

My Psychedelic Experience

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Monday

Monday was day 1 of my retreat with the British Transpersonal Association. Having never taken psychedelic substance before in my life, a retreat where you use magic truffles to process emotional issues and trauma might seem like a random choice and maybe it was. However, I was at a stage where stepping fully out of my comfort zone seemed like the only way to change my mind, and I've never been one for just dipping a toe.

As I nervously walked into the meeting place in Amsterdam, one of the facilitators spotted me and stood up to give me a big hug. She was happy to see me. Or was she just being nice? I hugged her back and smiled, but all I was feeling was anxiety and tiredness and also like I might cry at any moment. She introduced me to the other retreat participants, and I chatted as politely as I could and listened.

We walked to get lunch and I listened to one of the other participants talk, and then hovered between the rest of the group. A facilitator reached out to ask if I was ok and invited me to join. I mostly tried to listen to what was going on, fearing expressing too much, or being off-putting or talking about myself or my interests too much and coming across as self-centered.

After lunch, we returned to our meeting place and one more participant, we purchased our truffles and then got a taxi over to the retreat house, stopping on the way so one of the participants could pick up some luggage from the place he had been previously staying. I felt irritated at the time it took to find the previous location as we couldn't find the address (100% a reflection of me, not the situation).

We arrived and I was introduced to the rest of the facilitation team, and was then also introduced to the final participant. I was shown to a huge room with tiled floors, one single bed and an en suite bathroom. The room had absolutely tons of light. Determined not to be a recluse, I picked up my book, my safety barrier, and went to sit on the sofas in the main room, listening to the conversations and occasionally asking questions, without talking too much about myself.

I can't remember much of the afternoon, as I was tired from an early start and bad sleep from worrying about the experience. In the evening, there was a "sharing circle". I put that in quotes because that is how I felt towards the concept at the time. We introduced ourselves, both the facilitators and the participants, and I tried to listen but was mostly thinking about what I

would say. My story wasn't exceptional or unusual. I grew up with an absent father and a difficult maternal relationship, but there was nothing there to justify the depression and anxiety I was feeling. My experiences seemed trivial and insignificant. I introduced myself but quickly got overwhelmed and stopped talking.

At dinner that evening, everyone talked in little pockets of 2 or 3 people.

Tuesday

Tuesday started with a yoga session led by one of the facilitators, followed by meditation led by a different facilitator. They took us on a journey through an imaginary forest that represented our fears. For me, this fear was rejection in social situations. This was not hard for me to visualise.

The main event of Tuesday was the breathwork exercise. I had no idea what to expect from this but I knew that the goal was to reach a heightened mental state. I knew it was possible to reach a full psychedelic state using breathwork but as I had never taken psychedelic drugs, this didn't really help me to understand it any more.

All of us participants then sat on floor mattresses. My facilitator was sitting next to me and would be my guide for the experience. I had already rejected one of the facilitators for this experience. I have never been comfortable with people who see too much of me, and this person had been my therapist for 6 months and so I was wary - she felt too close.

The breathwork was incredibly challenging. Initially the sensation of dryness in the throat seemed too much of a compromise when I didn't know what I would get from the experience. With my facilitator's support, it wasn't long before my fingers were tingling, and once I could feel something happening, it became easier.

I'm not sure I can fully express what happened next. Suddenly I was crying, huge uncontrollable sobs and gripping the facilitator's hand. The massive release of emotion was unparalleled, and it felt like some of the walls I had been building up around myself for a decade were starting to crumble around the edges. I was already grateful. Overwhelmed and more relaxed than I had been in a while, but grateful for the experience and for his support.

The sharing circle and dinner that night were much more open. I was getting nervous about the ceremony the following day, so I had a lot of questions and was hungry to hear more about the experiences everyone else had had, so that I could try to understand better what to expect.

Wednesday

Wednesday morning started with some Five Rhythms Dancing led by a facilitator. I was tense again. I tried to get into this but I've never been a very free mover, so I spent most of the time standing still, with my eyes closed so as not to intrude on anyone else's experience. I had eaten a small amount of food but not too much as we were told that it could impact the psychedelic experience. Not long after the facilitators told us we could go to our rooms for a while to just have some time on our own. They had advised us to surrender our phones earlier in the week, so we weren't constantly in contact with the outside world, so I went to my room, and tried to focus on reading my book.

A facilitator knocked on my door to tell me they were ready for us and I went out into the hallway, and waited for the other facilitators and participants to come out. The atmosphere was tense but there was also some excitement. As we stood there, the facilitators started to sing and the group was swaying with arms around each other. I didn't know the words, I believe this is not right but the words I heard were

“Home, I'm coming home,
I need the land to heal my soul
Take me home, take me home,
Over the green, green fields and far away”

I was uncomfortable, having never been a big joiner, but I let it happen around me.

We entered the main room, and there were candles, burning white sage and palo santo. The mattresses were laid out again with duvets and pillows for comfort, and a beautiful space had been created.

We all sat around the big table and started to crush our truffles for the tea, which was being prepared. We went around the circle and talked about our intentions, participants and facilitators. After the breathwork experience the previous day, I was emotional but my intention was to break down more walls, and open up.

Once the tea was poured onto the truffles, it smelled absolutely beautiful. Like the most wholesome thing in the world, it smelled like the earth. We moved to the mattresses and waited for our “medicine” to brew.

After 15 minutes, we could drink our tea. Contrary to the beautiful earthy smell, the taste was... disgusting. I drank mine as quickly as I could, and more water was added to the truffles

so it could brew a second time. I got through as much of the second drink as I could but I was starting to feel nauseous, so I chugged what I could and lay back onto the bed. Lights flashed every time I closed my eyes, and the taste combined with the medicine and the slight moving and swirling around me were making me feel sick, so I stared up at the ceiling. After a while, my facilitator asked me if I was confident enough to put down my eye mask. I took a deep breath, nodded, and went in.

The following is an account of my psychedelic experience. The passage of time was irrelevant and I can't remember everything coherently, but this is an account of what I can remember and how I felt. This is all very specific to me and my experiences - my realisations and experiences do not apply to anyone else at all.

I could see a light in the distance past some shapes. I didn't know what the light was but knew I had to follow it. We were advised before going in to take every opportunity and not run away from anything, and suddenly, I was eager to find everything I could. I was excited and the nausea had passed. I chased the light, but it kept flickering away from me. Sometimes I could almost see it, flashing like an incredible sunset splashed across my vision, but then it vanished again. I kept running and running following the light, getting more and more excited. I went through gates and walls, they were all crashing open or crumbling around me. Eventually I was running up a slope, and completely bathed in beautiful yellow light. Just me. Nothing else. I was on my own, the light was shining all over me and it felt amazing. I felt a confidence I had never felt before. Like I was whole and unbroken and there wasn't anything wrong with me. I basked in the glow, feeling like maybe I was actually fine and great and just like everyone else, and then I felt my mouth start to smile. Realising it would look ridiculous to everyone in the room, I instantly tried to stop, but no. I could feel the medicine pulling up the corners of my mouth, willing me to smile. What reason was there not to be happy? I couldn't think of one. The overwhelming message was this:

“The only thing stopping you from being happy is you.”

I kept running, kept smiling, and every time my mouth started to relax back into a neutral position, the medicine pulled the corners back up, forcing me to smile. At one point I was laughing I think. Drunk on the intoxicating feeling of being good enough and just being myself.

What is that music? Am I creating that?! I wished I knew how to write music so I could save it forever.

I continued to explore, unsure what I was looking for, no idea of how much time had passed. I saw an ex boyfriend that I didn't treat very well and we talked. I don't think he could forgive me. I would always be the villain in his story and had to put that behind me. I don't remember what else happened but I remember not being sure if I needed the bathroom or not. I knew my intention was to break down walls so I remember wondering if I should just go to the bathroom on the mattress but fortunately decided that wasn't a wall that needed breaking.

I took off my eye mask and a facilitator came to make sure I didn't need any help and told me not to lock the bathroom door. I used the toilet and washed my hands and was thinking about how beautiful the facilitator was and how sorry I already was that I had rejected her, and how much I loved her in that moment. After washing my hands, I turned the tap on again to feel the cool water as it felt so good and I splashed some around a bit because it looked so fun!! (side note: apologies to whoever had to dry up after me!!!)

Back on the mattress and grinning inanely, I put the eye mask back on and that was when the work began for me.

I kept seeing doors, and trying to get through them. Was that a glimpse of my mother? I think so.. I tried to follow but couldn't catch up. I couldn't quite see her face. I kept following but without any success.

Suddenly I was zooming in a little bumper car rocket, seeing people I had disliked or not gotten along with. I was on a journey! "O wow, you're on a journey too! That's amazing! Isn't this amazing?!" Suddenly people who had offended me were just travellers like me! We were all on journeys! Their reactions and comments could no longer affect me - those were reflections on their journeys not on me or my journey!! I could see people playing. The childlike narrative in my head was telling me we could go play too! No one was stopping me from playing, no one was excluding me! It was all just me pulling myself away! I could play and dance with people whenever I wanted! My sister was there, and my friends. My friend from school and I ran up to each other and hugged each other, just so happy to be there in that moment.

I saw my boyfriend - he was on a journey too!! He had a briefcase and he told me he had stuff to figure out too but he was there! I was just happy to see him and wanted to follow him, but I knew that he had his own issues to deal with and I couldn't help him with that.

I could go back to the playing experience at any time, but I knew I needed to chase something else down. My mother was still there, in the peripherals of my vision, hiding. I wondered if she

wanted to play too but felt like she couldn't so I tried to drag her to play too but she disappeared.

At some point I caught up with her. I don't know how or exactly what happened. I told her she had taken something from me when I was a child and had stopped me feeling the joy. I yelled at her that this was my journey, it wasn't about her. It was about me today and my journey was my own. She could be a part of it, but my journey was as important as her journey. I told her she had taken something from me when I was a child and had stopped me feeling the joy. We could both play with the happy people if we wanted but I was on my journey and she couldn't control that. I told her I knew she was on her journey too and maybe she could find her mother, maybe we could look together to see if we could fix things but she resisted. She was hunched over, still hiding, still working, pulling a great weight up a mountain. "It's not too late, we can still get better"

I saw my father on an island in a bubble. I couldn't reach him, I grabbed my mother's hand and said that maybe we could help him as he seemed like he must be unhappy but she resisted. The bubble kept getting further away anyway. I gazed after it, but it wasn't the time for that. I realised I had been crying. I had no idea how much time had passed.

I gripped the compass on the strap around my wrist that had been given to each of us before the ceremony. Suddenly the group singing with their arms around each other before the ceremony was no longer awkward and uncomfortable, it was the most beautiful display of support and unity. I could feel each person in the room, could feel the love and the beautiful intentions from each of them.

After that, I remember following doors, not sure what I was looking for but mainly coming across people I had undervalued and being happy to see them and feeling so proud of them. I saw my friend and her puppy and took the lead, and the puppy was pulling me towards a forest. The narrative continued - "We can play", "we can help people", "what can we do to make things better?"

What am I missing? What haven't I seen? I continued to chase down doors and run around corners but having confronted a lot of huge issues, I wasn't sure what I was looking for next. What is that music? Was I creating that?! At one point, I lifted up my blindfold to ask my facilitator if Vivaldi was playing in my head or in real life.

At this point, I was tired. Emotionally wrung out. I can't express the scale of the emotional processing that took place but I knew I didn't want to do much more of it. I tried to let the

music guide me, but was relieved when I started just seeing black behind my eyelids, rather than more emotional baggage.

Eventually, I raised my eye mask for a bit. My facilitator asked me if I was done and told me that if I wasn't it would be better to put down my eye mask so I could stay in the experience. I lay back, put the eye mask back on and listened to the music, thinking about everyone in my life.

After not too long, I was done. I lifted my eye mask and sat up a bit, looking around the room. Some of the other participants were coming out as well, others were still deep in their experience.

The wonderful facilitators brought us fruit and nuts - beautiful watermelon, strawberries, kiwi, cashews. Nothing had ever tasted so sweet and fresh. Everything around me was amazing. I was so so happy to find my therapist/facilitator sitting next to me. I told her that I was sorry to have rejected her and pulled away and that I loved and was so happy she was there. I thanked my facilitator who had sat with me as well, and greeted the whole world from a brand new perspective. One of the participants and I exchanged smiles and started chatting after a while.

The whole world was new and beautiful, I can't quite describe all the sensations. Other participants were still going and facilitators were still sitting with them.

I continued to play with the compass bracelet. I couldn't imagine a more special object. I had never been sentimental or applied feelings to objects in my life, but I felt in that moment that I wanted to hold onto that time forever, and that compass would always be there on my wrist to take me back. I could see beautiful tulips across the room and wished they were closer, so one of the participants drew a tulip for me in my notepad. I reached for my notepad too and wrote messages of love to everyone I cared about. I wrote what I would say to them in that moment.

I don't know how much time passed, or how long I basked in the glow of the medicine and the beautiful space we were in. At one point a man outside with a ladder walked past the window on his way to fix a roof tile. Somehow it seemed so funny that life was just carrying on. One of the facilitators couldn't find the tortillas she had got out for dinner and this seemed like the funniest thing in the world. I tried to help look for it. I love all the people who were in that room so much and would do absolutely anything for them. I chatted and smiled and just enjoyed the atmosphere. I gave a participant a hug and chatted to her a bit, and told her how brave and amazing she was. At some point in the evening, another participant was able to

communicate a bit, even though he was still reeling, and we hugged and talked about our experience and how beautiful things were.

Eventually, after tasting all the incredible food which had been prepared, I went to bed, but I couldn't sleep! Every time I heard the wind, I couldn't resist going to the window to look outside. I kept standing up to dance. It was the first time in my life that I've felt so free. Eventually, I got to sleep, hoping to still be holding on to that feeling the following day.

Thursday

I woke up concerned. I had had a weirdly negative dream about being rejected in some way. Surely my positive, sunny outlook couldn't have vanished so quickly? I got in the shower and felt the hot water on me, appreciating how lovely it felt and smiled again. No, it had just been a dream!

Moving out into the living space, I smiled at all the people, just feeling so much love in the room.

The focus of today was another breathwork session. I was a little uncertain. I wanted to embrace everything that was offered during the retreat but having had such an intense journey on Wednesday, I was enjoying my time in the real world and wanted to stay there. Once again, I was back on the mattress with my lovely facilitator there supporting me again. After not too long, I was dancing. I was crying and laughing with relief and joy and sitting up on the mattress, dancing and loving the space I was in, the people around me. I didn't stop dancing for the rest of the week and even weeks later, I'm still dancing.

That afternoon, we were given a the task of writing letters to ourselves, which would be posted to us at some future point. I am already nervous to read my letter when it arrives in the post one day, but all I can hope is that it will take me straight back to that incredible beautiful experience we all shared together over the course of those days.

The final sharing circle was that evening. We sang together while we waited for everyone to join. I was open, I shared. I told the group how I had never in my life felt like I could connect with other people but now I knew I could. I told them that I was so incredibly grateful and loved them so much and was thankful to each of them. And that I was dancing and couldn't stop dancing because I felt so free. Each person there contributed to a complete transformation for me and I would always be connected to them and forever be grateful.

Before going to bed, we took the remaining medicine which had been in a glass on the side, and we each gave a spoonful of it back to the earth, under a large tree outside the house.

Friday

Parting was hard. We exchanged numbers and listened to music and all helped to tidy up. There were so many hugs and every time I hugged someone, I was overwhelmed with emotion and happy tears!

3 weeks later

Reality can be tough. The beautiful afterglow protected me from reality in the first week of my return from Amsterdam. It is still protecting me now. Integrating the lessons I've learned into my real life is going to be hard work, but I am meditating most days, doing yoga, walking every day, and spending time at my allotment. I am also doing breathwork before sleep every night. Some days, I feel my previous realities slowly coming at me, threatening to drag me backwards, but so far I've been able to handle everything. Suddenly I can cope with real life, and I'm no longer taking on the stress of those around me.

Fortunately, everything is still beautiful.

I remain so full of love for everyone who shared that experience in beautiful Amsterdam and am carrying that with me into my life.

It is now my intention to engage with this community as much as possible and pay it all forward. I am studying counselling and am starting a course with the BTA to begin to get me ready to be a facilitator of psychedelic experiences for other people, so hopefully I can one day give someone the incredible gift that was given to me.

Aho