

# **Self-responsibility as a psychological factor for facilitating the access to altered states of consciousness**

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## **Abstract:**

Too many ways of experimenting ASC imply a loss of self-awareness which increases the difficulty of the study and makes nearly impossible the verbalization of the experience after reintegration of so-called normal reality. Drugs, hypnosis and dreams are some good examples, they also are easy ways in comparison with traditional processes including long time tedious training.

Self responsibility acts as a discriminating factor for selecting psychotechniques for entering ASC which maintain a total lucidity during the whole process. The criteria should be :

Conscious access.

Conscious experience.

Conscious reintegration.

Freedom of communication.

In order to get an effective and rapid tool for experimenting ASC, the researcher has to reach a mental state of balance in-between the affirmative will of expectation for a result and the complete surrender to unknown possibilities. This mental state of balance is characterized by a highly conscious self responsibility and a total adequacy to space and time: I am here and (k)now !

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The practical study of altered states of consciousness (ASC) poses the problem of the relation subject-object between the student and the studied matter, being given that in order to get first hand information, the student must be studied by himself. The subject and the object are merged therefore.

We won't consider here the traditional protocols for studying a third party that satisfy the criteria of classical scientific methodology. On the contrary, we want to focus on the paradoxical situation of the student subject-object, situation which is found in the major part of social sciences and which tends to spread to the new conceptions of experimental methodology of sciences known as "hard", like physics, where the scientist is taken into account like a considerable element, being able to influence the result of the experiment.

The organization of a study of the ASC must respect the elementary conditions of organization of any scientific experiment. It is essential of course, to optimize the material environment, to collect measuring and recording instruments and to get the collaboration of qualified operators and observers. However the major difficulty lies in the organization of the protocol of the study, being given that the student finds himself in

the center of the experiment. This protocol must be established in order to respect the integrity and the lucidity of the student. It should be planned by the student himself, who should be able to personally control each one of its stages.

One can easily take as a point of comparison the organization of a round-trip journey. There is a starting point a goal and two displacements in opposite directions. This comparison was popularized by the numerous descriptions of "psychedelic journeys" at the time of the first experiments of consumption of LSD. Unfortunately in the cases of psychotropic drugs absorption, the control of the experiment remains uncertain, or even non-existent.

It is not sufficient to undergo the journey, it is necessary to be able to master it. It is not sufficient to be a passenger, it is necessary to be the pilot and better, it is necessary to have a perfect knowledge of the vehicle. Only then, it becomes possible to travel in an efficient manner while studying the course and modifying it when necessary, to finally come back to the starting point in total security, with a maximum of collected information, ready to be shared.

We understand therefore that in the study of ASC, the pilot and the vehicle are only one entity. The journey itself being not situated in a material spatial dimension and the temporal dimension being perceived subjectively in a discontinuous manner. The only point of reference usable by the student-pilot during the journey is located at a mental level of self-awareness. It is the central point of analytic lucidity, the center of oneself, that the Western tradition locates in the center of the skull.

It is thus of primary importance for studying the ASC to maintain a continuity of lucidity during all the experiment. This will make possible to select among the various methods of induction of ASC those which are best adapted to the protocol of study. We will keep those which respect the following criteria:

Voluntary and conscious access to ASC.

Lucid experimentation of ASC.

Voluntary and conscious reintegration of ordinary reality.

Freedom of communication of the experience.

We will reject all the involuntary methods which distort lucidity, which do not respect the student's free will or which impose a dependence to the effects of a drug or to the manipulations of a third party. The student must be able to experiment the ASC in a free, conscious volunteer and self-responsible way.

The concept of self-responsibility must be understood here in the sense that the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre gives to it: "The conscience to be the incontestable author of an event". What also

implies that this event is done at one's own risks and dangers. That requires also a preliminary decision, a personal engagement. This notion is found in the etymological Latin root "respondere" which means "to commit oneself", "to stand as guarantor".

Having rejected the debilitating methods, the student will be more sensitive to the techniques of voluntary induction of ASC, which privilege the self-esteem as it is defined by the humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow in his "Hierarchy of needs": "The self-esteem results from the appreciation of one's competence or the mastering of a task".

This state of mind applied to a technique of voluntary induction of ASC will reinforce the point of reference of the student-pilot and will enrich his self-awareness. His lucidity, his vigilance, his sense of the observation, all these faculties essential to the success of the study, will profit from it directly.

The protocol of the study of ASC presents itself as follows:

- Organization of the material framework of the experiment.
- Technical resources setting up.
- Human resources setting up.
- Cartography of the progress of the experience.
- Choice of an adequate induction technique.
- Optimization of the faculties necessary to the experiment by a personal work of the student on the voluntary decision, the self-responsibility and the self-esteem.
- Reinforcement of the self-awareness (point of reference).
- Progress of the experiment.

Let us return to the criteria of choice of the methods of induction of ASC best adapted to the protocol of the study:

- Voluntary and conscious access to ASC.
- Lucid experimentation of ASC.
- Voluntary and conscious reintegration of ordinary reality.
- Freedom of communication of the experience.

We note that the conservation of the lucidity and the voluntary maintenance of the conscious control of the experiment are especially difficult, like in the following example.

In 1949, Maya Deren went to Haiti to study and film Haitian voodoo dancing. In "Divine horsemen. Living gods of Haiti" she has published a detailed account of the physiological and psychological effects of the drumming on her own brain, ending in her apparent possession by Erzulie, the voodoo goddess of love.

She tells how the drums gradually induced uncontrollable bodily movements, until as a climax she felt possession coming on her:

“My skull is a drum; each great beat drives that leg, like the point of a stake, into the ground. The singing is at my very ear, inside my head. This sound will drown me ! “Why don’t they stop ! Why don’t they stop !” I cannot wrench the leg free. I am caught in this cylinder, this well of sound. There is nothing anywhere except this. There is no way out. The white darkness moves up the veins of my leg like a swift tide rising, rising; is a great force which I cannot sustain or contain, which surely will burst my skin. It is too much, too bright, too white for me; this is its darkness. “Mercy !” I scream within me. I hear it echoed by the voices, shrill and unearthly : “Erszulie.” The bright darkness floods up through my body, reaches my head, engulfs me. I am sucked down and exploded upward at once. That is all.”

Such feelings remain difficult to understand for the one who has not experienced the altered states of consciousness. Even with a complete freedom of communication, the structure of our language remains badly adapted to such descriptions. Maya Deren notices it while coming out of her trance:

“How clear the world looks in this first total light. How purely form it is, without for the moment the shadow of meaning...”

This experiment also shows what may happen to those who try to resist to the induction of ASC by an exaggerated effort of their will. The emotion caused by the induction does nothing but hasten their abandonment.

Maya Deren describes how she was caught in this way. Just before her possession, she had felt herself becoming vulnerable to the drumming, and turned her back on the dancers, but then rejoined them from a proud sense of professional duty:

“For I know that, today, the drums, the singing, the movements – these may catch me also...To run away would be a cowardice. I could resist; but myself, if I put aside the fears and nervousness; if, instead of suspecting my vulnerability I set myself in brazen competition with all this which would compel me to its authority...”

But finally she feels forced to submit:

“With a great blow the drums unites us once more upon the point of the left leg. The white darkness starts to shoot up; I wrench my foot free but the effect catapults me across what seems a vast, vast distance, and I come to rest upon a firmness of arms and bodies which would hold me up... With every muscle I pull loose and again plunge across a vast space and once more am no sooner poised in balance than my leg roots. So it goes: the leg fixed, then wrenched loose, one long fall across space, the rooting of the leg again – for how long, how many times I cannot know.”

This account illustrates perfectly the difficulties met by the student in field experiments, when he does not control the organization of the protocol.

In the same way, the communication in real time of the description of the experiment by the student-participant cannot be done without the help of measuring and recording material, as well as with the participation of operators and external observers, who are not implied in the ASC. A second description will be then possible at the end of the experiment, when the student will analyze the recordings and will compare his lived personal report with the testimonies of the observers.

Maya Deren's narration also showed us that in the absence of a strong personal point of reference, the student remains at the mercy of the process of ASC induction.

The following examples are ASC experiments lived by athletes or explorers who all have in common highly developed faculties of voluntary decision, self-responsibility and self-esteem. Therefore they have strong points of reference. The precision of their descriptions in simple and alive language is absolutely remarkable. These examples are quoted by Michael Murphy and Rhea White in "In the zone, transcendent experiment in sports", or by Robert Crookall in "Casebook of astral projection".

Mike Spino, running coach:

"In the winter of 1967, I was training on dirt and asphalt, paced by a friend who was driving a car. I had intended to run six miles at top speed, but after the first mile I was surprised how easily I could do it. I had run the first mile in four-and-a-half minutes with little sense of pain or exertion, as if I was carried by a huge momentum. The wet pavement and honking horns were no obstacle at all. My body had no weight or resistance. I began to feel like a skeleton – as if the flesh had been blown off its bones. I felt like the wind. Daydreams and fantasies disappeared. The only negative feeling was a guilt for being able to do this. When the run was over conversation was impossible, because for a while I didn't know who I was. Was I the one who had been running or the ordinary Mike Spino? I sat down by the roadway and wept. Here I was, having run the entire six miles on a muddy roadside at a four-and-a-half minutes pace, which was close to the national record and I was having a crisis deciding who I was."

Charles Lindbergh during his epic flight across Atlantic:

"While I'm staring at the instruments, during an unearthly age of time, both conscious and asleep, the fuselage behind me becomes filled with ghostly presence – vaguely outlined forms, transparent, moving, riding weightless with me in the plane. I feel no surprise at their coming.

There's no suddenness to their appearance. Without turning my head, I see them as clearly as though in my normal field of vision. There's no limit to my sight – my skull is one great eye, seeing everywhere at once...All sense of substance leaves. There's no longer weight to my body, no longer hardness to the stick. The feeling of flesh is gone. I become independent of physical laws – of food, of shelter, of life. I'm almost one with these vaporlike forms behind me, less tangible than air, universal as aether. I'm still attached to life; they, not at all; but at any moment some thin band may snap and there'll be no difference between us... I'm on the border line of life and a greater realm beyond, as though caught in a field of gravitation between two planets, acted on by forces I can't control, forces too weak to be measured by any means at my command, yet representing powers incomparably stronger than I've ever known... Death no longer seems the final end it used to be, but rather the entrance to a new and free existence which includes all space, all time. Am I now more man or spirit? Will I fly my airplane on to Europe and live in flesh as I have before, feeling hunger, pain, cold, or am I about to join these ghostly forms, become a consciousness in space, all-seeing, all-knowing, unhampered by materialistic fetters of the world ?”

Richard Byrd, exploring the Arctic:

“The day was dying, the night being born – but with great peace. Here were the imponderable processes and forces of the cosmos, harmonious and soundless. Harmony, that was it ! That was what came out of the silence – a gentle rhythm, the strain of a perfect chord, the music of the spheres, perhaps. It was enough to catch that rhythm, momentarily to be part of it. In that instant I could feel no doubt of man's oneness with universe. The conviction came that that rhythm was too orderly, too harmonious, too perfect to be a product of blind chance – that, therefore, there must be purpose in the whole and not an accidental offshoot. It was a feeling that transcended reason; that went to the heart of man's despair and found it groundless. The universe was a cosmos, not a chaos; man was as rightfully a part of that cosmos as were the day and night.”

Robert Kyle Beggs, swimmer:

“I was swimming back to the shore...Suddenly a mountainous wave broke over me. I went down, down, down into the quiet depths. I was so tired that I did not care. I felt peace settle over me. Well, I thought, I had tried, and I was so very tired. It seemed then that a wonderful transition occurred. I was no longer in the water but rather I was high above the water looking down upon it. The sky, that had been so gray and lowering, was iridescent with indescribable beauty. There was music that I seemed to feel rather than hear. Waves of ecstatic and delicate color vibrated around me and lulled me to a sense of peace beyond comprehension. In the water beneath me a boat came into view, with two men and a girl in it... Then I saw a blob of something floating

in the water. A wave tossed it and rolled it over. I found myself looking into my own distorted face. What a relief, I thought, that that ungainly thing was no longer needed by me. Then the men lifted the form into the boat, and – my vision faded. The next thing I knew, it was dark and I was lying in the beach cold and sick and sore. The two men were working over me.”

We note in all these accounts the presence of regular rhythmic elements, they are:

For Maria Deren, the beat of the voodoo drums.

For Mike Spino, the rhythm of his running.

For Charles Lindbergh, the noise of the engine and the vibrations of his plane.

For Richard Byrd, the spontaneous apparition of a rhythm in a low stimulating environment.

For Robert Kyle Beggs, the rhythm of his swimming and the noise of the waves.

These rhythms are catalysts of access to ASC. Although all different they are located in a frequency spectrum in relation with human physiology, either directly as the rhythm of the running or indirectly by a phenomenon of harmonics, like the noise of the engine.

This frequency spectrum corresponds to ELF, Extremely Low Frequencies, among which one finds the electric frequencies emitted by the brain and usually recorded by electroencephalography.

Therefore we can note a phenomenon of psychophysiologic resonance between the human subject and its vibratory environment. The perception of certain frequencies or combinations of frequencies causes the induction of ASC. This tendency of the electric rhythms of the brain to be driven by the frequencies of external sensory stimuli is called FFR, Frequency Following Response.

Maya Deren, Mike Spino, Charles Lindbergh and Robert Kyle Beggs were exposed to vibratory stimuli which induced ASC by frequency following response.

The case of Richard Byrd is different. His experience was caused by the perception of a rhythm which becomes apparent only because of the weak level of stimulation of the Arctic environment. His description allows to suppose that in his state of relative sensory deprivation, he perceived a fundamental psychophysiologic rhythm coming out from his own entity. A rhythm which under normal conditions is covered by the background noises of man's current activities and his environment.

We must also recognize in these testimonies, the role of the accumulated tiredness which lowers the threshold of vigilance and induces a certain detachment of oneself.

From now on we can better define the elements of our ideal protocol of ASC study:

The organization of the material framework of the experiment will be done under conditions of restricted sensory stimulation, taking into account the necessary technical and human resources.

A cartography of the experience will be established on the basis of a virtual journey relativizing the concepts of space and time.

The technique of induction will use rhythms provoking the phenomenon of frequency following response.

The student will optimize his faculties while being focused on his self-awareness, reinforced by his self-esteem, as the participant-pilot of the experiment.

The full success of this study will be achieved by carefully maintaining the delicate balance between the point of reference of the student and the progress of the experiment. If the point of reference is exacerbated, a despotic impatience attitude will blind the student by disrupting his lucidity and his vigilance. A weakened point of reference will involve a reduction of the consciousness and consequently an uncontrolled submission to the contingencies of the ASC.

The student will therefore cultivate a respectful mental state of this balance, totally lucid and conscious of himself and of his self-responsibility.

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