

Guidelines for the Sacramental Use of Empathogenic Substances

by Sophia Adamson

The following guidelines have been compiled from the collective experience of about twenty or thirty therapists who have used these substances in their work, and who have based their methods on observation of hundreds of individual sessions. While there is by no means means uniformity of approach among the different practitioners the guidelines offered here do represent a kind of distillation of methods that have proven their efficacy. Their description here should not in any way be construed as an encouragement to the use of illegal substances. Rather they are applicable to any state of heightened empathic awareness, regardless of how it is generated.

Although the use of MDMA and other drugs of this family occurs statistically most frequently in what might be called a hedonistic or recreational context, with no particular therapeutic or spiritual purpose in mind, these types of sessions will not be discussed here. It is the belief of the present author, and of the therapists and individuals represented in this book, that such recreational use, while probably harmless (certainly less harmful than alcohol or tobacco), does not have the intrinsic interest and healing potential that the guided, intentional, therapeutic, and sacramental use has. The approach will be described under the headings of Preparation and Set, Alchemical Catalysts, Setting and Context, Process and Method in Individual Sessions, Ritual Structure in Group Sessions, and Re-entry and Follow-up Factors.

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PREPARATION AND SET

The single most important foundation for a beneficial experience is intention or purpose. One should ask oneself, and discuss with the therapist or guide, what is my purpose in entering into this altered state of awareness? Typically, people approach the experience with fundamental existential and spiritual questions, such as Who am I? or What is my Purpose in Life? or What is the Next Step in my Spiritual Path?

These are questions that all seekers have, and it is natural to want to ask them in the course of an encounter with one's sources of inner wisdom. In addition there may be more personal and therapeutic questions, including questions concerning physical illness, traumatic or conflicted experiences from the past, including early childhood and birth, and questions concerning imbalanced or unsatisfactory relationships with others, particularly parents, spouses, lovers, children, family and friends. It is not uncommon for individuals to spend major portions of the experience reviewing and healing interpersonal relationships.

Other kinds of questions people have addressed are concerns regarding work and career, questions about creative expression or blocks, and questions concerning collective and global issues. Some therapists and guides encourage the person to make a written list of questions, which can then be reviewed just prior to the session, and perhaps recorded on tape. Some people prefer to declare an intention to explore certain areas or topics, rather than posing questions. In either approach, it is a good practice to release the questions and intentions to one's own higher knowing just prior to ingestion. In that way one is not too intent on problem solving, which could lead to a limited view; and whatever experience unfolds then will likely contain answers to one's questions, including those not asked but implied. If the experience is the first one with the particular substance, it is also useful to review with the guide or therapist any fears one might have concerning the drug, and any other expectations based on what one has heard from other people.

The question of sexual feelings and expression between the two people should be raised. If their relationship is a professional one, then the principle of no sexual contact should be discussed and affirmed. If the two people are friends who are not lovers, their feelings for each other should be stated and clarified. They are going to be in a state of extraordinarily heightened emotional intimacy for several hours. The state allows an unusual degree of access to fears, concerns and frustrations in the area of intimacy. But it is not advisable to use that state for the initiation of an ordinary sexual encounter. Even if the guide and the voyager are married or lovers, it is probably best to postpone actual sexual contact to the latter part of the experience...because it would tend otherwise to distract from the exploration of other areas.

If two individuals who are lovers, and are experienced with empathogenic substances, wish to use a conjoint session to explore deeper levels of emotional and sexual and spiritual intimacy, this is certainly a state in which tantric and taoist eroticism, which is non-striving, non-craving, and non-possessive, can be experienced. Several of the accounts in this book testify to the extraordinary tactile sensitivity and sensuousness of the Adam state. But for the more usual kind of session, where someone is being initiated into this heightened awareness for the first time, for purposes of psychospiritual awakening, an agreement or understanding of no sexual contact is preferable. As part of the discussion around this, it is important to also agree that the physical touch of a hand on the heart the shoulder, the head or the hand, can be an important source of support and encouragement, and signals empathy or compassion, but not sexual interest.

Another important part of the preparation, that is usually done just before the session, as part of the discussion of intention and purpose, is to practice a meditation with which one is familiar, or a basic relaxation procedure, so that one can enter into the state from a baseline state that is already somewhat clear centered, and freed from distracting everyday concerns. Some people like to read, or have read aloud, a favorite passage from a personally meaningful text, such as a chosen prayer, or a beautiful poem, or an extract from the **Course in Miracles**, or similar inspirational writings. For some people the prayer or meditation might include the specific invocation of a beloved guru or teacher, and the invocation of a particular deity or guardian spirit. People have had extraordinarily powerful experiences with such figures as the Great Goddess, or Jesus, or Shiva, or American Indian spirit beings. Such prayers and invocations should of course not be imposed by the guide or therapist, but rather should come naturally out of the individual's own practice.

Some people familiar with shamanic practices and rituals like to bring "power objects," such as crystals or feathers or any object that has been psychically charged, to the session. Some others, especially if wanting to explore relationship issues, might bring photographs of parents or family to contemplate, or photographs of themselves to activate childhood memories. Finally, it is recommended that one fast for at least six hours, or for anywhere from one to several days beforehand, both so as to not reduce the substance effect with a full stomach, and also as part of the general psychic and physical purification -- this will tend to make the journey much more productive and pleasant.

ALCHEMICAL CATALYSTS

Since the goal of alchemy was the transformation of consciousness, symbolized in the chemical and biological transmutations taking place within the human body, the physical substrate of consciousness, the prima materia, it is appropriate to call these chemical substances that facilitate a transformative reaction alchemical catalysts. The discussion here is limited to the catalysts that are generally agreed to have empathogenic effects, and will not cover the larger and more varied hallucinogens such as LSD, psilocybin, mescaline. For more detailed information on the botany, chemistry and pharmacology of these substances the reader is referred to the **Psychedelics Encyclopedia**, by Peter Stafford (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1983).

The compounds of this class that have been used in therapy include MDA, MDMA, MMDA and 2CB. Many others have been synthesized and found to be psychoactive, but none has attained the widespread attention that these have. Chemically they are referred to as phenethylamines. Botanically, some of these compounds are found in the volatile oils of certain plants, including nutmeg and mace. Structurally, they resemble dopamine, a neurotransmitter; mescaline, a potent hallucinogen; and amphetamine, a stimulant. The psychological effects are not unlike a blend of mescaline and amphetamine, although less hallucinogenic than the former, and less stimulating than the latter.

MDA is 3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine, and became fairly well-known in the 60's, when it was called "the love drug". It is active in dosages from 50 mg to 200 mg. The Chilean psychiatrist Claudio Naranjo, in his book **The Healing Journey**, called it "the drug of analysis" and reported it to be especially useful for therapeutic regression and recollection of childhood experiences. It has a duration of 6-8 hours, and is generally more stimulating, or amphetamine-like, than Adam or MDMA.

It has a reputation for being an aphrodisiac, and is used in some circles as a stimulant for dancing and sex. None of the experiences reported in the present book deals with MDA. Since it has been illegal since the late sixties, and since other compounds with fewer of the somatic side-effects have been found, it does not currently find much use in therapy, as far as is known.

MDMA is 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, and is active in dosages of 50 mg to 250 mg, with 150 mg as an effective dose for the average adult. It differs from MDA in its duration, which is 4-5 hours; and in having fewer of the amphetamine-like side-effects, such as muscular tremor or jaw-clenching. Onset of pharmacologic effects is usually within 20 to 30 minutes after ingestion, and there is a transient moderate rise in blood pressure and pulse rate. Subjectively

there is a rise in feelings of bodily heat, greatly increased attention and alertness, and yet bodily relaxation and ease.

MMDA is also mentioned in Naranjo's book, where it is said to induce an experience of the "eternal now." (Both this, and the description of MDA given in that book could apply equally to MDMA). Since it is, however, totally inaccessible, and was not used by any of the contributors to this volume, it will not be discussed further here.

The only other chemical used in the present series of studies is 2CB, which is 4-bromo-2,5-dimethoxyphenethylamine. This is more potent than MDMA, being active in some people at 18-20 mg; and with 25-30 mg the recommended maximum dose. Energy tremors, jaw-clenching, heat, and blood pressure rise are the usual kind of stimulant side-effects. There is great individual variation in sensitivity to these substances; so one should at all times proceed with caution, beginning always with a lower dose, and only gradually going to higher amounts. Psychologically, 2CB is empathogenic, like MDMA, although it appears to be somewhat more body-oriented, and also to have some mild visual effects, not unlike mescaline. (It is not, to 1985, illegal; although the exploration of its applications in therapy has been much less). Some therapists and researchers have experimented with MDMA, followed 3- 4 hours later by 2CB, which basically serves to extend the empathogenic experience by the same amount again. Some of the group experiences reported in this volume used this combination.

The side effects of all of these substances occur basically in response to the amphetamine-like stimulant action in some people. They are very much dose-dependent. Most frequently noticed are the jaw-clenching, and fine to gross muscular tremors. Many people have found that a calcium-magnesium supplement (300-500 mg), taken just before, during, or after, the MDMA, can greatly reduce the intensity of these, or eliminate them altogether. There is usually complete loss of appetite during the duration of the experience, and even for a few hours afterwards. There may be fatigue the next day, perhaps partly due to the reduced food intake. Vitamin and mineral supplements are recommended before and after the experience. Plenty of water should be drunk and available at all times, since there is considerable dehydration. After the experience, some people take 500 mg of tryptophane, an amino acid, to help them sleep.

Contraindications for the use of these substances, which are, it must be remembered, new and relatively unresearched pharmacologically, include heartdisease or high blood pressure, hypoglycemia and diabetes, seizure disorders, and of course pregnancy, as with any drug. When in doubt, one's physician should always be consulted.

It should be remembered that these substances, unlike any other known psychiatric medication, produce an intense but transient altered state of awareness. Even although one's perception of everyday reality is not appreciably altered with these empathogenics (unlike the hallucinogens like LSD), one's emotional response to reality is greatly different. Thus, although technically a person may be able to walk around, converse, or even drive an automobile during these states, this is obviously not desirable...not only because the heightened state of emotional sensitivity could slow down one's reactions; but also because to do so would be to take one away from the interior exploration of the psyche, which is after all the main point of the experience.

SETTING AND CONTEXT

Generally, the preferred setting for sessions in the therapeutic-sacramental mode is a serene, simple, comfortable room, in which the client, or voyager, can recline or lie down, and the therapist or guide sit nearby. Clothes should be loose and comfortable, and a blanket should be available in case of transient episodes of chilling.

It is best if there is access to, or proximity to, the elements of Nature: a fire in the fire-place serves as a reminder of the alchemical fires of inner purification, and the life-preserving fire of Spirit. Fresh water to drink, and proximity to a stream or ocean, reminds us of the watery origins of our life. There should be access to fresh air, so one can experience the unutterable preciousness and sweetness of the breath of life. Earth and its natural forms -- soil, plants, trees, rocks, wood -- should also be close to the touch. Trees or plants in or near the room of the session make wonderful companions. Crystals or other stones may be brought and contemplated. A somewhat different, although also profound kind of experience may be had if the setting is outdoors, in Nature. Probably it is best if such sessions, if they involve walking, or possible interaction with people, only be done with lower dosages (50-100 mg) or in the latter part of the session; and if the voyager has had prior experience with full-intensity indoor sessions.

The music played, usually selected and changed by the guide or sitter, can have a profound effect on consciousness, as with the psychedelics. Entire therapeutic processes, or shamanic journeys, can be undertaken during certain musical selections. Generally, the therapists and individuals working with MDMA and other empathogens have found the serene, peaceful, meditative music sometimes referred to as "inner space" music, most valuable in these experiences. Fast or highly complex music seems too difficult to follow for most people. Composers such as Kitaro, Vangelis, Deuter, Schoener, Paul Winter, and the slower baroque music of Bach or Vivaldi have become favorites of many users of empathogens. Simple gongs, bells and chimes are also pleasing and centering during such experiences, whether one plays them or merely listens to them.

The attitude and behavior of the guide or sitter during the session is of course extremely influential; and this role should be played with integrity and sensitivity. If the guide is the person's therapist, then they have a therapeutic agreement to explore any areas of concern. If the sitter is a friend or even partner, it is best to have agreement and understanding, before the session, as to what the role of the guide should be. Most people prefer to, and are perfectly able to, do their own best therapy, in these states. They want the sitter merely to be there, meditating quietly, perhaps changing tapes, listening and recording the remarks of the voyager, providing encouragement and reassurance if needed. Intense explorations of certain issues, for example relationships, sexuality, birth trauma or the like, should only be undertaken by prior agreement, or at the request of the voyager.

In the state of emotional openness of these experiences, it is extremely easy for the voyager to become caught up in an analytical, verbal mode, in discussion with the guide, that would take him or her away from the experience of the heart-center awareness. Even if the interpersonal interaction between the two is warm, affectionate and trustful, it can still be a distraction from the deeper intrapsychic awareness that is possible when attention is focussed inward. These shifts

in attention are subtle and elusive. The wise guide will watch for signs that the voyager is losing his or her connection to the deep source within, and will refocus attention toward that source.

PROCESS AND METHOD IN INDIVIDUAL SESSIONS

This is not the place to enter into a discussion of the processes and methods of individual therapy assisted by empathogens. Psychotherapists interested in this topic are encouraged to consult the comprehensive guide by Stanislav Grof entitled **LSD Psychotherapy** (Pomona, CA, Hunter House, 1980). It goes without saying that no therapist should consider administering or guiding a session with these substances who has not had personal experiences with those substances. The remainder of this section will merely give a few suggestions, primarily for the individual undergoing the experience.

The questions, purposes, or agenda brought to the session, as discussed above under Preparation and Set basically set the tone of the experience. Whatever unfolds during the experience seems to be, in a sense, an answer to those questions; even although this may not become apparent until much later. Many of the therapists from whom these findings were obtained, suggest to the voyager to go first as far and deeply within as they can, to the core or ground of being, to their High Self, or similar directions. From this place of total centeredness, compassion and insight, one can then review and analyze the usual problems and questions of one's life. It is not uncommon for people to feel, and report to the therapist, that all their questions and problems have been dissolved, in the all-embracing love and compassion that they are feeling. Even with such an initial state of total unity and transcendence, it is often helpful later to ask the questions, and perhaps record one's answers or comments on tape, for postsession review.

Just as affirmations, or statements of intention, are used to bridge from one's ordinary state of consciousness to these heightened states, so can intentional affirmations be made during the Adam state that would apply to the subsequently re-established ordinary state. Individuals have made statements of intention in regard to questions of emotional attitude, of communication in relationships, of creative expression; even changes in diet, exercise or life-style have been decided and later applied. The empathic state of these substances is such that one can think clearly about the various options one has available, without the usual distortions caused by emotional attractions or aversions. One can think and feel the emotional implications of different courses of actions. One can assess the probable emotional impact of things one might choose to say to a partner or friend, and one can modify one's expression so as to minimize the activation of defensive or hostile reactions. One can hear things without getting hurt or angry, and one can say things without getting fearful or timid.

If the statements above sound "too good to be true," I can only respond that they are based on repeated experiences and observations of many hundreds of intelligent, articulate individuals. What strikes one actually is the profound simplicity of the Adam state. People often express this in the form of apparently banal statements, such as that one only needs love and all else falls into place, or that coming from the heart center, or from the source, makes all other choices easy and right. What these observations and experiences imply is that here we have a substance with perhaps its greatest value and potential in the training of psychotherapists. Psychotherapists who

have taken it frequently also report having insights into their clients' problems, as well as their own.

Various practices of meditation, of yoga, of guided imagery, of psychosynthesis, of shamanic journey work, of re-birthing breathing, can all be performed while in this state. Most people who have attempted them have found it most effective to practice such methods either with low dosages of MDMA (50- 00 mg), or toward the latter half of the session (after two or three hours). It is reported by many that such methods, which are essentially self-initiated and self-guided explorations of consciousness, are enormously facilitated and amplified in these states. People have reported that in the Adam state they for the first time experienced and understood what the nature and efficacy of a given technique really was. Various forms of body-work, such as Trager, or massage, can also be amplified greatly in their range and depth, if the recipient's awareness has been sensitized by empathogens (again, in lower dosages).

PROCESS AND RITUAL FOR GROUP SESSIONS

Amongst the therapists and group leaders from whom the reports in this book have been collected, there appear to have evolved two basic types of approaches to group work (that is, group work whose focus and intention is serious self-exploration in a group context...in other words, MDMA "parties" are not being considered here). In one kind of group, the participants have no interaction with one another during the session, although before and afterwards there is significant sharing of intentions and experiences. Each individual explores his or her own "trip," listening to music with earphones, and communicating if necessary only with the guides. In the other kind of group, there is communication during the session, but in a scrupulously adhered to ritual fashion.

Some groups have experimented with night-time sessions, following the example of Central and South American shamanic cultures that use mushrooms or ayahuasca. However, since the onset of normal fatigue can appreciably shorten a session begun in the evening, others have resorted to daytime sessions. Typically, a group will assemble on a Friday evening, talk and share their intentions with one another, and steep that night in the same building. Starting the session in the morning, they continue until evening, sleep another night; and then do the final sharing and celebration on the following (Sunday) morning.

Which particular substances are used may also vary from group to group. In some, different participants may take different substances, including LSD, mushrooms, MDMA, or ketamine. In others, only MDMA may be used; or MDMA, followed 3-4 hours later by 2CB, in order to prolong the empathogenic state. Most therapists and group leaders agree that it is not wise to encourage someone to participate in a group experience who has not had previous individual experiences with the particular substance involved. The first time with any substance, including MDMA, occasionally may involve an individual in intense expression of their feeling states, either orally or through physical movements. This kind of behavior, which can be extremely distracting to the others, can usually not be stopped on one's first trip; but in subsequent sessions one normally has much more choice in regard to expression.

In the kinds of group ritual in which talking is permitted, the ritual that is used is the talking-staff, or talking-stick. This is adapted from the practices of several Native American tribes, who

follow a similar format in peyote sessions of the Native American Church, as well as in some non-drug healing circles, and in some political decision-making councils. One talks, or sings the song one has learned, only when one has the staff: one speaks or sings then from the heart, and the other group members attend respectfully. The combination of channelling intense inner experiences, and the contemplative attention of the group, is a powerful, almost magnetic attracting force, that can draw someone's expression through in an often surprising manner. Sometimes, group members choose, when they have the staff, not to talk, but simply to share a silent meditation. So in these kinds of groups, a typical session might consist of 40 minutes of individual inner exploration, while listening to music, followed by a round of songs and statements with the talking staff. A kind of rhythm develops in which internalized experience alternates with externalized expression.

An agreement of strict confidentiality in these groups is made: anything that anyone either says, does or ingests, is agreed not to go outside the circle of the group. This not only protects the individuals from unwanted gossip, or possible legal consequences, but also serves to build a kind of trust. As a result, I have witnessed some truly extraordinary revelations being made in these groups. Similar agreements are used in other Native American groups, such as the sweat-lodge ceremony, so that each individual participating can feel completely confident that what he or she shares will not be divulged. It is the group leader's responsibility to ensure that that level of trust exists in the group.

In such a group there is then no other talking, or chatting among two or more members of the group. The integrity of the circle is maintained by participants either lying silently in a circle with their heads to the center, or sitting on the same spot while the staff is going around. The energy that builds up in such a group is highly charged, and its power can be "used," as it were, by each individual to amplify his or her own intrapsychic process; and it can be used by the group to focus energy on planetary networks of light and consciousness, as is done in many peace circles.

Besides the agreement on the structure of communication, agreements on touch and sexual behavior are also called for. Sexual behavior in the group is obviously best discouraged; even in the case of couples who are together, to engage in intimacy behavior would be seen by the rest of the group as exclusive and as dissipating the energy. It should be understood, though, that sometimes the simple touch of a hand from one's neighbor can be the most profoundly reassuring and comforting gesture.

Again, one needs to find a balance: inexperienced participants sometimes make the mistake of assuming that someone who is crying, sobbing, moaning or groaning, is somehow in need of help or comfort. Where the comforter seeks to make a painful experience go away, i.e., to placate, the individual concerned is much more likely to want, need, and cherish the opportunity to experience deeply buried feelings for the first time. Just a simple touch, indicating presence and support if needed, is probably the most effective therapeutic aid in such situations.

Other kinds of rituals that have been adapted by some groups from shamanic tribal cultures include: at the beginning and end of the session finding a "power spot" outside, in silence, and meditating there before and after the session; or having a blanket with ritual power objects that people have brought in the center, and letting these objects be "charged" during the session;

offering prayers to the four directions, and the four elements... or rather the spirit or intelligence of those elemental powers. Group rebirthing breathing work, or movement patterns such as tai chi, have also sometimes been incorporated into a group ritual. As stated above, those kinds of ritual activities usually work best in low dosage sessions.

FOLLOW-UP AND AFTER-EFFECTS

An interesting question for many people concerns the extent to which the insights and changes of such experiences with empathogens are permanent: is it possible to transfer the learning, the new attitudes and feelings, into one's everyday reality? Or, to put this question another way, what kind of behavior or personality changes occur in people after the deeply changed states of consciousness, of the kind described in this book?

From reviewing the work of therapists and guides who have witnessed sessions with MDMA and other of the empathogens, one is led to the conclusion that there are two main kinds of outcomes: for one group of people there is no discernible outward change in behavior. The significant changes occurred in attitude, in emotional response to situations. They discovered, perhaps, that what they were doing was in line with their true spiritual purpose. They feel confirmed perhaps in their commitment; they have more compassion and true understanding. The second group are those who do see things in their life that they want to and can change... and they proceed in a more or less systematic manner to bring about those changes. Patterns that people have changed have ranged from physical symptoms, dietary habits, work habits and attitudes, to basic changes in world view, in religious or spiritual practice, or in fundamental career changes.

Some individuals have only one experience with Adam, and have made major life changes as a result of one such experience. Others find they "need" perhaps three or four or five sessions, to clear out some basic problems. After that, they may find that the experience doesn't "take" any more: there is almost a kind of psychic tolerance, or a feeling that the "space" the MDMA experience can be entered at will, without the substance, and is not the major re-organizing that it was the first time.

The intention or set of the individual in taking the substance is crucial here also, in the after-effects. The intention before the session affects experiences during it, and the intentions acknowledged and affirmed during the experience affect the long-term outcomes. Intention seems to function as a kind of bridge between states of consciousness.

It is also the impression of many therapists and observers that the empathogens, more than other psychedelics or hallucinogens, leave one with the ability to consciously recall the state of consciousness -- to do a kind of voluntary, purposive "flashback". One therapist, for example, reported that clients could be asked to remember how they felt during an Adam session, and then use that feeling, of compassion and well-being, to look at and deal with a troublesome issue in their current life. Some have used physical "anchoring" techniques, such as listening to the music they hear during their session, to trigger them back into a momentary re-living of their experience. It's almost as if the doorway of the heart-center, once opened, stays open, or can be opened very easily again, by choice.

There is a feeling of being empowered to make conscious choices, about the direction of one's life, and one's relationships, or work, or creativity, and that one can empathically sense what the emotional consequences of one's choices will be. One can choose where one directs one's attention and focus of awareness. One woman reported feeling that there were paths that went out from the heartcenter, and that she could choose which one was most appropriate for her; and not just take the one always taken, the traditional, expected path. Many possibilities lie open for those who have found themselves in this great gateway to the inner realms of light and beauty.

This sense of the heart-center as a kind of crossroads, from which major directions are chosen, is expressed in the following poem, which came out of some experiences with MDMA, and with which I will close these remarks on the sacramental uses of empathogenic substances.

Six-fold are the paths at the crossroads of the heart.
Forward and backward,

left and right,

upward and downward.

The path forward leads to the future, and is called
"imagination."

The path backward leads to the past, and is called
"remembrance."

The left-hand way is that of the woman, and is called
"Eve-the-Beautiful."

The right-hand way is that of the man, and is called
"Adam-the-Strong."

The upward path leads to the world of Spirit, and is called
"transcendence."

The downward path leads to the world of Matter, and is called
"embodiment."