

Altered States of Consciousness

The concept of altered states came into prominence in Western psychology in the 1950s and 1960s, according to Ralph Metzner, author of The Unfolding Self, and founder of Alchemical Divination Training Program, after the discovery of LSD and other psychedelic, “consciousness expanding” drugs. This meant that profoundly transformed and transforming states of consciousness, hitherto accessible only to a few individuals, could be induced with fairly high probability in larger numbers of people, given the right preparation, safeguards and set and setting.

The discoveries of correlations between variations in neural functions and variations in subjective states of consciousness stimulated an enormous upsurge of research, which continues to this day, with profound applications in fields as diverse as health, learning, creativity and psycho-spiritual growth. It’s been argued that this approach – the study of associations between brain states and mind-states – has become the dominant paradigm in the scientific study of consciousness. In working with this paradigm of altered states of consciousness, I have learned from the research and writings of such authorities as Charles Tart, Stanley Krippner, Stanislav Grof, Ralph Metzner, Andrew Weil, Terence McKenna, and Michael Harner.

Triggers or catalysts that bring about the shift into a different mode of functioning are well known as meditative practices, hypnotic inductions, shamanic drumming, neurofeedback therapy, drugs, music, nature, sex, and others, as well as the normal cyclical variations of brain chemistry that catalyze us into “falling asleep” or “waking up”. There is a whole spectrum of states of consciousness, from the familiar to the anomalous extreme, and this is true for both positive, expansive, health and knowledge enhancing states, as well as negative, contractive, unhealthy and destructive states. Whether the state is normal or abnormal is, in any case, a culturally and historically relative judgment imposed on experience, and thus, an academic question of no particular significance.

In order to use the expansive, positive states constructively for our own well-being, creativity and growth, we need to be able to recognize the state we’re in, and how to navigate through it in order to learn. For example, shamans learn to use the shamanic drumming journey state for the purposes of obtaining knowledge for healing, problem solving, and guidance. Yogis and meditators practice their skills in order to gain insight. This is how Buddhist mindfulness training may be understood, as well. With the negative, contractive states, our main concern, for ourselves and for others with whom we may be working, is to identify the state we’re in, recognize how it’s affecting us (our thinking, our perception, our behavior), and how we can navigate our way through it and beyond it into healthier, life-affirming states.

Such an attitude would be consistent with William James’ insightful aphorism: “my experience is what I choose to attend to.” By becoming more conscious (mindful) of

the nature of the state we're in at any given moment, we can deploy attention in different ways, and thus enhance the range of choices we make, and more fully take responsibility for the impact of those choices on others and in our world.