realms via altered states of consciousness occasioned by one of several “techniques of ecstasy” (subtitle to Mircea Eliade's classic study on [Shamanism](#)), which may include any combination of physical ordeals, fasting, sex, dancing, drumming, and drugs.

Many scholars, Eliade included, once assumed the ingestion of hallucinogens an inferior path reflecting a later decadent phase in shamanic cultures; a growing body of research, including anthropological finds and contemporary fieldwork, belies that assumption. (Daniel Pinchbeck, author of [Breaking Open the Head](#), an examination of contemporary shamanism, claims Eliade eventually reversed his position.)

Over 50 species of psychoactive plants have been used by tribes on the African continent – such as *Iboga* among the Bwiti of Gabon and the Congo. Similarly, *datura* midwife's vision quests and healing rites of shamans from New Guinea to New Mexico. Shamans in Siberia rely on fly agaric (*amanitas muscaria*), while *psilocybin* mushrooms perform the same function for several North American tribes.

Archaeology has unearthed evidence of ritual *peyote* use up to 7,000 years ago. Joseph Campbell speaks highly of the peyote-influenced mythology of the *Huichol* Indians in Mexico (for whom this powerful psychedelic cactus is a Sacred Being ingested in regular rituals) declaring their “pattern is exactly that of the visionary journey which I have designated the ‘Monomyth’ in [The Hero with a Thousand Faces](#) ...” ([The Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Volume II, Pt. 3, p.302](#))

Meanwhile, in the 1950s, R. Gordon Wasson discovered *teonanactl* – “the flesh of the gods” – a sacred *psilocybin* mushroom still used among tribal shamans in the highlands around Oaxaca, Mexico; Campbell points to the continuity of this cult in the discovery of 2,300 year old stone images of the same sacred mushroom found in burial sites along Guatemala's Pacific coast.

In fact, 130 different species of psychoactive plants have been used in tribal societies throughout the Americas (inspiring a tongue-in-cheek reference by Campbell to pre-Columbian Mesoamerica in [The Hero's Journey](#): “Now that's a drug culture!”)

In the tropical rainforests the Yanamamo brew *yage*, the Quechua *ayahuasca* – derived from the same jungle vine, perhaps the most powerful teacher plant in use today, a liana through which shamans receive visions that offer knowledge about the ways of the creatures and spirits of the rainforest – and not just esoteric wisdom, but information immediately applicable to daily life (like which plants are poisonous, which beneficial, how they should be prepared, etc.).

That might seem difficult to reconcile with the contemporary Cartesian perspective, but Western science is able to live with the dichotomy if there's a benefit to be had - and there is.

Richard Evans Shultes (1915 – 2001), Jeffrey Professor of Biology and director of the Botanical Museum at Harvard, discovered over his lifetime thousands of plants in the Amazon basin that have added hundreds of beneficial drugs and medicines to the modern pharmacopoeia – but he

acknowledges much of this information came from the consumption of *ayahuasca* with shamans who were able to guide him to crucial plants revealed by the spirits ayahuasca provides access to - which means that hundreds of thousands of people are alive today, and millions more have had their quality of life improved, thanks to shamans (and the occasional biologist) “tripping” in the jungle!

One doesn't hear that in the television advertising.

In recent decades, anthropological fieldwork (like that of [Michael Harner](#) and [Jeremy Narby](#)) has helped document the often-astonishing characteristics of such rituals, as well as located the source of several tribal mythologies in the visions inspired by these plants. And, as Richard Evans Shultes, Albert Hofmann, and Christian Ratsch observe in their comprehensive survey, [The Plants of the Gods](#), “there is hardly an aboriginal culture without at least one psychoactive plant.”

## High Cultures and Sacred Plants

*Ecstasy! In common parlance ecstasy is fun. But ecstasy is not fun. Your very soul is seized and shaken until it tingles. After all, who will choose to feel undiluted awe?*

R. Gordon Wasson, quoted by Huston Smith in [Cleansing the Doors of Perception](#), p. viii

General use of psychedelics fell out of favor with the advent of agriculture, roughly eight to ten thousand years ago - difficult to get up and plow the south forty at dawn if you've been communing with God all night! As tribal cultures gave way to civilization, the use of sacred plants fell to an elite and influential minority - primarily priests and priestesses, initiates into mystery cults, and, the last few centuries, artists, poets, mystics, philosophers, and other bohemian spirits in Western culture.

In 1969 R. Gordon Wasson identified *amanitas muscaria* – or fly agaric – as the *Soma* of India's *Rg* Veda. According to Wendy Doniger (who assisted Wasson with the translation of Sanskrit texts, and currently occupies the Mircea Eliade Chair of Religious Studies at the University of Chicago), both the Upanishads and the techniques of yoga can be viewed as an attempt to recapture the vision granted by the *Soma* plant that “underlies the whole of Indian religion and everything of a mystical nature within that religion is pertinent to the identity of that plant” (cited by Huston Smith in [Cleansing the Doors of Perception](#), p. 49).

The question of *Soma*'s identity is not settled to everyone's satisfaction (the argument is over *which* entheogen *Soma* refers to, not whether it does; Wasson's thesis has been embraced by Doniger, Huston Smith, Claude Levi-Strauss, Richard Shultes, Robert Graves, and Joseph Campbell, among

others); but there's no question that the amanitas mushroom was in use in the Indus Valley at least 3,500 years ago, and that a number of psychoactive plants remain central to the Indian mythos - particularly *cannabis* (for example, at one point while seeking enlightenment Buddha is said to have survived on one hemp seed a day), and *datura*, which in India is called "tuft of Shiva" (*datura* blossoms are woven into the flying locks of the famous image of *Shiva Nataraja* - "the Lord of the Cosmic Dance" - and when Buddha was preaching, heaven was said to sprinkle the *datura* with dew).

And then there are the Greek Mystery cults:

*Some very interesting research concerning the plants associated with these cults has shown that the people who were going to go through the great ceremony consumed a barley drink before attending the rites. One of the historically important hallucinogens is **ergot**, which is produced by a fungus that grows parasitically on barley. Since one family was for centuries in charge of the rites, many now believe that this barley broth contained a bit of the ergot. There is a very fine study called The Road to Eleusis, written by Albert Hofmann, who discovered LSD; R. Gordon Wasson; and classical scholar Carl A. P. Ruck. This book deals with the entire ritual of Eleusis in detail as a ceremonial matching of the rapturous state of the people who have taken the drink with a theatrical performance that is rendered as an epiphany. So there is an inward readiness to an outer fulfillment.*

- Joseph Campbell, [Transformations of Myth Through Time](#), p. 193

Campbell has playfully noted parallels between these ancient mystery rituals and the pageantry of the Grateful Dead (which prompted guitarist/songwriter Jerry Garcia to respond, "They didn't know what they were saying, and we don't know what we're saying, but we think we're saying the same thing."); whether or not the comparison holds, it nevertheless appears that an *ergot* compound - precursor to LSD - inspired the mystery rites of this influential sacred cult that endured nearly a thousand years and included participants ranging from Socrates and Plato to Aristophanes and, quite possibly, the Apostle Paul (much of Pauline theology parallels imagery associated with the mystery cults). These initiation rites contributed to a beautiful, elegant mythology whose echoes are still heard today.

Even in Christianized Europe of the Middle Ages the ritual use of *amanitas muscaria*, nightshade, witch bane, and other psychedelics were often part of sacred ceremonies celebrating the turn of seasons, cross-quarter days, and full moons - those "riotous *sabbats*" that brought charges of witchcraft and satanism during the period of the Inquisition. (Michael Harner points out the

common image of the witch riding her broomstick to the *sabbat* has an origin in the traditional means used to apply ointments of belladonna, hemlock, and henbane to vaginal membranes, thus triggering the ecstatic visionary experience – a wild ride indeed.)

Meanwhile, in the eleventh century, Avicenna, celebrated Islamic physician and philosopher, recommended *datura* – which is coincidentally congruent with the appearance of the *arabesque* (an intricate pattern *datura* users often report) as a mystical, unifying theme in Islamic art and architecture.

These examples barely scratch the surface. Traditional cultures have generally considered sacred the altered states these substances occasion. Alan Watts, Robert Graves, R. Gordon Wasson and others have even suggested religion itself may have its source in “such chemically-induced theophanies.”

What, then, do these theophanies contain?

The mythic image.

## Swimming with Archetypes

*Let us first ask about the waters into which he has descended. They are the same, we have said, as those of the mystical experience. What, then, is their character? What are their properties and what does it take to swim?*

*They are the waters of the universal archetypes of mythology. All my life, as a student of mythologies, I have been working with these archetypes, and I can tell you, they **do** exist ...*

Joseph Campbell, [Myths to Live By](#), p. 209

At the end of the turbulent sixties Joseph Campbell confessed to Sam Keen that while psychedelics had “uncovered the unconscious depths in a society that is lopsidedly rational and evaluative,” thus demonstrating that the archetypes of the unconscious “are as real as tables and chairs,” he nevertheless feared the drug culture had been “caught in the fuzzy end of things”:

*The young seem bewildered by the world of the psyche. They came into it too fast. It is like the situation in Greek mythology where a person says to a god, “Show me yourself in your full power.” And the god does, and the person is blown to bits.*

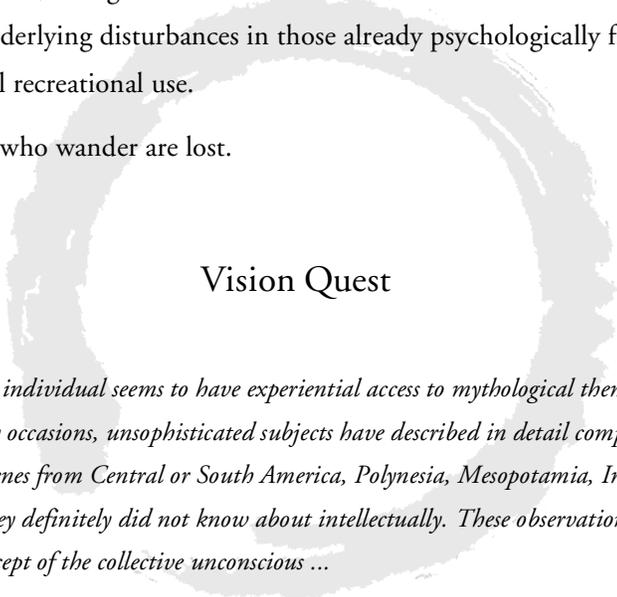
Campbell, “Man & Myth” (interviewed by Sam Keen), *Psychology Today*, July 1971

While decrying both the fuzziness and the frenzied extremes of the period, Campbell acknowledged that many had nevertheless experienced “a more serious encounter with the religious practices and myths of the East – Zen, meditation, yoga, etc.”

In the pages of *Life* magazine the lack of structure to the hippie lifestyle no doubt seemed obvious: hordes of barefoot, bedraggled, yet colorfully clad adolescents milling about the corner of Haight and Ashbury getting high, then wandering over to Golden Gate Park to get high, have sex, eat free food, get high, dance to free music, find a crash pad and have more sex and drugs. No aims, no ambitions - a generation lost and adrift.

It's easy to understand how Joseph Campbell sometimes lumped LSD users in with schizophrenics, whom he describes as drowning in the same waters in which mystics swim. That may indeed have been the experience of some; though LSD has never been demonstrated to be the source of mental illness, it can unmask underlying disturbances in those already psychologically fragile – a risk too great to rationalize casual recreational use.

But, it turns out, not all who wander are lost.



## Vision Quest

*In principle, every individual seems to have experiential access to mythological themes of all times and all cultures. On many occasions, unsophisticated subjects have described in detail complex mythological images and even entire scenes from Central or South America, Polynesia, Mesopotamia, India, Egypt, Japan, and other areas that they definitely did not know about intellectually. These observations clearly support Carl Gustav Jung's concept of the collective unconscious ...*

Stanislav Grof, [The Adventure of Self-Discovery](#), p. 127

Huston Smith points out that Stanislav Grof has logged over 12,000 clinical hours monitoring LSD sessions (and draws on another 800 case studies conducted by his colleagues); when legal research on LSD and other psychedelic substances was suspended in the wake of the youth revolt of the sixties, Grof developed a technique he calls Holotropic Breathwork™ (akin to a Hindu breathing practice used in rebirthing sessions) to induce altered states of consciousness, thus allowing research to continue.

A surprising number of patients identified with mythic imagery, familiar and foreign, during psychedelic sessions:

*The subject can witness numerous scenes from the mythology and folklore of any culture in the world and visit any number of mythical landscapes. He or she can also experientially identify with legendary and mythical heroes and heroines, or fantastic mythological creatures. It is possible to experience the labors of Hercules or the adventures of Theseus and Jason. One can become the legendary Polynesian hero Maui, or suffer through the ordeal of the twins in the Mayan **Popul Vuh**. Among the archetypal creatures that subjects have identified with in psychedelic sessions and during holotropic breathing were Uroboros, Typhon, Centaurs, Cerberus, Sphinx, various European, oriental, and pre-Columbian dragons, Snow White, legendary knights, mermaids, fairies, elves, gnomes, Scandinavian trolls, and others.*

Grof, [The Adventure of Self-Discovery](#), p. 126

These observations echo ancient as well as contemporary accounts of those who have ingested sacred plants. Grof's follow-up research indicated subjects found themselves drawn to beliefs and practices they had previously ridiculed – including astrology, alchemy, Tarot, the I Ching, Gnostic teachings, and Eastern disciplines – and developed “a deep interest in the spiritual path.”

Whether LSD in the laboratory or ayahuasca in a tribal rite, all subjective accounts suggest the psychedelic experience is of the same order and shares the same source as myth and dream – so no surprise they share the same structure as well.

*[Campbell & Jung] have demonstrated that true myths are manifestations of fundamental organizing principles that exist within the cosmos, affecting all our lives. Jung called them archetypes.*

*These archetypes express themselves through our individual psyches, but they are not human creations. In a sense archetypes are supraordinated to our psyches and represent universal governing principles at work within our individual lives. Archetypes are universal and they cross historical, geographical, and cultural boundaries, though they may appear under different names or show variation from culture to culture. Since myths involve archetypes, they can truly be said to have autonomy, and they are in no way dependent on us to create them. They exist in that vast sea of human knowledge that Jung referred to as the “collective unconscious,” as real as the birds that fly in the sky or the marine life that lives in the ocean.*

Grof, [The Holotropic Mind](#), p. 156

Grof found the imagery of death and rebirth central to a stage of the LSD experience that not everyone reaches. The subject finds him or herself awash in the contents of the personal unconscious, confronting everything from sexual and religious taboos to childhood fears and family relationships. Often this involves consciously re-experiencing one's own birth trauma (even details previously unknown to the subject), followed by catharsis – a release or breakthrough into transpersonal realms:

*Dr. Grof has found (and I find this extremely interesting) that the differing imageries of the various world religions tend to appear and to support his patients variously during the successive stages of their session. In immediate association with the birth trauma, the usual imagery brought to mind is of the Old and New Testaments, together with (occasionally) certain Greek, Egyptian, or other pagan counterparts. However, when the agony has been accomplished and the release experienced of “birth” – actually a “second” or “spiritual” birth, released from the unconscious fears of the former, “once born” personal condition – the symbology radically changes. Instead of mainly Biblical, Greek, and Christian themes, the analogies now point toward the great Orient, chiefly India. “The source of these experiences,” says Dr. Grof, “is obscure, and their resemblance to the Indian descriptions flabbergasting.”*

Campbell, [Myths to Live By](#), p. 262

Joseph Campbell first met Stanislav Grof in the early seventies – but it was Grof’s meticulous research into LSD and other entheogens in the fifties and sixties that first documented mythological imagery revealing the contents and structure of the unconscious psyche – thus providing independent scientific confirmation of many of Campbell’s insights and observations.

It turns out the psychedelic experience mirrors the hero’s quest – departure from the world of every day experience, followed by a crisis of initiation (death/rebirth), and a return – and not just in the broad outline, but in exquisite detail.

No wonder [The Hero with a Thousand Faces](#) was adopted as a guide to the LSD experience; the book embraces the entire cast of characters across mythologies, mapping the multiple expressions of the hero motif as it unfolds across cultures, and in the individual life. Trippers in the sixties turned to [Hero...](#) not because it imposes structure on a formless experience, but because *the myths and rituals Campbell describes therein correspond with the inherent nature of the psychedelic experience.*

*That was the era of inward discovery in its LSD phase. Suddenly, [The Hero with a Thousand Faces](#) became a kind of triptych for the inward journey, and people were finding something in that book that could help them interpret their own experience. The book is the presentation of the one great mythic theme – that of the journey, of the quest, and of the finding, and the return. Anyone going on a journey inward or outward to find values will be on a journey that has been described many times in the myths of mankind, and I simply put them all together in that book.*

“Living Myths: A Conversation with Joseph Campbell,” **Parabola**, Volume I, Issue 2, Spring 1976

## The Quality of Illusion

Considering the intensity of immersion in the symbolic realm, it's no surprise that many psychedelic explorers in the fifties and sixties became seekers, turning to mythological structures to provide a framework within which they could process and explore the insights and imagery of what might otherwise have been a life-shattering experience.

Alan Watts offered Buddhism as a model, leaning toward the elegant simplicity of Zen; Aldous Huxley and Richard Alpert (Ram Dass) embraced Hindu traditions; Carlos Castaneda espoused the shamanic model; and the Grateful Dead evolved a spontaneous structure that contained and nurtured the psychedelic experience - a powerful traveling ritual centered on dionysian dancing and shamanic soundscapes that allowed the time and space for visionary states to safely unfold.

Many in traditional disciplines across the spectrum automatically discount the validity of "instant enlightenment," claiming realization must be earned and maintained through commitment and hard work, not chemistry. This objection mistakes collective stereotypes shaped by the media-fueled frenzy of the sixties ("hedonistic adolescents catching a momentary buzz") with actual experience.

Forty years after the Summer of Love we're better able to chart the aftermath of the psychedelic explosion. Multiple studies have, for example, demonstrated a common trajectory to LSD experimentation: Addiction is not a problem - with some exceptions, the standard rhythm with psychedelics is one of intense use over a limited period of time, followed by a tapering off and eventual discontinuation - as if the entheogen had served its purpose. This pattern is the direct antithesis of every other class of psychoactive drugs (including alcohol, tobacco, opiates, and stimulants). Apparently the experience of that overwhelming, soul-shaking, undiluted awe that Wasson describes, coupled with the confrontation with one's shadow *and* the dissolution of the ego, is not easy to endure on any regular basis ... so the tendency is to move on to less shattering means of accessing the inaccessible (yoga, fasting, meditation, initiation rituals, etc.).

Alan Watts succinctly summed up this dynamic: "Once the call goes through, you hang up the phone."

Several studies have explored the spiritual nature of the psychedelic state, but one of the best documented is described by Huston Smith:

*In his doctoral study at Harvard University, Walter Pahnke worked out a typology of religious experience (in this instance, mystical experience) based on classic reports that Wallace Stace included in his Mysticism and Philosophy. Pahnke then administered psilocybin to fifteen theology professors and students (half the total population of thirty) in the setting of a Good Friday service. The drug was given in a "double-blind"*

*experiment, meaning that neither Dr. Pahnke nor his subjects knew which were getting psilocybin and which fifteen received placebos to constitute a control group. Subsequently the subjects' reports of their experiences were rated independently by three former schoolteachers on the degree (strong, moderate, slight, or none) to which each report evinced the nine traits of mystical experience that Stace enumerates. The results showed that "those subjects who received psilocybin experienced phenomena which were indistinguishable from, if not identical with, the categories defined by our typology of mysticism."*

[Smith](#), p. 22

Far from a fleeting illumination, this mystical experience proved significant and life lasting for the seminarians and theologians involved (Smith, one of the original participants, is today a widely-respected religious scholar whose volume, [The World's Religions](#) - originally published as [The Religions of Man](#) - remains a standard college text).

Whether entheogen-induced altered states are *similar* to mystical experience or rather *are* mystical experience seems a moot point (especially to those who have experienced psychedelics). Considering that a key illumination of mystical experience is the realization that "All is Illusion," there's a certain irony in maintaining an exclusive belief that there is a "real" realization of the illusory nature of all reality (including the realization itself) through, say, sitting *zazen*, while the identical experience of the *same* underlying truth achieved through the ritual ingestion of a mushroom or cactus must be *not* "real" - a line of reasoning that paints itself into an imaginary corner.

What we do know is that psychedelic experimentation for many individuals opened the door to a deeper exploration of their own spirituality, often in conjunction with a recognized religious tradition (Yoga, Vedanta, Zen, Christianity, etc.), and, just as often, through a self-created path.

This isn't to suggest that I (or Joseph Campbell for that matter) endorse the use of psychedelics, or advise others to take LSD to find God – there are so many other paths to the Transcendent that are less hard on the body, have less in the way of distracting fireworks, and are legal almost everywhere - but psychedelics do represent one portal that has proven significant in the lives of many.

For a few hardy adventurers, though, spiritual exploration through the use of sacred plants has become a discipline all its own.

## Psychedelic Shamans

*Psychedelic shamanism* strikes some as a trendy term designed to justify the self-indulgence of dotcom

druggies and sixties burnouts; practitioners, on the other hand, maintain the inward turn midwifed by psychoactive plants is a legitimate realization of the mythic vision quest.

Though off the radar of most First World peoples, the study (and practice) of shamanism is a serious and growing discipline – one that includes an expanding interest, among scientists *and* seekers, in psychedelic shamanism. Mainstream critics discount this movement, either ignoring it completely, or assuming proponents are simply drug-addled hippie-wannabes (recall the ridicule heaped on Carlos Castaneda).

Nevertheless, this theme has been picked up by a new generation. Committed practitioners - such as journalist Daniel Pinchbeck, anthropologist Jeremy Narby, and the late, legendary Terence McKenna - are identified with contemporary shamanism, a movement that stretches from the rainforests of Mesoamerica, the plains of Africa, and the remote reaches of Nepal, to Europe and the United States, where this decidedly individual practice finds collective expression in events like the counterculture's Rainbow Family gatherings and the annual Burning Man festival.

Of course, not all shamanic practices involve the use of psycho-active plants – but those that do have been discussed in detail at the Visionary Ethneobotoany Conference, an annual weeklong event that drew biologists, botanists, chemists, psychiatrists, anthropologists, and shamans (both tribal and self-proclaimed) to Palenque, Mexico for thirteen years (discontinued, unfortunately, after McKenna's passing). Similar events are held annually in Hawaii, Jamaica, and elsewhere. These aren't the party sessions that the common stereotype demands, but opportunities for the presentation of serious research and the exchange of information between members of different disciplines.

Is this simply a cultural hiccup – intriguing, but insignificant – an aberration with less impact in the long run than a Trekkie convention?

Or might the resurgence of interest in psychedelic shamanism be the canary in the coalmine, portending a shift of mythic proportions rumbling up from the bowels of contemporary culture?

## The Inward Turn

Joseph Campbell noted congruencies between our period and two previous episodes when the ritual use of sacred plants emerged as a response to the breakdown of the prevailing mythology.

One ran concurrent with the Indo-European subjugation of the Achaean peninsula, culminating centuries later in Alexander's conquest of Asia Minor, the Fertile Crescent, and northern India, followed by Roman domination of the Mediterranean world. Local mythologies were threatened by

the new and pervasive cosmopolitan culture of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds - what had held true seemed in dissolution. As the discredited local cults languished the mystery cults emerged, compensating this loss of the sacred with an inward experience of the universal divine (precipitated by consumption of a sacred plant).

Campbell also finds a parallel in American history, in the aftermath of the tragic slaughter of the buffalo in the decade between 1870 and 1880. The buffalo was not only the chief food animal of the Plains tribes (and chief source of clothing, blankets, dwellings, etc.), but also their primary spiritual symbol. As Campbell points out in [An Open Life](#) (with Michael Toms), p. 104, “It was when the social religion dissolved and the object of the cult disappeared that the peyote cult came up from Mexico and overwhelmed the Plains cultures.”

*What does peyote do? It gives you visions from inside. So the outside social structure is no longer sanctified through rites. The rite has been taken away, the object of the ritual no longer exists, nor does the manner of life that made it relevant. An inward turn, then, is the only resort for the individual – he finds his religion inside – and that’s what’s happening to ourselves right now. The authority of the inherited religions is in question. Christianity and Judaism are on the rocks, at least for many of the young people in our culture. So along comes the peyote and LSD fad of the 60s – inward turning. And today it’s no longer LSD so much, but meditation.*

Campbell, “Living Myths,” *Parabola*, Spring 1976

Joseph Campbell isn’t recommending we turn to psychoactive drugs – indeed, he never indulged himself, despite the opportunity:

*I prefer the gradual path ... My feeling is that mythic forms reveal themselves gradually in the course of your life if you know what they are and how to pay attention to their emergence. My own initiation into the mythic depths of the unconscious has been through the mind, through the books that surround me in this library. I have recognized in my quest all the stages of the hero’s journey. I had my calls to adventure, my guides, demons, and illuminations.*

Campbell (with Sam Keen), “Man and Myth,” *Psychology Today*, July 71

Nevertheless, Campbell notes the spontaneous reappearance of this psychedelic motif in society suggests the tip of an iceberg, signaling a shift from faith in authority to reliance on an authentic and individual inward experience. “The Shaman,” as Campbell writes in **Primitive Mythology** (p.231), “is one who, as a consequence of a personal psychological crisis, has gained a certain power of his own.”

## Waking the Shaman

Though LSD as a social issue has faded away, the spiritual use of psychedelics continues – and is even legally protected in some forms. As recently as 1993 the United States Congress passed legislation ensuring the right of the members of the Native American Church to use peyote – and, in 2005, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled in favor of a small religious group that imports ayahuasca from the rainforest for religious ceremonies (*Ashcroft v. Uniao Do Vegetal*).

Of course, despite the growing interest, only a small minority of the public has any experience with psychedelics. Increasing that number is not what's being suggested. Even though I imagine Joseph Campbell would be pleased to see scientific research allowed, believing there's so much yet to be learned, and would certainly support the protection of indigenous traditions, I can't imagine him under any circumstance advocating the indiscriminate use of psychedelics.

However, as he notes, meditation and other expressions of this inward turn are much more widespread and on the rise, a further response to the absence of the sacred in our society.

The loss of faith in the dominant mythological paradigm doesn't represent a social failure so much as it anticipates a cultural shift every bit as significant as the emergence of agriculture ten thousand years ago. Accompanying this transition, Campbell sees the archetype of the shaman resurfacing:

*The binding of the shamans ... by the gods and their priests, which commenced with the victory of the Neolithic over the Paleolithic way of life, may perhaps already be terminating – today – in this period of the irreversible transition of society from an agricultural to an industrial base, when not the piety of the planter, bowing humbly before the will of the calendar and the gods of rain and sun, but the magic of the laboratory, flying rocket ships where the gods once sat, holds the promise of the boons of the future.*

*Campbell, [Primitive Mythology](#), p.281*

We are passing from an agricultural phase that has provided the context of life for ten thousand years, zipping through the industrial and into the information age at breakneck speed. Indeed, as in the period of the Mediterranean mystery cults, what had held true seems in dissolution.

Joseph Campbell would not be surprised by the spontaneous resurgence of shamanism (psychedelic or otherwise) we're seeing today – it's the harbinger of broad change to come.

But there's a personal and practical aspect to the motif as well. Though he is hardly recommending we all drop acid or jaunt off to Gabon to eat *Iboga* with the Bwiti (that would be taking the metaphor a mite literally), Joseph Campbell nevertheless affirms the increasing relevance of the shaman

archetype in an age that has lost its mythic moorings:

*The Shaman goes off on his own flight. The priest is the agent of a village system of gods. There is a pantheon of which he is the ordained minister. But the Shaman goes off to have his own experience, his own familiars, his own personal guardians, and they are the ones that carry him into these distances.*

Joseph Campbell interview with John Lobell, 1983

We can no longer rely on a dynamic collective tradition to point the way. Each must follow one's own path; forge one's own myth.

Anyone know where to find a good TripTik<sup>®</sup> for the journey?



---

<sup>®</sup> TripTik is a registered trademark of the American Automobile Association.