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The spiritual side of Soma

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In 1955, banker-turned-scholar R Gordon Wasson became the first westerner to take part in a sacred mushroom ritual in Mexico. With his help, scientists were able to decipher the chemical structure of the mushroom's psychoactive compounds (psilocybin and psilocin) that caused vivid hallucinations and time dilation.

Mr Wasson went on to study the intoxicating hallucinogen of the Aryans called Soma. This, he proposed, was based on the psychoactive Fly Agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) mushroom. (Some speculate that Garuda, the divine Soma-hunting eagle of the Aryans, might have been a keen-eyed raptor, specially trained by its handlers to prospect for Soma mushrooms, in the manner of modern truffle-sniffing hogs!)

Mr Wasson's work helped change our understanding of the origin of religion. Prior to his research, it was widely believed that Vedic rites of the Aryans involving Soma were based on alcoholic beverages that produced inebriation. Mr Wasson was the first to suggest that the divine ecstasy produced by Soma was 'entheogenic', a term he coined to avoid the more popular but profane label 'psychedelic'.

That did not, however, prevent the subsequent public backlash against psychoactive drug abuse and the flower-power lifestyle associated with it. Psilocybin was declared to be schedule one drug and because of the stigma attached to it, research on the compound was kept to a minimum, until very recently.

A controlled study funded by the US government at the Johns Hopkins University has now validated what Mr Wasson had been preaching all along: volunteers who took the psychedelic mushrooms had 'mystical' experiences. What is more, many of the subjects reported feeling a profound sense of happiness months after the trial. Psilocybin appeared to work mostly on the brain's serotonin receptors to alter states of consciousness.

The Johns Hopkins team wanted to unravel its mode of action under controlled conditions. The 36 college-educated subjects, each without a previous history of drug use, averaged 46 years of age. In the randomised and double-blinded study, half of them received psilocybin; the other half got a non-hallucinogenic stimulant, methylphenidate (Ritalin, used to calm hyperactive kids); but neither researchers nor the participants knew who got what in any given session.

The results were striking: nearly two-thirds of the volunteers said they achieved a "mystical experience" with "substantial personal meaning". One-third rated the psilocybin experience as "the single most spiritually significant

experience of his or her life,” and another 38% placed the experience among their ‘top five’ most spiritually significant moments.

More intriguing, most of the subjects also said they had become better, gentler people in the following two months. The researchers ruled out ‘delusional behaviour’ after family members and friends contacted on telephone reportedly confirmed the claims.

The study also reported a darker side of the hallucinogen. About 30% of the candidates had periods of intense fear or anxiety that “could easily escalate into panic and dangerous behaviour had the drug been given in any other kind of circumstances”. The researchers said they did know what causes a bad trip. Still, many experts have hailed the research as long overdue.

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