

7-1-2014

## The Transformative Power of Ketamine: Psychedelic States and a Personal History of Transformation

Philip E. Wolfson

*Center for Transformational Psychotherapy*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), [Psychiatry and Psychology Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wolfson, P. E. (2014). Wolfson, P. E. (2014). The transformative power of ketamine: Psychedelic states and a personal history of transformation. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 33(2), 193–202.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 33 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2014.33.2.193>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#). This Special Topic Article is brought to you for free and open access by International Journal of Transpersonal Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Transpersonal Studies by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact the editors.

# The Transformative Power of Ketamine: Psychedelic States and a Personal History of Transformation

*Philip E. Wolfson*

Center for Transformational Psychotherapy  
San Francisco and San Anselmo, CA, USA

A discussion of the nature of transformation and its relationship to psychedelic experiences—particularly ketamine experiences—is presented and discussed along with a schema for thinking about types of states that may be encountered and transformations that may occur related to psychedelic use and practice. This is followed by a longitudinal historical approach for portraying and examining personal transformation along with a proposed instrument—The Transformational Codex—for cataloging that history and the elements that compose it.

**Keywords:** *transformation, psychedelics, spirituality, consciousness, dreams, Buddhism, empathogens*

Transformation can be understood in terms of the alternative: staying the same. Staying the same—it is perhaps the greatest problem for the human species. Staying the same means that people repeat their mistakes, keep their biases and prejudices, and maintain their difficult behaviors. It means that obedience—to religions, national formations, groups, tribes, and cults—too often trumps personal beliefs, self-awareness, and self-interest. Staying the same is the great purveyor of psychotherapy, the source for authoritarianism's success, the frustrator of communitarianism and empathy. It is what makes us inflexible, repetitive, and argumentative. Change is difficult!

In psychotherapy, one refers variously to character, to self and Self, to ego and Ego, personality and personality disorders, obsessions, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), muscular armoring, defensiveness and defenses, rigidity, the repetition compulsion, and so forth. All of these are descriptors in one form or another for staying the same. Individuals are trained to underplay the corresponding social expressions of staying the same since their understanding and the potential breakage from control becomes too close to political revelation and liberation—compliance, passivity, soldiering-on, authoritarian, conformist, conservative, diehard, reactionary, pessimistic, alien and alienated, fundamentalist, the “isms,” and so on. Each of us has some of these elements going on at some level of control—within themselves, within others, within the ebbs and flows of relationship.

Buddhists have wrestled with this one for their 2500 years. Buddhism comes down to the presentation of deep formulas for liberation from this suffering, such as, “there is no intrinsic self;” or to the great medicine of the Buddha's Fourth Noble Truth, “the letting go of attachments”; or in Vajrayana (Tibetan)—Dzogchen or primordial awareness; or Rigpa—both referring to the endlessly generative spaciousness we each contain. Change is life's constant, yet annoyingly, staying the same also seems to be very with us. Somehow as we develop, grow, age, confront endless scenarios for learning and adaptation, as our molecules are exchanged for new ones, as the air we breathe is renewed with each respiration, as we have the opportunity to change our views and approaches, our attitudes and beliefs—somehow structures of mind are retained, even if maladaptive and afflictive.

Of course, there are essential structures such as memory, learned responses to contacts with the world and self, our language and its formats and so much more that are essential to function and quality of life, that give us a continuity, a sense of self, without which we would be lost much as if we were immersed in a formless ocean. That is the great dialectic—between rigid limiting conceptual structures and those that are necessary to be social, survivable, functional, creative, and nurturing beings. That is the ridge on which transformation rides. On one side is staying the same with its attendant suffering and difficulties that in this continuum ranges towards paranoid structuring; and on the other, the bliss

of openness, new mental maps, and re-constitution—ranging in this continuum to formless confusion. Transformation is not uni-directional or certain. Bumps in the road of life shove us all over the mental places we may inhabit. New partly formed characters arise within us with their own—our own—personalities arranged around cores of belief and reaction—often to our surprise as to who we suddenly have become—this in relation to new challenges, trauma, and aging. Our response repertoire narrows and expands continuously.

Here is my definition of transformation: A change in one's core conceptual and even physical structure that interrupts the prior sense of self and world view and induces an altered, at least partially different, sense of self and world view immediately and/or over time with some degree of persistence. Transformation is a reboot of our operating system with at least some new programming and sometimes even a change from system 1.0 to 2.0. It is analogous to neuroplasticity but occurs at a much faster rate—generally with an immediacy—and may well lead to an eventual corresponding revamping of dendritic relations—and who truly knows what that looks like.

### **Psychedelics and Transformation:**

#### **A Personal Overview**

One set of the transformative experiences I have sought over a major portion of my personal history has been with the non-compulsive and deliberate use of psychedelic substances. As with most people who repeat, an initial powerful experience oriented me to the possibility for inner work and alternative experiences—that I would be different as a result of use and these differences would be sufficiently beneficial to explore additional trips and different mind-altering substances. I will present a schema for looking at the allure of these substances and their transformative powers. In this presentation, the mental ambience in which I write is particularly oriented towards ketamine experiences, which I view as singularly and rapidly productive of transformational experiences.

First, a bit of background to situate the presentation of subjective states. Psychoactive substance induced alteration of consciousness is age old, the specific history dependent on humans' particular geographic location and corresponding native plant habitats. It is important to differentiate between our equally ancient propensity to “get high” with those particular substances that induce intoxicated states and, in contrast, the often difficult deliberate journey of the psychonautical

pioneer or shaman. This is an imperative for clarity about psychedelic use—although there is certainly a mid-region of experience where recreational use meets transformation. Certainly, the inadvertent is also a potentiality. The remarkable discovery, perpetuation, refinement of use, and sacralization of psychoactive substances in even stone age cultures testifies to the timeless power of human interest in transcending “ordinary” historical and cultural realities and the enduring strength of human mind exploration.

Marijuana use dates at least to 4000 years BCE—the earliest plant remains known having been dated to that time. Humans and marijuana have co-evolved, influencing each other reciprocally in terms of cultivation and culture. Mushroom and other psychoactive plant use in Mesoamerica is undoubtedly thousands of years old and was ineradicable despite the deliberate murder of practitioners by the Inquisition and genocidal suppression of indigenous cultures by the colonizing Europeans. In fact, Europe was desperately poor in psychedelics, these being limited to the toxic tropane alkaloids contained in such plants as mandrake and henbane with their datura like effects. European consciousness developed its particular distortions in concert with the addictive and easily manufactured toxin known as ethanol—of limited value for mental and spiritual transformation.

Most remarkable is the Amazonian creation of ayahuasca, or yage, the admixture of two separate plants that had to be bundled to create the remarkable oral DMT based experience that was practiced as divination and personal transformation by native shamans. Ayahuasca use has recently spread to North America culminating in the US Supreme Court's recognition of the União do Vegetal (UDV) with hoasca as an acceptable sacrament and indispensable part of the UDV Church's ceremonial life, much as peyote for the Native American Church—deliberate uses of mind altering substances for the purpose of transformation within bounded social and religious frameworks.

As to the allure of psychedelics, the most potent explanation is that they offer the possibility of a transformation of consciousness. That may occur as an intimate acute experience or a form shaking permanent alteration—it is a spectrum of effect that ranges to incalculable personal and social consequences. The introduction of psychedelic substance use to masses of people in the sixties was part and parcel of the immense

cultural change that occurred. Liberation from the suppressive, repressive yoke of McCarthyism that had penetrated darkly into the family culture of the late 40s and 50s was in part due to the mind expansion of psychedelic use that blew up restrictive mental fetters and fear of the personal imagination. Huddled in social phobia and conformism after the great cultural and political awakening of the post World War II epoch by the repressive political reaction and domination of the late 40s and 50s, there lay latent in the populace a great desire for a Spring blooming of equality, justice and freedom of mind and life. This latent corrective can be envisioned as an inherent sense of justice, and nurturance—of the pleasurable nature of the freedom to think and to be in open connection.

This psychedelic transformation of sectors of Western societies and of the overall cultural stream was transmitted reciprocally to and from new cultural and political formations. Politically for example, if the entire New Left did not succumb to rigid and dogmatic Leninism, it was to a great extent protected from that by personal mind-expanded experiences that escaped control by all ideologies and false consciousness. But it is not a perfect record and psychedelics were also used to corrupt and control humans. For example, from opposite perspectives, this applies both to the final catastrophic period of the Weather Underground, and to the CIA—which has had a compulsive interest in using psychedelics adversely to extract information or to create group and personal confusion, even madness.

As the vector of transformational change with psychedelics is uncertain in a general sense and deterministic in an individual sense by personal experience and values, psychedelic experiences that are dissociative in nature are potentially transformative because of their rupture of conceptual structures and the induction to some extent of a confusional state—a scramble of categories and of the process of categorization—in the Brunerian sense. It is this potentiality that makes us anxious about beginning a profound trip, and it is the letting go of control within a trip that facilitates our resilience and restructuring with the fullness of the experience. Integration during and after a psychedelic experience therefore is an essential component of consolidating and perpetuating change. It is an essential component of any thoughtful and potentially helpful psychedelic psychotherapy.

There are basically three schools in this regard, with many practitioners doing combinations. The Grof

tendency (referring to Stanislav Grof) asserts the healing potential in the experience of the journey itself that requires support but not guidance and little in the way of interpretation. Inner wisdom knows what needs to be transformed. The Metzner tendency (indicating Ralph Metzner) asserts the benefit of guided interventions that are felt to increase the depth, diversity, and the psychotherapeutic aspect of psychedelic experiences. Preparation and clear intentionality are considered essential. However, for both, creation of a pluripotential setting that is safe but provocative is essential. The third and again overlapping tendency, I am labelling as the Roquet tendency (after Salvador Roquet) and is challenging in both the provision of the setting and the provocation of intensity. Ego-lysis, or ego dissolution, is deliberate and amplified with reconstruction in the integration phase a necessity. This has been well described in the pages of this issue by Richard Jensen and others.

Some aficionados of the pure psychedelic experience argue that the unmitigated experience itself is sufficient to deliver transformation. Sasha Shulgin often took this position and as his experience was of the greatest depth and diversity, it certainly deserves credibility. Empathogenic and dissociative experiences may very well lead to incredible changes in our consciousness and behavior. Then, there are others such as me, who find that the transformative influence of the psychedelic experience makes a quantum leap when integrated with spiritual practice, such as Buddhist contemplation and with a liberating psychotherapy. Unsupported psychedelic experience tends to be unpredictably transformative and integrations from the spirit side with ordinary lived reality are more difficult without recognizing that psychedelic transformation is but one prong of conscious intent to transform ourselves from the capture of the corporate materialist culture and its introjects. That is not a simple or straightforward task. The value vectors of personal ethics and social morality that have been developed, or not, over our personal/social histories truly guide us in the path of our psychedelic experiences. Psychedelics can be tools for deliberate exploration of our lives and tendencies, for examination, contemplation, and for transcending ordinary reality and our adherence to its format.

#### **The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience**

To convey the varieties of psychedelic experience is to have the experience of words faltering as descriptive. Hopefully, without intending to reify, or circumscribe, I

will present a taxonomy of experience that reflects my personal history and observations over 47 years time, since I and a small group of new friends, just commencing medical school in New York City, dropped acid—LSD. With this I am attempting to convey the psychedelic allure and a schema for recognizing and understanding transformation. I am using the term states rather than some hierarchical notion based on “levels”—all such states having value for transformation.

### **The Mundane State**

Conventional allure to trip flows from curiosity, a desire to change oneself, temptation for forbidden fruit, getting high, and the emulation of others. This is “tripping” with no, or little intention regarding what will come, what will change—experience without intentionality. There is no pejorative here, no judgment. Many of us have and will do this and find extraordinary experiences.

### **The Personal/Psychotherapeutic State**

In 1964, I was a young, awkward, and self-conscious male, repressed, having just finished a psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapeutic experience that had helped me to alleviate some of the pain of my hypercritical feuding parents that I had introjected. I was beginning to find my own voice and guidance. In the flash dance of a few hours, my inner structure rocked and shifted. LSD and I met and I passed through great fear to feel alleviated of self-hate and my imagination freed to inform a creative new consciousness. Art came alive, as did every day experience. After I came down from the LSD trip, integration included a deliberate determination to hold onto that freedom informed by a structural psychological awareness that had been obtained in the intensity of my earlier psychotherapy experience. Pockets of repressive structure opened for awareness work. Subsequent introduction to marijuana freed me of physical and sexual awkwardness, turned me onto intimate discourse, a heightened closeness in friendship, and furthered my sense of being a creative person. This was not completely linear—there were ups and downs—and it took place with absorption in the growing Movement—a sense of being in a community of progressive people worldwide. Psychedelic use in that formative period increased my self-confidence and sensuality. It did not prevent me from making all manner of errors in personal and political life, but I was much better at discernment, moving on, kindness, and forgiveness.

Psychedelic use invariably affects the personal/psychological matrix. Starting a journey forces an encounter with fear—of the unknown, of the lurking dangers believed hidden in one’s own mind, of coming back altered. In the encounter the first period is generally absorbed with the personal—relationships, guilt, love, longing, grief, attachments, self-concepts. This encounter opens the possibility of examination, release, and change, of reframing and heightened awareness of self and the other(s). A bad trip—usually in an uncomfortable setting under stressful circumstances—can result in fear, paranoia, and recoil from the opened space that is perceived as threatening. Some folks never use psychedelics again. Occasional young people and some others—I know personally of several 12 and 13 year olds—suffer with mental effects that damage and may last far too long. Set—the minds orientation—and setting—the circumstances of use—always affect the quality of significant psychedelic experiences. Conscious preparation, good location, presence of support and friends benefit experiences and outcomes.

### **The Empathic State**

Generally any psychedelic experience may heighten empathy and empathic awareness—as love and affection; as the ability to see another’s point of view and put oneself in the other person’s shoes; as deep respect and regard; as elimination of barriers that separate; as communion with nature; as a transcendent feeling of warmth for all things. In the 1980s, the potency of MDMA was recognized as a means—a tool—for heightening the quality of communication between people and for fairly reliably producing a state of warmth, affection, and non-sexual sensuality. Many therapists including myself introduced MDMA psychotherapy within couple, family, and group contexts. Because the experience was fairly replicable, generally positive, and without much in the way of distortion and hallucination, a new name was coined for a cluster of substances for which MDMA—Ecstasy—was the exemplar: empathogens. Before the DEA’s own administrative law judge, those of us who saw MDMA’s potential for positive impact were able to demonstrate its medical utility. Despite the judge’s ruling, which would have placed MDMA in an accessible Schedule II classification, the DEA went against its own judge’s finding and placed it in the highly criminalized and inaccessible Schedule I group of substances that included heroin, and other banned psychedelics. In the years that followed the 1986 ruling, MDMA use soared

and the “rave” phenomena began—again a testimony to the power of the substance to facilitate loving, intimate, sensual experience—even with huge numbers of people. MDMA’s appeal continues to be based on the facilitation of a state of communion and community larger than the personal self’s usual strictures allow. MDMA consciousness can be learned and generated without the drug on board as part of an expansive, loving daily life. Much of the concern about brain damage due to serotonin depletion was based on phony research that was retracted from the literature when it was exposed. After almost thirty years of use, 24 of it in this continuing prohibition era, with an unimagined scale of use—100s of millions of doses consumed—my informal census of other therapists and friends who were there from the start fails to reveal names and numbers of MDMA brain damaged individuals.

### **The Egotytic State**

For the most part the psychedelic experience exerts a damper on egotism and ego centrality. A sense of smallness and particulate being in the universe may be a fundamental part—that is, I am truly insignificant. A reduced sense of attachment to material goods, awestruckness with life and the psychic ground, spaciousness of mind, a situating of the self as but a speck in the cosmos, a sense of ease at being free of self-inflated importance may compose much of the trip. For some, this can be difficult and disorienting as a loss of the centrality of self and confusion as to how to manifest and re-integrate. For most, this state provides a welcome relief from the tension of being a particular totalization in the personal world and the competitive, demanding outer life.

### **The Transcendent Transpersonal State**

Stripped of ego, of personal psychology and investments, the psychedelic traveler enters the ground state from which thought, feeling, form, and formlessness emanate. It is as if the source of mind becomes the mind experience itself. This is certainly not restricted to psychedelic states. In the unadorned meditative experience, this too is highlighted for periods of time. An apocryphal story from those who travel in both the spiritual and psychedelic realms is that the great guru drops a bizillion micrograms of LSD and stays beaming and untouched the entire trip time and is in his nature so spiritually elevated that the drug is not altering or transformative—he is the ground state itself. Ram Dass amongst others is fond of this tale. I have my doubts.

### **Transformative Power of Ketamine**

In the psychedelic state it is the flux, the movement, of stimulated consciousness—that is there to be experienced at a heightened level of manifestation. Some psychedelic experiences are difficult to recall and difficult in which to maintain an observational awareness. However, most experiences include intense observational awareness. Dose is a factor—generally, the more you take the more observational awareness tends to diminish. By amplifying the phenomena coming into being, placing our attention on the background generative source of mind, psychedelics tend to make more available for experience and scrutiny what Tibetans refer to as Dzogchen or primordial awareness as it is commonly translated, the sunyata state in Sanskrit, and in the less developed Western explication, the state of awe. By learning to reside in a non-dualistic state of mind, by choosing to enter that state and by having experiences which create faith in the goodness of that state, spaciousness, creativity, and compassion arise from non-attachment, from living in the flow, from not grasping at every object that comes to mind and attracts our attention.

Within the Transcendent Transpersonal State, a multiplicity of experiences and views will arise and are generally not pre-programmable, but have some degree of specificity depending on the substance ingested—different substances tend to produce a quality of experience specific to those substances—and state of mind. I will mention a few by description that I class as “vistas”—this is certainly not meant to be exhaustive. I am referencing primarily ketamine and ayahuasca experiences.

**The Sensual Universe Vista.** Traveling through space as on a rocket ship, or being that rocket ship, I encounter extraordinary forms and shapes. Neon colored blazing fractal worlds open. Forms emerge—animals, beings from other galaxies, lovers and forgotten friends. I morph to meet them and my morphing morphs. I am eaten and eat, am absorbed and absorb. Sexual encounters may occur. Love spills everywhere. Or fear brings on its own forms and monsters. Psychological themes come from my everyday life and are given forms, often allowing for a working through of trapped emotional energies. There is a sense of great exploration and great bliss, and at other times of the terror of being alive and vulnerable.

**The Entheogenic Vista.** A personal experience of being of god, or a relationship to the personally held notion of god that deepens may occur. A sense of traveling in the starry cosmos freed from all constraint may occur,

of being part of a perceived universe. Buddhists are told that they have, as do all sentient beings, Buddha Nature. In the psychedelic realm, I became the Buddha and felt that meaning and that responsibility. I moved about as the Buddha. I have tried to maintain that sense of awesome responsibility in my usual unenhanced state, to varying depth and effect—it is difficult. At other times, there can be the sense of the devil within, of the play of evil and the hunter/murderer, which we also contain and constrain. In mind travelling, there is no risk in exploring this aspect of us, knowing and accepting of what we are capable and explicitly reject.

**The Connection Vista.** The experience of connection and inter-dependency gives rise to feelings of gratitude, love, humility, and desire to benefit others. Our personal lifeline extends backwards through a near infinite unbroken number of progenitors to the unformed stuff of the great earthly soup from which first life forms emerge—this may be experienced—and forward to the future as well. I have felt myself to be much as a mushroom sprouts from the great mycelial mass, its myriad threads stretching underground in all directions, sprouting beings who as their time ends return to the rich mulch while new sprouts—humans—emerge—a sense of vibrant biological immortality. Or in contrast, the direct experience of the human mass as itself a cancer, having all of those characteristics—unrestrained expansionism, proliferation in all directions, lack of concern for others needs and requirements—eating everything in its path, out of control. Or as group mind, the experience of sensation outside the confines of the personal body/mind, in resonance with the others with whom one is travelling as a new assemblage in which the mind is of its nature intrapersonal.

**The Cartesian Vista.** I am the source of all that I experience. I create it. The outside realm—all of it—is a manifestation of my mind. This passes before me as I scan all of my creations from scientific texts to great vistas and friends and my partner. I am the author of life and death. Moving about within this perspective, I am able to revise what exists and what will be—for a time—until I am drawn back to the usual perspective of subject and object. That experience, while a false consciousness, increases the sensitivity to the difficulty of being an interpretive, removed from direct experience consciousness with only mediated awareness of the external and personal awareness of the interior. While in this inflated state, I am god and master of the universe,

prophet, seer, enlightened being. Then there is the crash, and hopefully great humility.

### **Integration**

In the post psychedelic condition, integration is the key to maintaining transformation. Integration is a function of intentionality—conscious and unconsciously maintained, or incorporated. Integration occurs both without effort—as a re-design of the central processor of our minds—and voluntarily as a deliberate effort to understand, find meaning, and as rectification—of our behavior towards others and towards ourselves. The psychedelic experience in and of itself may be transformative of our consciousness, but support for change by deliberate and disciplined absorption in the myriad spiritual/emotional/psychological/activist opportunities for increasing clarity and breadth most probably results in a more long term and positive transformation of self. The human mind while extraordinarily plastic, adaptable, and mutable, is also built with a great rubber band that returns us to our dominant character. This serves both as preserver of the integrity of the self and as a block to transformation—holding onto our deluded self.

Grounding in the world of the interior and the external world—finding balance—is a prerequisite for successful psychonautical voyaging and for a mind expansion that is in essence kind, creative, and loosens the spell of the propaganda filled social world we inhabit that tells us what to think and feel and especially what to desire and purchase.

To conclude, psychedelic exploration has been part and parcel of this culture for several decades. Both inadvertent change from recreational use of mind altering substances and the deliberate pursuit of a transformative path have occurred for many millions of people, yet as a result of the illegal status of psychedelics, there has been a restricted discussion and sharing of experience, despite the extraordinary numbers involved. I have presented one schema among many possibilities for sharing and conveying transformations that occur with psychedelics and hope this inspires both research and sharing by others of the qualities of mind and behavior that result from psychedelic use as transformations of self.

### **A Longitudinal View of Personal Transformation (presented as a humble exemplar and an encouragement to view your own path)**

I am 71 rapidly approaching 72. Aging is transforming my physical capacities, my desires—fewer of them; my

interests—perhaps more of them; my sense of time—moving faster and less of it; and the immediacy of death itself—close by, inevitable. My mental abilities have yet to atrophy—so I am told—for how would I know if I lacked them. I have spent my life transforming. I am certainly not with the consciousness I can remember from my start in life. Nor from my teenage years. Nor even from my thirties and forties. Yet I have a sense of continuity and that commences with my first memories at about 3 and includes a sense, a feeling, of me-ness. I seem still to be enough of the “me” that arose that I recognize a strand. Life is truly a dream and my experience seems more and more a mediation between me and my past, and me and the world outside. It is this sense from which more profound psychological states of dissociation arise. I am fortunate in that I have dreamt the entire night, every night, so long as I can remember. If sleep architecture with its discontinuities and non-dreaming states is to be believed, it does not correspond to my own uninterrupted experience of constant nightly movies. The usual marking of day and night is more of a slippery transition for me and while I have no trouble discerning the two consciousnesses from each other, I have virtually no experience of being fully unconscious. My five surgeries with general anesthesia gave me the most pertinent information on ceasing to be—from complete darkness as the sensation from whence arising consciousness emanated. Before that sense of darkness, I had no prior sensation of existence whatsoever. All of this convinces me and highlights my sensation of a stream of consciousness that begins for me at about 3 years of age, also emanating from darkness, and continues unbroken, like a moving river, a dream state, during each 24 hours, part of the time in contact—more or less—with a mediated reality outside of me, and part of the time just with me, an interiority, that also has an awake interiority that is more cognitive, less imaginal than night dreaming, but with many of the same elements, sensations and removal from direct sensory contact.

If personal life is a stream dream, how then to view transformation? There is that classical argument in Zen schools between gradual and saltatory transformations—getting to Kensho and Satori. The same dualism occurs in Vajrayana Buddhism with schools making differing claims on the means for transformation, the prerequisites, the rapidity and the immanency. If I have learned anything is that there are as many schools as there are humans and even my dogs have their views, which they espouse as well in their own ways, according to their

capabilities of reaching my awareness, and my capabilities of understanding their communication—some of that an empathic mutual understanding—making me aware of their needs and views. What many do agree upon is that they experience transformation of consciousness and life behavior both gradually and also in sudden spurts of fierce energy and realization. The direction is not always pleasant. Transformation can go either way, through unpleasant experience and chosen unpleasant means, and through pleasant, even ecstatic states. Transformation can be courted, seduced, planned, practiced for over time, induced, and can be involuntary, unplanned, damaging, life-threatening, grievous and disabling. Since conscious life is an experience related to a seamless existential dreaming, transformation is a constant moving thing. Peak experiences, as per Abraham Maslow, may entail transformation—or not, whereas transformation may contain or entail peak experiences—or not. Historically, discussion of transformation has focused on mystical, and sudden transformations that are often only partially integrated and are experienced as “stand alone” experiences, unclassifiable and ineffable. While such significant events are unforgettable and momentous, they tend to be overemphasized and obscure other more prolonged experiences of fundamental change and the effects of deliberate practices aimed at transformation.

So, my experience of me over time is that I have changed and that this has been reflected in my contexts, connections and behavior. I am unable to isolate a single experience as The Transformational Transcendent Singular Event (TTSE). I am unlike Saint Augustine for example. Rather, as I look back over time, there have been numerous transformational moments and processes, a catalog of which would be voluminous and necessarily incomplete because of faulty memory and inadequate retrieval—too much time and too many events. If this seems too mundane, not sufficiently spectacular, one factor is that of time, which blunts immediacy and tall peaks. Nonetheless, it appears to me to be a truthful representation of my experience that goes back as far as I am able to remember. If transformation is not restricted to peak experiences, but rather to an awareness of change over some time scale, it is clear that transformation is not discrete, has long slow waves, and sudden lurches, and things in between.

Some transformation is clearly developmental but still contingent. For example, I recall falling in love (FIL) at 3 to 5 years of age. Though I never saw any of the



three girls with whom I played in my early Manhattan apartment house culture, I was permanently altered by an awareness of attraction at that age that made me seek them out, made me miss them after I moved—never to see them again—and dreams of them that occur even now—their names affixed to imagined representations of them as adult women who come in and out of my dream life on occasion. The integration was my experience of love and arousal for girl strangers with whom I bonded at a high level—non-sexual but aroused intimacy. In that same early period I made close friendships (FNDS) with boys and had a very different, but complex and loving set of feelings for them—friendship as a mode arose in me—clearly both of these transformational and not inevitable. Thereafter, I sought out both experiences throughout my life. When we left for Queens and a small, isolating private house, I grieved and was depressed for quite some time. That too was poignantly transformational as I learned of loneliness and the inability to rectify my heartbreak, and the arbitrariness of adult authority—out of touch with my love and needs for my companions. Transformational indeed. In childhood, transformations are a frequent part of life as part and parcel of development, but from the adult vantage point we forget that we were incredibly mutable and affected—by love, trauma, and the vectors of growth and mastery. Nevertheless, the notice internally—the awareness at the meta level—of the occurrence of a transformational experience is set-up during childhood.

A taxonomy can be developed for transformational experiences (Table 1):

- Time scale: Sudden, short-term, and prolonged;
- Volition: Deliberate and just as planned or not at all as planned; or inadvertent;
- Integration: Integrated, partially integrated, stands alone;
- Quality (Pardon the bit of levity, or hopefully, enjoy it): Ah ha; aah, haa; aaah, haa; or oy, oy vey, and ouuuy veey;
- Validated: You are different, or not;
- Self-validated over time: I am different and my consciousness, choices, and actions are different;
- Duration: A lasting change, absorbed—fully or partially, overridden or deleted;
- Awareness of the occurrence and nature of transformation: Immediately conscious; semi-conscious; unconscious—became aware downstream from the event.

Clearly these are continuums and capable of being placed in a matrix: The Transformation Codex. I use Codex deliberately to represent the book of changes, which can be compiled for any of us, at virtually any stage of life.

Examining my chart indicates the variety of powerful transformational events spread over a lifetime, their different experiential time frames, my tendency to focus on events that resulted in what I regard as long term and integrated changes, and the mix of inadvertent and deliberately sought for experiences. The list is suggestive and not meant to be exhaustive by any means. I hope it provides an encouragement for others to look at their history.

Some limiting factors: o reach significance, a transformative experience has to be at the level of an Ah or an Oy. The duration of an experience can be prolonged and over years of time. Aging tends to diminish former peaks and there is an undoubtedly “besotted with change” factor that alters the drama of change to some incalculable effect. Finally, this is an almost entirely subjective method, save for the subjective awareness of others’ views of our sense of transformation, which has some verifiability attached. I am—and hope you are—a fan of qualitative research.

My hope is that you will play with this schema, fill in your own experiences and have a better grasp on how you have changed over time and space. It may serve to guide future practice and the deliberate courting of experiences including the psychedelic. Bon voyage!

### Conclusion

A ketamine psychedelic experience tends to offer up the possibility for transformation of the self by isolating the mind to some extent from external sensations, altering body consciousness towards an experience of being energy without form, and by amplifying and scrambling the contents of mind in unpredictable ways—all of this generating the potentiality for changes in consciousness that may be beneficial and persistent. Coming back from a ketamine journey as a somewhat different being is quite predictable. The supportive nature of setting, facilitation, and integration are indispensable for reducing confusional aftermaths and having a positive sense of the experience and its outcome. As described, the nature of experiences will be quite variable and unpredictable for each individual’s repetition of a ketamine experience. Relaxing of control and resorting to observation of the flow of the experience

are important means for having an experience that is beneficial.

*In conducive settings, ketamine experiences that are transformative may well result in a qualitative improvement in affect and consciousness that can result in a lessening*

*of depression, of the hold on us of traumas and obsessions, of negativity and pessimism, and an improvement of our self-regard. There are various ways to conceptualize this reformation. This IJTS Special Topic Section on ketamine and ketamine assisted psychotherapy represents our effort to*

**Table 1. The Transformation Codex**

Life Event	Age	Time Scale	Volition	Integration	Quality	Validated	Self-Validated	Duration	Awareness
Early Love FIL	3 on	P	IA	I	AH	V+/-	SV+	ALC+	SCs, UCs
Friendship FNDS	3 on	P	IA, then D+/-	I	3AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	SCs, UCs
Leaving Home LHC	16	S	D+	I	2AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs
First Psy- choth FPE	17-18	ST	D+	I	3AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs, SCs, UCs
Mature Love FMLS	17-18	ST	D+/-	I	3AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	CS
College CIGA	17-20	P	D+/-	I	AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs, UCs
Trip LSDT	21	S	D-	I	3AH	V-	SV+	ALC+	Cs, UCs
Sixties SM	20 on	S, P	D+/-	I	3AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs, UCs
Family FB	27 on	P	D+/-	I	3AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs, SCs, UCs
Loss LOAC	44	S, P	IA	PI	OV-	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs, SCs, UCs
Buddha BP	52 on	P	D+/-	PI	2AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs, SCs, UCs
Psychedelic PP	40 on	S, P	D+/-	PI	2AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs, UCs

**Key:**

Time Scale of Transformation Event—sudden, short-term, prolonged: S, ST, P

Volition—deliberate-just as planned, somewhat, not at all as planned: D+, D+/-, D-, or—inadvertent: IA

Integration—integrated, partially integrated, stands alone: I, PI, SA

Quality—positive, ah ha, aah haa, aaah haaa: AH, 2AH, 3AH; negative, oy, oy vey, ouuy, veey: O, OV, OV-

Validated—others concur or give evidence of my change: V+, V-

Self-Validated—I am different and my consciousness, choices and actions are different—Totally, somewhat, not at all: SV+, SV+/-, SV-

Duration—A lasting change—fully, partially overridden, deleted: ALC+, ALC +/-, ALC-

Awareness of the occurrence and nature of Transformation—immediately conscious, semi-conscious, unconscious: Cs, SCs, UCs

To play with this classificatory schema, I will share with you a partial temporal review of some of my transformational experiences, with the classification as above—to tweak your own sense of history and its partial correspondences:

Leaving home for college (LHC)—transformation—partial independence and autonomy.

First psychotherapy experience (FPE)—at college—transformation—reduction of tyrannous super-ego influences, finding my own mind and speaking it.

First mature love and sexuality (FMLS)—transformation—being loved by another fully (or as much as possible under those circumstances), less self-conscious and negative.

College intellectual growth and assurance (CIGA)—transformation—dependent thinking possibility enhanced social capacity.

LSD trip (LSDT)—transformation—loss of fear of incipient madness, access to another realm of mind, enhanced imagination and creativity, unique experience.

Sixties Movement (SM)—transformation—citizen of the world, brotherhood/sisterhood, loss of fear of confronting authority, physical trauma, enhanced creativity and empowering sensation of freedom.

Family building (FB)—transformation—experience of the absolute love of children, new sense of wider responsibilities and larger sense of self, enhancement of the child consciousness within.

Loss of a child after prolonged illness (LOAC)—transformation—loss of orientation and meaning, permanent grief, dissolution of marriage, extraordinary anxiety, greater coping skills, awareness of my own imperative to stay alive.

Buddhist practice (BP)—transformation—explicit meditative states and the freedom occasionally from grasping and attachment—valuing that experience and seeking it.

Psychedelic practice (PP)—transformation—sudden dissolution of my self and reconstitution—deliberately sought for its transformative power; experience of group mind and being out of my own particular body experience; improvisation and intuitive mindfulness and creativity.

*assist in this deep work by presenting the issues, difficulties and potentialities. We hope you have benefited.*

### **About the Author**

*Philip E. Wolfson, MD*, is the Principal Investigator for the MAPS sponsored FDA approved Phase 2 clinical trial of MDMA Assisted Psychotherapy for Individuals Suffering with Anxiety Due to Life Threatening Illnesses. Practicing psychiatry/psychotherapy in the Bay Area since 1977, Dr. Wolfson has been on the faculties of UCSF School of Medicine, JFK, and CIIS, and has been at the forefront of the development of alternative, progressive psychotherapies. Writing on politics, medicine, psychiatry, psychedelics, consciousness, Buddhism, and bereavement, he is the author of *Noe—A Father/Son Song of Love, Life, Illness and Death*. In creation is The Center for Transformational Psychotherapy, established as a base for offering Ketamine Assisted Psychotherapy and progressive psychotherapy in general.

### **About the Journal**

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic journal in print since 1981. It is sponsored by the California Institute of Integral Studies, published by Floragrades Foundation, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at [www.transpersonalstudies.org](http://www.transpersonalstudies.org), and in print through [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) (search for IJTS).