

# **MDMA and States of Consciousness**

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## **Introduction**

In the last few years several researches investigated the effects of MDMA on the human body and on the nervous system. Furthermore, a large number of psychiatrists and psychotherapists described the potentialities of this drug for personal growth and for the resolution of psychological problems. Rather rarely, however, were the effects of MDMA analyzed from the point of view of the theoretical study of the states of consciousness. What are the states of consciousness induced by this drug? Have these states equivalents in contemplative practices and in the descriptions of mystics? What is their place among the scheme of the most well-known classifications of the states of consciousness? In this article we will try to answer these questions. We will start from several subjective accounts of experiences with MDMA to be found in the scientific as well as in the "alternative" literature (Eisner, 1994; Metzner & Adamson, 1985; Shulgin & Shulgin, 1992). Our reflections are completely "provisional" and open to subsequent new elaborations, however we think that they are useful to focus the properties of this drug and its possible use in a more thorough and rational way.

## **The main states of consciousness induced by MDMA**

Generally, it is not possible to establish an univocal correspondence between the consumption of a certain psychoactive substance, be it psychedelic or not, and the bringing about of a certain state of consciousness. This because of the role played by factors related to the setting where the experience takes place and to the subject's expectations. In the case of MDMA, however, the variability of specific responses is much lower than that recorded with

psychedelic drugs. The preparation of the experience and the conditions in which it takes place, in fact, contribute in a determinant way to the attainment of a certain state of consciousness among a group of possible states which can be exactly defined. Among them we can distinguish, because of their higher frequency, three particular states: a state of "rave-trance", one of "opening of the center of the heart" and one of "psychological regression." The Tart's pattern of the subsystems of consciousness (Tart 1975) and the more recent one by Walsh (1990) enable us to analyze these states from the point of view of the experience's subjective dimensions. In fact, only through an analysis of this kind are we able to tell whether these are discrete states of consciousness and hence really different one from the other. The common feature of the three above mentioned states is a strong empathy between the participants (from which the term "empathogens" comes with which MDMA is sometimes indicated). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the concerned states are almost always the result of the use of the drug in specific settings. One can affirm, in fact, that "set" and "setting" precisely determine in a decisive way the state which will follow the intake of the drug. The state of rave-trance is generally associated with the use of MDMA in discotheques or anyway in large "raves" with high volume repetitive music and wild dancing. It is characterized, among other things, by a high motor activity, by a reduced sense of self-identity and by a poor awareness of the surrounding background. It is probably a state similar to that of the Dyonisiac rituals of ancient Greece or of some folk festivity of the Middle Ages in which the individual sought in the frenzy of dancing a deliverance from the limitations of his/her individuality (Eliade, 1984). In this case, the main role of MDMA is that of lowering the emotional barriers which restrain the complete manifestation of one's energies and of amplifying the psychophysical effects of music (the famous 120 beats per minute of "house music"). On the contrary, the state of opening of the center of the heart is typical of individual or small group use, at any rate in a situation of quiet and concentration. It is mainly

characterized by an increased lucidity and capability of concentration, by the remarkable sensitivity to the aesthetic aspects of the background and to one's and other's emotions as well as by a greater capability of communicating. On the one hand the tranquillity and the serenity of this state make it close to some yoga meditation practices, on the other the joy and the unconditional love which distinguish it show similarities with some mystical states described in Christian and Muslim tradition. Finally, the state of psychological regression is frequently the result of a psychotherapeutic setting and is characterized by infantile ideas and behavior such as assuming a "fetal" position and the wish of sucking the female breast. The situation, in which alternating phases of temper and sometimes memories and moods connected with childhood experiences are present, is very similar to that occurring with some techniques such as "rebirthing" or "holotropic breathwork". The psychophysical energies mobilized by the intake of the drug result in strong emotional experiences, however, in this case, they are unable to lead to a true opening of the center of the heart.

The states which we have described can also be analyzed, from the neurophysiological point of view, according to the distinction between ergotropic system and trophotropic system, the two complementary somatic systems which control the distribution and utilization of metabolic energy in the body (Gellhorn, 1967). The ergotropic system is connected with the fight-or-flight responses and controls adaptation to quickly changing environmental conditions. The trophotropic system, on the contrary, is responsible for vegetative functions such as digestion, relaxation, sleep, etc. The peculiar psychophysiological effects resulting from the consumption of MDMA can be interpreted as deriving from a simultaneous discharge of both systems (Laughlin et al., 1992:319), obtained however in a different way according to circumstances. As far as the rave-trance state is concerned, in fact, one starts from a hyperergotropic condition, with high excitement due to cadenced music and to dancing to reach, in the middle of it, a sudden activation of the trophotropic system experienced as a

sensation of "oceanic tranquillity", of floating and of detachment from physical sensations. As for the state of opening of the center of the heart, instead, one starts from a basic trophotropic condition, of concentration and meditation, in which a sudden eruption of the ergotropic system takes place with very strong "energy rushes" crossing the body, associated with physical sensations and movements corresponding to the hyperactivity of the ergotropic system. Therefore, the intake of MDMA would be a method to bring about in a direct way conditions which could be otherwise obtained through other forms of alteration of the balance between ergotropic and trophotropic system such as, for example, some meditation practices.

### **MDMA and mysticism**

The states of rave-trance and regression can be easily reached in other ways too, both with other drugs (a good deal of the pills taken in discotheques contain ephedrin or caffeine only) and by specific techniques (such as hypnosis). In our opinion, the most interesting and specific potentiality of MDMA is its capability, in certain situations, to "open the center of the heart" and therefore in the rest of this article this state will be mainly dealt with. The opening of the center of the heart is a psychological condition characterized by increased lucidity and awareness, together with a strong feeling of love for oneself and for other people. A rite of close physical and emotional contact restricted to a limited number of acquaintances, a walk in a meadow full of flowers, and listening to certain types of music are conditions which may easily lead the experience with MDMA towards such a condition which shows parallels, yet with all proper differences, in Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. For Hinduism, for example, the "center of the heart" corresponds to the fourth chakra. Its position is in the cardiac region and the air element, the sense of touch, the green color and the musical note Fa are associated with it. These associations, far from being arbitrary, are the result of a deep "neuroexoteric knowledge" and according to some people they can play an important role in programming an experience with MDMA. However, the most vivid and penetrating

psychological descriptions of the state of "opening of the heart" are those of Christian and Muslim mystics. In this connection, Christian authors speak of "notizia generale e amorosa" (S. Giovanni della Croce, 1985:118) and of "raccoglimento dell'anima" (S. Teresa di Gesù, in Buber, 1987:177), whereas the Sufi mystic Farid Od-Din Attar speaks of a condition called "the vale of love" and Gurdjieff, in more recent times, of a "True Emotional Center" (to which he associates the vibrational level 12 of his scale). The similarities between these descriptions and the accounts of some experiences with MDMA are numerous and significant. On the other hand, the states described by us are quite far from the true "ecstasy" which is described by Christian mystics as "rapture" or "flight" of the soul (S. Giovanni della Croce, 1985:568, 571).

Furthermore, it is interesting to examine the great number of imagines and metaphors based on the concept of "fire" and "heat" accompanying the descriptions of the above mentioned mystic states. Also MDMA, as is well-known, causes a rising of bodily temperature which in some cases can exceed 40 degrees (this thermal effect is the cause of many serious and even mortal accidents occurred to young people who have used the drug in discotheques and other densely crowded places). A similar effect can be obtained also through meditation practices. For example, think of "tapas", the ascetic heat of the Hindu tradition and of people practising Tumm-Tibetan Yoga, who melt snow with the heat of their body (Benson et al., 1993). A similar reasoning could be made for aspects connected to the other "energetic" manifestations, such as tremors and energy rushes. In our opinion, the analysis of such metaphors offers interesting prospects as for the comprehension of the symbolic interpretation which the subject can give to his/her peculiar physiological condition, in a social-cultural setting. In fact, it is not a matter of reducing religious and spiritual aspects to physiological processes, but of seeing in which way these processes, whatever their origin may be, become the starting experience datum, the *materia prima* for the subsequent cultural symbolisations

(Laughlin et al., 1992:159). It is worth underlining that the power of MDMA of causing quick and strong physical and mental modifications can be used both for the psychological as well as spiritual development, and, as it happens more often, to strengthen a compulsive behavior of dependence and abuse (Metzner, 1994). One thing is experiencing a certain "superior" state of consciousness, in a more or less hazardous way, with a chemical substance or through meditation, another thing is reaching a stage of development of the self corresponding to an integration of the significant aspects of this experience in daily life, that is in the "ordinary" state of consciousness. This is the target of spiritual traditions which we have here mentioned. Furthermore, in all above systems the state which we have described is not at all one of the highest, but it is placed only at the beginning of the journey of spiritual accomplishment.

#### **A glance to some theoretical systems**

How is the state of opening of the heart placed inside a theoretical pattern of classification of the states of consciousness? Let us briefly examine three hierarchical patterns, in other words offering a "vertical" classification of such states, influenced both by the great Eastern and Western spiritual traditions and by modern development psychology. John Lilly describes with efficacy a state which he defines as "state of consciousness +12", characterized by bliss, reception of divine grace, heightened bodily awareness and cosmic love (Lilly, 1972). Following Gurdjieff, Lilly places such state in the "center of emotions" in the breast. According to Lilly, state +12 can be reached with not high doses of LSD or with different meditation and psychological techniques. However, his descriptions also coincide significantly with those of people who used MDMA for their personal growth. As for the Ken Wilber's model of "spectrum of consciousness", subsequent to that of Lilly, the accounts of the many experiences with MDMA undoubtedly place themselves at the level of the so-called "Centauric Self": a stage of development of the trans-verbal Self, however not yet trans-personal, which constitutes the complete accomplishment of the egoic potentialities

(spontaneous will, creative wish, autonomy and self-actualization), and at the same time the transition towards "the fine and transpersonal realms of being" (Wilber, 1980). Finally, the theory of the eight cerebral circuits, conceived by Timothy Leary in the seventies and then resumed and perfected by Robert Anton Wilson (Leary, 1979; Wilson, 1987) is an interesting attempt of classification of the states of consciousness considering both the theory of evolution and neurosciences. According to such theory, the ecstatic states which can be reached with MDMA fall within the functioning of the "fifth circuit" or "holistic neurosomatic circuit": a neural circuit marked by global and non-linear ways of the information processing. Furthermore, Leary explicitly speaks of MDMA and defines it as a "neurosomatic drug".

### **Conclusions**

In this study we tried to define the relationship existing between the consumption of a psychoactive substance, MDMA, and the attainment of certain states of consciousness. The way so far has been that of analyzing the experiences with MDMA from the point of view of the theory on the states of consciousness, starting from the subjective accounts available in the literature and looking for possible points of contacts with the states described in different spiritual traditions. We have then examined the possible placing of such states within some theoretical patterns of classification of the states of consciousness. We think that such a research may supply indications on the connection between neurophysiological processes resulting from the intake of a psychoactive substance, the conditions in which the experience takes place and the symbolic interpretation of the corresponding states of conscience, either in a psychological or spiritual sense.

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