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Tryptamine Hallucinogens and Consciousness

by [Terence McKenna](#)

A talk given at the Lilly/Goswami Conference on Consciousness and Quantum Physics at Esalen, December 1983. It was to be the first of many lectures at Esalen Institute on the Big Sur Coast of California. (Included as [written word](#) because this edited transcription appears in print as part of his book *The Archaic Revival* - dimitri)

There is a very circumscribed place in organic nature that has, I think, important implications for students of human nature. I refer to the tryptophan-derived hallucinogens [dimethyltryptamine \(DMT\)](#), psilocybin, and a hybrid drug that is in aboriginal use in the rain forests of South America, [ayahuasca](#). This latter is a combination of dimethyltryptamine and a monoamine oxidase inhibitor that is taken orally. It seems appropriate to talk about these drugs when we discuss the nature of consciousness; it is also appropriate when we discuss quantum physics.

It is my interpretation that the major quantum mechanical phenomena that we all experience, aside from waking consciousness itself, are dreams and hallucinations. These states, at least in the restricted sense that I am concerned with, occur when the large amounts of various sorts of radiation conveyed into the body by the senses are restricted. Then we see interior images and interior processes that are psychophysical. These processes definitely arise at the quantum mechanical level. It's been shown by John Smythies, [Alexander Shulgin](#), and others that there are quantum mechanical correlates to hallucinogenesis. In other words, if one atom on the molecular ring of an inactive compound is moved, the compound becomes highly active. To me this is a perfect proof of the dynamic linkage at the formative level between quantum mechanically described matter and mind.

Hallucinatory states can be induced by a variety of hallucinogens and dissociative anesthetics, and by experiences like fasting and other ordeals. But what makes the tryptamine family of compounds especially interesting is the intensity of the hallucinations and the concentration of activity in the visual cortex. There is an immense vividness to these interior landscapes, as if information were being presented three-dimensionally and deployed fourth-dimensionally, coded as light and as evolving surfaces. When one confronts these dimensions one becomes part of a dynamic relationship relating to the experience while trying to decode what it is saying. This phenomenon is not new - people have been talking to gods and demons for far more of human history than they have not.

It is only the conceit of the scientific and postindustrial societies that allows us to even propound some of the questions that we take to be so important. For instance, the question of contact with extraterrestrials is a kind of red herring premised upon a number of assumptions that a moment's reflection will show are completely false. To search expectantly for a radio signal from an extraterrestrial source is probably as culture bound a presumption as to search the galaxy for a good Italian restaurant. And yet, this has been chosen as the avenue by which it is assumed contact is likely to occur. Meanwhile, there are people all over the world - [psychics](#), [shamans](#), mystics, schizophrenics - whose heads are filled with information, but it has been ruled a priori irrelevant, incoherent, or mad. Only that which is validated through consensus via certain sanctioned instrumentalities will be accepted as a signal. The problem is that we are so inundated by these signals - these other dimensions - that there is a great deal of noise in the circuit.

It is no great accomplishment to hear a voice in the head. The accomplishment is to make sure it is telling the truth, because the demons are of many kinds: "Some are made of ions, some of mind; the ones of ketamine, you'll find, stutter often and are blind." The reaction to these voices is not to kneel in genuflection before a god, because then one will be like Dorothy in her first encounter with Oz. There is no dignity in the universe unless we meet these things on our feet, and that means having an I/Thou relationship. One say to the Other: "You say you are omniscient, omnipresent, or you say you are from Zeta Reticuli. You're long on talk, but what can you show me?" Magicians, people who invoke these things, have always understood that one must go into such encounters with one's wits about oneself.