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Ethnographic Accounts of Ketamine Explorations in Psychedelic Culture

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Off-label use of ketamine as a mind-altering substance did not begin in the laboratory, but in the psychedelic culture that grew out of the 1960s counterculture movement. Whatever the risks and limitations of such experimentation, without them the remarkable therapeutic effects of the drug might well have gone unnoticed, and unresearched. The following personal accounts—both inspiring and cautionary—offer glimpses into the cultural contexts that found ketamine to be much more than a reliable anesthetic.

Keywords: *Ketamine, near-death experience, NDE, psychedelic, Esalen, John Lilly, addiction*

Ketamine Days *by Kenneth Ring*

My adventures with ketamine began with a fateful phone call over thirty years ago. In August of 1984, I was in California to give lectures and meet with professional colleagues in connection with my recently published book on near-death experiences, *Heading Toward Omega*. The last of my talks on that visit was to a San Francisco Bay Area medical society, which had been arranged by my cousin Cliff, a cardiologist. That evening, while I was still at Cliff's house in Orinda before leaving for Los Angeles the next day, I received a phone call from another Orinda resident who was, but would hardly remain, a stranger to me. Her name was Therese.

It turned out that Therese had read my first near-death experience (NDE) book, *Life and Death*, and wanted to talk to me about a professional matter related to that book. Since she had discovered that I was serendipitously staying near her house in Orinda, she wondered whether I could come over to meet her while I was still in town. I explained that it would not be possible, since I had to pack and leave the next morning. Therese countered by asking whether it might be possible for me to take some time on the phone right then, so that she could explain just a bit of what she had in mind. She had a very pleasant and gracious manner of speaking—there was certainly something very appealing, almost

seductive, about her voice—so I readily consented. She then had a bombshell to drop concerning another invitation altogether.

Therese told me that she had been working with an oncologist, and that they were both concerned with trying to find ways for terminal patients to die with less fear and with a sense of transcendent revelation similar to that which near-death experiencers often reported. In fact, they wanted to try to induce something like an NDE, and the means they proposed to use for this purpose was the anesthetic ketamine. Because Therese had read my first book on NDEs, she regarded me as an expert on the subject. She suggested to her oncologist colleague that she ask me to be a professional subject who would take ketamine under supervision in order to see the extent to which this drug might mimic an actual NDE.

Whoa! In my mind I remember thinking, “Oh, God, wait just a minute.” I already was familiar with work that had been done with terminal cancer patients along these lines using LSD, which Stan Grof and Joan Halifax had described in their book, *The Human Encounter with Death*. They had indeed shown that LSD employed in this way sometimes induced an experience that shared many of the same components and after-effects of an actual NDE, including, in most cases, a reduction of the fear of death and an increased expectation for some form of life after death.

But ketamine was another story. I knew something about this drug from having read about John Lilly's experiments with it and from some other sources, and what I had heard had certainly made me wary of it. I definitely had never had any interest in trying it—if anything, I was averse to doing so, particularly because I knew that it was administered by injection. Thoughts of heroin addiction flickered in my mind. Besides, my days of using psychoactive drugs were by then long passed. I had experimented with LSD, peyote, and psilocybin for a while during the 1970s, but I had taken them only about once a year, and had stopped for good in 1977. I had no desire to try anything new along those lines, and certainly not anything like ketamine, which for me was a drug associated with real risk and danger.

"Ah, I don't think this would be for me, Therese."

Therese had an alternative proposal ready. "Well, you don't have to make up your mind now, Ken. Just think about it, and let me send you a little literature on the subject, OK?" She then mentioned that the following Spring, she would be coordinating a conference on psychedelics at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, and wondered whether I would have an interest in being there—particularly because John Lilly himself would be attending. She added that it would be held during the first half of June, 1985.

Now here's the kicker. Therese did not know, when she tendered this invitation, that I would actually be at Esalen exactly at that time. I had first visited Esalen in 1983 when its co-founder, Michael Murphy, had asked me to give a program on NDEs. It was successful, and Michael and I hit it off. He had recently been in touch to invite me again, this time for a much more extensive engagement at the institute. He wanted me to come for three weeks in the late Spring of 1985 as a scholar-in-residence so that I could conduct a workshop on NDEs and present my work in other workshops and seminars that would follow mine, including a month-long workshop that would be conducted by none other than Esalen's then-permanent scholar-in-residence, Stan Grof. I had loved being at Esalen on my first visit, so naturally I jumped at the chance. So I already knew what Therese didn't—that I would be there at the same time her conference would be held.

It is a cliché among people in my world to say, "there are no coincidences." Being contrary, I usually reply, "except for accidents and chance events." In this case, however, I couldn't help feeling a little unnerved

when she invited me to attend. It already seemed like destiny had decided to take a hand in my affairs.

Naturally, I told her I would love to come. Naturally, she was delighted. We agreed to table the whole business about ketamine for now. In due course, however, she would send me some materials pertaining to the conference. That, for the moment, was all.

Fast forward to June, 1985. By then I had already spent a very engrossing week at Esalen, and had become very involved with a woman I'll simply call L. with whom I was staying. One morning, several days before Therese's conference was scheduled to begin, L. told me that Therese's roommate, S., would be arriving in order to set up things for the event. Since L. and S. were already good friends, L. invited me to come along to meet her.

That evening, the three of us met and slipped into a warm pool together, sans clothes of course—Esalen style. We were alone except for one fellow at the end of the pool. At some point, S. whispered to L., but in my hearing, "Would you like to do a little K tomorrow?"

"What's K?" I asked.

"Ketamine", L. whispered in my ear.

"Uh-oh," I thought.

Of course, I was supposed to be "saving myself" for a possible ketamine experience, which I hadn't ruled out. It had been on the agenda for Therese and me to discuss after she arrived.

L. quickly expressed her enthusiasm for having a ketamine session the following evening. She knew that a grand house on her property was temporarily vacant and L. had the key and permission to use it.

I was very conflicted, and more than a little afraid. I explained all the reasons for my hesitation, but briefly, urgently, and *sotto voce* so that the fellow who was still at the other end of the pool couldn't hear. Not only was I concerned about violating an implicit understanding about remaining a "ketamine virgin" for Therese, but I was really worried about having to take it by injection.

S. said to me, "Ken, I have taken it about 200 times. It's perfectly safe. I know how to give injections. Meet me for breakfast tomorrow and I'll answer all your questions."

By now, I was virtually living with L.—things happen fast at Esalen, and now I was already on the verge of taking ketamine with her and S.—so the following morning I had to hustle to meet S. for breakfast.

"I have a lot of questions," I began.

"I'm sure I can answer them all," S. replied.

She did give me the feeling I could trust her. That was something I had quickly learned during my short stay at Esalen. You had to trust. If you were going to take a leap in the dark, you had to assume that someone would be there to catch you. S. radiated confidence; I felt I would be safe with her and that she would answer my questions truthfully based on her own extensive experience with ketamine. In the end, after she had explained a great deal to me, I felt reassured. But there was still one problem: Therese. I mentioned this to S.

"Call her," she said.

When later that morning I was able to reach Therese, who would be leaving for the conference in just a couple of days, she was very upset. She really didn't want me to do it—it would bias my reaction to the kind of ketamine test under controlled conditions that she was still hoping I would assent to. She urged me to decline. There was also some evident bad feeling between L. and Therese, as if they were rivals of sort (which was indeed the case, as I soon learned).

I neither consented to Therese's request, nor rebuffed it. I just didn't commit myself one way or another. I think I evaded the whole matter and simply told her I would consider it and think it over. The conversation ended on a note of irresolution. I didn't think Therese was happy with me or the prospect I might be doing ketamine with L.

By that time, however, I had come to feel very comfortable not only with S., but also very close to L. Because there was already a strong bond of friendship between S. and L., and a growing sense of camaraderie among the three of us, I rather resented Therese's attempt to place a block of sorts in the path of what seemed a natural progression.

I decided to follow the call of my desire rather than to honor what wasn't exactly a pledge to Therese. I would do it. What the hell! This was Esalen. At Esalen, you took chances, trusting you would land on your feet.

That evening, after dark—for it was still early June—the three of us made our way down to the large house L. had commandeered for our session. Immediately I was struck by its burnished beauty. I remember a very ornately designed banister with a series of balusters that led down to the lower portion of the house, where there was a bedroom in which we would stay once we had received our injections of ketamine. In the nearby

bathroom, S. got out the syringes and the little vials of ketamine, but before she began the injections, L., who was always the most eloquent of the three of us (she had a gift for spontaneous flowery incantations) took a few minutes to do a kind of ceremony, asking blessings for a safe and fulfilling journey. Now we were ready to begin.

S. had explained that even at the sub-anesthetic levels we would be taking, once the injection had taken place, we had to immediately go to the nearby bed, lie down, and wait. She also said she had to be careful in order to make sure that there were no bubbles in the syringe because that could cause problems. I began to feel very nervous.

She would first inject L., then me (in my thigh), and finally herself. Were we ready?

Gulp.

Once S. had injected me, I made my way to the bed. L. was already supine to my left, I was in the middle of the bed, and S. would soon join us, and lie to my right.

I waited.

After only a few minutes, I began to see swirling colors—beautiful oranges and glowing peaceful reds. I was no longer aware of my body. It was as if I were gliding on a river of color, and then I was the colors, I had merged with them.

But next, I found I was holding L.'s hand with my left hand and S.'s with my right, and I was blending into them. I could feel their energies, their essence in me, because seemingly my own boundaries had dissolved. I said—we never forgot this—"The L. of Us and the S. of Us."

L. hissed softly but with emphasis, "Yes!"

We lapsed into silence.

I continued to ride the waves of ecstasy, but this was entirely different from what I had previously experienced on MDMA, which I had taken several days earlier with L. There were peaceful, floating, beautiful colors. Then at one point, everything went black—very black. I grew frightened; I thought I might be dying. Then, a radiant exfoliating burst of new colors and another level of the trip had begun. I was no longer aware of anything but beauty—no body, no Ken, nothing but being merged with the very sensations of the experience itself from which I was not separate, there being no "I."

Eventually—because I had no sense of time I had no idea how much time had elapsed—I became aware that I was feeling the energies of L. and S. again. I was still holding their hands. But then—I remember

this distinctly—my left hand began “making love” with L.’s hand. It was in the way our fingers were moving together. She responded. This was love. I felt a little bad not doing the same with S., but it was L. I was drawn to.

It turned out about 45 minutes had gone by. I was still very woozy and had to continue to lie there for a few minutes while the two of them got up.

There was a large, beautifully designed blue stone-inlaid circular hot tub nearby. Someone—probably S.—turned it on. Eventually, we all got into it and began talking softly about what we had experienced. We laughed over my phrase, “The L. of Us and the S. of Us.” But it still seemed true—we had bonded, we had blended, we had become one. One in three persons, the Esalen trinity. (By the way, twenty years later, we are all still very deep and loving friends with one another.)

I spent the next day recovering—and reflecting on what I had experienced the night before. I had never taken anything like ketamine before—the experience was so qualitatively different from anything I had encountered with any of the psychedelics I had used during the ’70s or with MDMA. I wasn’t hooked, but I was exceedingly intrigued. Now I was really looking forward to doing it again, this time with Therese.

Speaking of Therese, she was now due the next day. The people for the conference were already arriving, S. was now busy at work preparing the conference room and making various arrangements, and Therese was scheduled to arrive that evening. I needed to get the ketamine out of my head, so to speak, and ready myself for my meeting with Therese. I hoped she wouldn’t be angry with me when she learned I was no longer a ketamine virgin.

She wasn’t. During the time of her conference, we quickly were on our way to becoming good friends, particularly because of another deep MDMA session we had together the night of the first day of the conference.

Therese, however, still wanted me to do ketamine with her and invited me to come up to her home in the San Francisco Bay Area once my stint at Esalen was over. Now I agreed with alacrity. I was on a ketamine roll.

The day after I had arrived, she proposed that we try an experiment. At that time, Therese was interested in exploring various combinations of drugs. In this case, she suggested that we start with MDMA and use it as a kind of booster. When that drug had reached its peak intensity after about two hours, I would then be injected

with ketamine. (S., who was in the area but had vacated the apartment temporarily so that Therese and I could remain there together, would be summoned to do the injection.) Was I game?

“But what about that ketamine session with that oncologist of yours?”

“Oh, we can put that off for a while.”

I had a little hesitation, but not for long, since I had already bonded so much with Therese at Esalen. Therese’s apartment had obviously been set up for such sessions. My impression was that this was the way she conducted some of her work with her clients. Since I had already come to feel very comfortable there, I was ready to relax with her, be close to her physically, and begin my second MDMA encounter with her. S. came in to wish us well, and then went elsewhere, presumably into her bedroom.

Therese and I lay down on one of her very plush rugs and waited for the MDMA to take effect. By this time, I was familiar enough with the drug to know how it would affect me. Once more, I felt myself bonding with Therese, with her essence, and the feelings just built and built with waves of love lifting me into a world of pulsating ecstasy.

At some point, S. quietly came in and injected me, but not Therese, with ketamine, but this time the dose, by agreement, was much higher than that I had taken at Big Sur. This, too, was part of the experiment. Not surprisingly, my experience was radically different. Although it started in the same way, with those beautiful shimmering colors into which I soon merged, I then found myself—although I could only recall this afterward—experiencing what I subsequently came to label “the creation of the universe.” Somehow, I seemed to be an indissoluble part of “the Big Bang,” except it was a soft feeling of being, not seeing, something like an expanding balloon that contained the germ of all the galaxies that were then first forming. It was as if, encoded into the star-stuff of which I was composed, was information about the very origins and evolution of the universe, which I was now tapping into. (Afterward I couldn’t resist the admittedly wild speculation that this information must somehow be contained in our very cellular structure, but I had no such thoughts then. I was not capable of thinking at all.) I remember that the energy of this soft expansion was not neutral—this creation was infused with a feeling of love. (Again, afterward, I was inclined to feel that this was probably due to the effect of MDMA.)

At this point, there was no “I.” There was only the experience of oneness with the nascent universe as it was in the process of formation. Any sense of time had completely disappeared. Not only that, any sense of being human, much less a particular human called Ken Ring, had also vanished. There was only this experience, but no one was observing it.

At some point—it must have been perhaps a half hour later from what Therese, who had been observing me, told me—I began to have a faint inkling of a kind of descent through an array of what seemed to be galaxies all around me, as if some invisible force, a kind of gravity, was causing a sense of downward motion—although in fact, there was still no sense of “I” or anything human—just this feeling of a descent through star-systems.

After a time, I had the first intimation that there was something called “Earth,” which appeared to be my destination, and with that came the slow realization that I was something—a person! That I was human, that I was heading back toward Earth. But my identity was still not clear to me.

I later learned that S. had been there during this whole session, and that she had had a tape-recorder handy in case I said anything of interest. It’s good that she did because what happened next surprised everyone.

I didn’t come back as myself, Ken Ring.

I returned with another identity altogether. I was a Dutch tugboat captain who appeared to have lived in the 19th century, and I spoke English with a distinct accent (that later seemed to be like that of the famous Austrian comic film actor, S. Z. (Cuddles) Sakall, a staple in films of the forties, most famously *Casablanca*). When I started talking in this accent, I heard Therese hiss to S. “Is the tape recorder going? We have to get this!” I have a very clear memory of what I was experiencing at this time.

First, it was as if in my final descent toward Earth—as I was slowly parachuting down, as it were—I had landed not on the ground, but had got stuck in the branches of a tree. On the ground was Ken Ring, and I, as the tugboat captain, was aware of him. But Ken Ring was no longer who I was.

Second, I remember saying and repeating, “this is a distinct personality, a distinct personality.” I could not just see this man; I was him. I could feel him as if I indeed lived inside of him. I knew that he was a “cold man” (not at all like Ken)—that he was lonely, and somewhat embittered—and that he was actually envious

of Ken Ring. About him he said, “Yah, Ken Ring, the guy that likes the ladies.”

I knew what he looked like. I could see his face, his sideburns and whiskers. I could see him on his boat, and I could see him in a tavern where he made his remark about Ken Ring’s fondness for ladies. I knew he was Dutch, even if his accent was more like that of an Austrian—and I knew I was him, not me.

You know how when you are driving in a car listening to the radio and you begin to lose the signal? Well, something like that began to happen next. I felt that the tugboat captain, whom Therese later labeled “the immigrant,” was beginning to fade out and as he did—to continue the metaphor I used earlier—it as if I was now being sucked out of the tree and down into the body and person of Ken Ring.

Plop! I was back. I recognized—with relief—that I was Ken Ring again. But I remembered everything about “the immigrant,” and Therese had recorded my words and accent.

In all, over the next year, I wound up doing ketamine nine times, including my first experience in Big Sur. In five of those sessions, “the immigrant” was present during the penultimate stage I passed through on my way to myself. He was always the same, and he always, as far as I can now recall, spoke in the same accent and had the same personality—cold, unfeeling, somewhat cruel, and lonely. I leave it to you to interpret who—or what—he was, and why he was so often a part of my ketamine experiences as they terminated.

My subsequent experiences with ketamine, sometimes with Therese, but mostly with others, were similar, but on the whole, not quite so intense as my initial ones had been—though still full of marvelous and enthralling sensations and periods of ego-dissolution. Whenever I would enter the k-state, I would recognize it immediately as distinctively sui generis. It represented a world of its own, radically different from any of my other experiences in altered states of consciousness and utterly beguiling. I might have used words such as “captivating” or “enchanting” were it not for one further experience I had under Therese’s aegis the next year.

Remember her wish to have me become a volunteer for a ketamine session with her oncologist colleague? Well, even though I was no longer a ketamine “virgin,” but almost a ketamine veteran by now, she still wanted me to undertake this journey, if only for the sake

of satisfying her colleague's professional interest in my report.

So one day in the winter of 1986, at this doctor's office in the hospital, I would be given the anesthetic with a special infusion that would allow the doctor to titrate me—that is, he could control the amount of ketamine to be administered so that it could slowly be increased to its maximum. During this process, he would tape-record any utterances that I might emit and afterward, once I had recovered, he would interview me. His main interest would be to determine the extent to which I felt my experience mimicked that of an actual NDE. Therese, of course, had accompanied me there, and she would remain at my side during the entire session.

In going through my boxes of memorabilia recently, I was surprised to come across a cassette tape of this session and a two-page letter from the doctor summarizing my experience and what he felt he had learned from it. I didn't have the patience to re-listen to the tape, but I did read his letter. It brought back some aspects of the experience for me, though it was one that I remember very well, with horror.

Although some of the excerpts from the tape that the doctor's letter includes make it clear I was again experiencing vivid colors at the onset, when the dosage was increased, I was already indicating that I was "farther out now ... whirling in the cosmos ... like part of a galaxy ... moving through vast, vast, vast spaces ... like floating nebulae ... going further out into space ... scintillating. I see more light"

Then there was nothing for a long time, but what I remembered afterward was something that gave me a sense of profound metaphysical fright. What I became aware of when the dosage was apparently at or near its maximum was that human beings were not real. It was as if they were mere projections, like the images on a screen. But people were deluded because they had come to identify with the images in the same way that when we watch a movie, we see people, not images. But only the images are real, not the people. We were no more than simulacra—the whole of existence was not as we supposed. Instead, it was empty—just full of moving images. Who or what was behind the projector? Nothing

I am certain that I have never experienced anything more unnerving and psychologically destabilizing in my life. I felt that all points of ordinary reference and meaning had dissolved and that it left me, or what I had thought of as me, completely void.

The doctor wrote, "At this level, the process of ego-dissolution appeared to start. Pertinent comments included the statement 'I'm gone ... gone ... gone' and somewhat later repetitions of the word 'collapsing.' Later [there were] long howling vocalizations. During this period the speech was very dysarthric, but there was a plaintive and possibly dysphoric quality to it The first sign of recovery was a chuckle or laugh which sounded almost like crying. Then the first clear vocalization, 'I'm alive ... I'm alive.' "

What I remember at this point was seeing Therese's elbow. I reached out for it the way a man drowning in an ocean and overcome by fear reaches for the edge of a raft. Although I obviously felt I had in a sense returned from death, what I had experienced was in no way like a transcendent radiant NDE. If anything, it was the opposite, and it left me with a feeling of something close to dread. What if what I had perceived was somehow a kind of ultimate truth about the nature of things that was blessedly veiled from us during states of ordinary consciousness?

Certainly, I had never before experienced anything like that on any of my previous trips with L. or Therese, nor would I experience anything remotely like it in any of my subsequent ketamine sessions. In fact, I've never known what to make of it. It occurred to me afterward that maybe I had never had so much ketamine in my system, that perhaps I had had too much this time. Or perhaps I had been given a glimpse of something that was an essential, if unutterably frightening, part of our universe. All I know is that that the experience haunted me for days afterward and that I have never forgotten it.

Years later—almost three decades now—what do I make of these experiences? To be sure, I can't draw any generalizations about ketamine experiences on the basis of my own idiographic encounters with this drug. I don't want to claim that they have any ontological significance either. Mine were what they were, and while others may have had experiences that seemed to mimic at least some aspects of NDEs, that certainly was not true for me.

Nevertheless, I still regard ketamine as providing the means of access to a distinctive world of revelatory experiences that usually left me in a state of rapturous wonder even if upon recovering it was hard to retain much of the contents of these extraordinary voyages, which were in any event almost impossible afterward to capture in the net of language.

I remember that at the time of Therese's Esalen conference that John Lilly, one of the participants, was hardly ever present. Dressed in a kind of brown monk's robe, he seemed mostly to be in his VW microbus (if memory serves) injecting himself, as I was later told, every 15 minutes or so with ketamine. I remember thinking at the time thoughts along the lines of, "How sad—such a brilliant man," and so on.

But after my own experiences with ketamine, I was inclined to see things very differently. At least on the basis of my own experiences, ketamine gives you access to a world that is so fantastically alluring and full of wonders that to me it makes perfect sense to want to explore it, just as adventurous naturalists of previous centuries were keen to travel to unknown and exotic lands. I'm glad I took the journey.

John Lilly and Ketamine: Some Personal Recollections

by Ralph Metzner

I first met John Lilly in the late 1960s when I was living in Southern California near Idyllwild, teaching at an alternative residential High School for disturbed adolescents. I was aware of his early research with dolphins and also that he had written a serious analysis of the potentials of psychedelic drug experiences to open up new avenues for scientific investigations of the mind-body interface. I had read and heard about his involvement with the Arica school of meditation founded by Oscar Ichazo and his subsequent disillusionment with the esotericism and power politics of that school. From the late 1960s to the late 1970s I had been involved in a different esoteric meditation group, the School of Actualism. I was impressed by the fact that John Lilly drove up to Idyllwild in the van he was living in at the time, and took several of the meditation lessons that our group was learning. He became one of my models for his relentless devotion to the search for scientific truth—regardless of the social status and official credibility of the particular methodology involved.

I connected with John Lilly again in the early 1970s in Northern California, where I was working as a psychotherapist and teaching at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. I attended several talks and seminars he gave on the extreme altered states induced by sensory isolation environments—to which he had added the refinement of inducing a

sense of weightlessness by floating in heavily salted warm water. This particular methodology of inducing profoundly relaxing states has become incorporated into psychophysical health culture through what is commonly known as samadhi tanks.

Subsequently, in the mid-to-late 1970s I met John and Toni Lilly several times through the month-long residential seminars at the Esalen Institute. These events were conducted by Stanislav Grof, fellow explorer of the potentials of psychedelic and other non-ordinary states of consciousness, who was then Fellow-in-Residence. My friend, the Basque anthropologist Angeles Arrien, accompanied me on several of these journeys to Esalen. It was on one of these occasions that Stan Grof offered me the opportunity to experience the state of consciousness induced by intra-muscular ketamine injection—a state that was significantly different than other psychedelics I had been exploring for the past 20 years. Classified as a dissociative anaesthetic—ketamine expanded my consciousness into an abstract realm of thoughts and images, but without any of the sensory fireworks of the classic psychedelics and without their potential for dramatic emotional upheavals. Ketamine brought me to a realm even more difficult to translate into verbal descriptions than the classic hallucinogens, but was uniformly pleasurable in a kind of even-tempered ecstasy. The notoriously spectacular "bad trips" of the classic hallucinogens seemed distant from this experience.

Living, teaching, and practicing in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1980s, I conducted a few trials using intramuscularly injected ketamine, under medical supervision, as an adjunct to psychotherapy. I remember one client, who was heavily occupied with obsessive ruminations; these stopped for the hour or so of the ketamine state, which he enjoyed, but resumed afterwards. I also collaborated with a couple of medical doctor friends, one of them an emergency physician. We conducted a study in which we wanted to see if we could stay in verbal communication with each other while both being under ketamine's influence. The experiment was a total failure. Each of us got caught up in attempting to decode and describe the strange abstract thought-forms we were individually experiencing.

It was from the emergency physician that I learned of John Lilly's increasingly addictive use of ketamine. At first he had collaborated with John, impressed by his seriousness in trying to scientifically map and describe interior landscapes. But after some

weeks, he gradually came to realize that John was using him as a drug connection for what had become a daily or multiple daily use of ketamine. My friend stopped all contact. He told me that John claimed he was “channeling” extra-terrestrial and extra-dimensional entities—but also occasionally a Los Angeles TV station reporting the evening news.

A few times on trips to Southern California during the 1980s, I connected with John, as well as Toni, ever his warm-hearted and high-spirited companion. However at social gatherings he would often leave the party and retreat to his van parked outside, apparently preferring to explore his interior states to socializing with others. I heard from one of our mutual friends concerned about his excessive abuse of ketamine that John had said he liked being in out-of-body states, because he had been raised by puritanical parents from whom he learned to dislike or even hate his body.

The German-born innovative video-artist known as Brummbear, with whom I had connected a few times during the 1980s and who was close to Lilly, sent me an e-mail message in 2001, on the occasion of John’s funeral, at which he gave a eulogy. As of 2013, Brummbear was dealing with his own cancer—but gave me permission to quote from his talk at John’s memorial. This is what he said:

John Lilly was a close friend of mine—for over ten years we were fellow ketamaniacs, even though I also added MDMA, 2CB and other Shulgin-products in my research. The last time I shot up was a couple of years ago in Hawaii and already then it took quite a toll on my body and even more on John’s. Taking ketamine is not just a flirt with death—it’s a tantric fuck with death—all nine holes of your body participating—and it’s not free! (Price of admission, like in Steppenwolf—your mind.) So when we saw each other last week he asked what had become a ritual between us: “Got some K, Brummbear?” And we confided with each other that we hadn’t taken any psychedelics for some time—but also didn’t seem to miss it that much. A day without pain is such a nice gift, as you probably understand very well.

For myself, I will always remember John Lilly’s ferociously fearless explorations of the further reaches of the mind—even at great cost to his body and to his social connections.

**Ketamine Dependence:
John Lilly as Explorer and as Caveat**
by Philip E. Wolfson

For my own part, I first was exposed to John Lilly and ketamine at Esalen in the mid ’80s when he pulled up to our weeklong ARUPA colloquium in a giant white RV and gauntly strode forth, a very altered dude indeed. During those days with him, I felt disappointed with his lack of coherence and Messianism, which he boldly presented as his personal exploration of the cosmic consciousness that he was performing solo for all of our benefit. He was unabashed about putting needles into various parts of his body that were not suppurating or scarred from recent and long term use—and he was running out of corporeal space. He shot up intramuscularly and it seemed subcutaneously as well—and frequently—it seemed every couple of hours or so, but of that I am not certain.

When I was a young man, Lilly had impressed me with his towering intellect and fearlessness in seeking altered states and the source of consciousness. His metaphysical autobiography, *The Scientist*, was eccentric, tendentious and fascinating, and it also seemed just too out of here, on the edge of paranoia and world egress. The person who arrived at Esalen had both feet in the stratosphere and nothing on the ground. I was not alone in my disappointment and sense even of repugnance. Yet, there was also that curiosity that is inflamed when a brilliant person turns to a path that must therefore have some great depth and allure, perhaps novel wisdom making, even realization. Addiction is generally not attractive, no matter the substance, or the rationalization. In fact, Lilly’s ketamine dependence was both a warning and a turn-off, and my sense was that many of the others who watched him did not feel induced at that time to try the drug.

But addiction is another one of those words—dismissive, full of judgment, too encompassing—and while that is to some extent on the mark, a cautionary on many levels, there are other aspects. Lilly was an exemplar in many respects. He had developed single-mindedness to his own exploration of consciousness that preceded ketamine and included intense brain exploration and study, psychedelics, Samadhi states and meditation, isolation tank development and countless immersions in various states. Ketamine was a means to

further that exploration and he felt its power to carry him to greater depths on his particular version of his journey.

So, how do we get out there and lose it? That is an important question for those of us who use and advocate psychedelics as mind manifesting and transformational—inter and intra-personally. Any one doing this work as a therapist will come across those folks who become too attached to a drug or drugs, who make broad mistakes, lose their relationships, even themselves. This is neither a rarity nor a commonality. And it is always a matter of balance—and losing that balance. Or being in an unbalanced state and trying to gain balance by consuming drugs that give us relief from ourselves; or give us a sense of purpose and attainment; or our ego driving us to a singularity of view that resembles hypomania/mania in the sense of the loss of the monitor that overrides and guides us through the labyrinth of life, as best as it can.

From my view, Lilly exemplified the latter, losing himself in his sense of mission as a self-appointed psychonaut heading for the cosmic reaches. That seems to me to be the ego guiding the unfolding journey, entrained in the quest for the grail, single-mindedly, as all else falls away to the perceived need to be in the state itself, and the arising of an inability to let go—a kind of OCD-ness—a capture of the soul in a particular repetitive labyrinth that still seems fresh and expanding. Ketamine can have that allure—a sense of ever differing experience that is unpredictably alive in ever-varying ways, and even programmable for a search for the source. For Lilly, at some point, he was not really able to, or perhaps not committed to bringing back the information from his roving—to Earth and its peoples, to whom he was inextricably connected and whom he came to disregard. Ketamine has that potential—allure, envelopment, cosmic contact, entry into the great mysteries.

That is a formulation, not a certain condemnation. In any event, it behooves us to keep our mind's eyes trained on balance and balancing, on helping to overcome bad paths as they begin, and to recognize that the life of the spirit and community, of education, love, connection and sharing hold us in balance and are in constant need of attention and growth.

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