

The Utility of Psychedelics | Dr. Sam Harris & Dr. Andrew Huberman

Could you tell us why psychedelics can be useful And here I give the caveats that maybe you'll feel obligated to give as well But this we're talking about you safely and responsibly age appropriate context appropriate ideally with some clinical or other type of guidance legality issues Obeyed et cetera All that stated it was psychedelics to me are an experience of uh altered perception internal and external perception altered spacetime relationship somewhat dreamlike I think it was Alan Hobson at Harvard for a long time talked about the relationship between psychedelic like states and dreamlike states um because of this distortion of space time dimensionality Um And I haven't uh experimented with them much Um I've been part of a clinical trial three doses of MD Ma which certainly altered my the the quality of my conscious experience in ways that led to a lot of lasting and at least for me valuable learning So what are your what are your thoughts about psychedelics in terms of how they intersect with the discussion that we've been having And um what utility do they play in recognition of the self or in other sorts of brain changes Well so Uh yeah let's just price in all those caveats that people can anticipate Um these drugs are not without their risks And it's it's one problem is that we have the single term drugs or psychedelics which names many different types of substances and they're not all the same and they're not So like MD MA is not even technically a psychedelic I think it has an immense therapeutic value and it actually was my gateway drug to the this this whole area of concern amphetamine pathogen right It's a sort of an amphetamine and a pathogen At the same time it's often called pathogen pathogen pathogen pathogen pathogen or an intact It's it's been called um but it doesn't tend to change perception in the way that classic psychedelics do And it's it's also serotonergic but it's it's not um uh it has to be in some part differently so than me even LSD and and psilocybin which are much more similar and and classic psychedelics both are also serotonergic but they're not merely so and they're they're also different Um and the and the higher dose you take of these drugs the more you at at lower doses everything can kind of seem the same at higher doses They you know they they they begin to diverge Um and we can talk about the the uh pharmacology if you wanted to But um the uh I would just say that for many of us I mean certainly for me psychedelics were indispensable

in the beginning in proving to me that this was uh that that that a first person interrogation of the mind was worth doing You know because you know I was somebody who you know age 17 or 18 before I had any real experience with um with MD MA or LSD or Psilocybin Um If you had taught me how to meditate at that point I think I would have just bounced off the whole project I think my mind was I I was just I was so um cerebral in my just my engagement with anything I was so skeptical of any of the the spiritual the religious and spiritual traditions that that have given us most of our meditation talk you know um that I think I just would have um I and I know many of these people like I you know I have I have tried to teach you know Richard Dawkins to meditate and Daniel Dennett to meditate I've ambushed them with meditation and very you know both both in a group setting and and one on one not not not Dan but uh but Richard II I ambushed on my own podcast with a guided meditation And he just you know from his he you know he closes his eyes he looks inside and there's nothing of interest to see right Like it's just it's like it's not he doesn't have the the um the conceptual interest in him that would that would cause him to to persist long enough to find out that there's a there there right now this is not a problem with LSD or psilocybin or MD MA And I know that if I gave him 100 mcg of LSD or 5 g of of mushrooms or you know 20 you know 25 mg of psilocybin Um That's probably not the analogous dosage to the 5 g of mushrooms 5 g of mushrooms would be more than that Um uh uh I forget what it is of uh of MD MA maybe 100 and 20 mg I think the maps dose is uh which is the one that's under clinical trials is 100 and 25 mg with the option of a 75 mg booster Funny I remember the facts that come to hand Um But uh there's no there's just no possibility that nothing's gonna happen right now Something with with a psychedelic wi wi with with MD MA Most people tend to have certainly under any kind of guidance tend to have a very uh positive you know prosocial experience Um But you know with a psychedelic you might have a AAA um a somewhat you know terrifying experience if you have quote a bad trip You know if you and I've certainly had those experiences on on LSD and and to some degree in psilocybin But um the prospect that nothing is gonna happen is just in you know a million you know nearly a million cases out of a million Just not in the cards I mean just just neurop physiologically something's gonna happen with the requisite dose of of uh of one of these drugs And if if that thing that happens is is psychologically at all normative and you know pleasant and interesting and valuable which it is so much of the time and certainly under the appropriate you know setting

setting and and guidance Um it can be you know a lot of the time for you know virtually everybody Again there are caveats if you if you're prone if you think you have you know uh proclivity for schizophrenia or you know bipolar disorder this is almost certainly not for you you know and anyone doing a the the the studies like Johns Hopkins for for um the therapeutic effects of of any of these drugs they're they're ruling out people with you know first degree relatives with with any of these clinical conditions Um but so for somebody like me at 18 who didn't know that this was an area of of not only interest but would it be the you know the the center of gravity for the rest of his life If only he could pay attention clearly enough to see that it could be right Um I was someone who very likely again I don't know I don't have the counterfactual in hand I don't know what would have happened if if someone had you know forced me to meditate for an hour uh at that point But I know I wasn't interested in it until I took MD Ma Um I know I wasn't having these kinds of experiences spontaneously that get that showed me that there was an inner landscape that was worth exploring Um I was a very hard headed skeptic who was very interested in lots of things but there was no alternative to me just thinking more about those things right I mean the idea that there's some other way of grasping cognitively at the interesting parts of the world beyond thinking about the world right I just like that just wouldn't have computed for me at all Right And if you had so I just I and I literally I had I had no one ever gave me a book to read or and I have had I I don't uh if you the noun in meditation very likely meant absolutely nothing to me before before I took my first dose of uh in that in this case it was MD Ma Um So what the drug experience did for me is it just proved I mean so the the one of the limitations of a drug is that you know obviously no matter how good the experience the drug wears off and then you're back to you know more and more or less your usual form And now you have a memory of the experience and it can be a fairly dim memory I mean some of these experiences are so discontinuous with normal waking consciousness that it can be like trying to remember a dream you know that just disappear that degrades you know over the course of seconds And then it could have been the most intense dream you've ever had And for whatever reason you can barely get a purchase on you know what it was about And um you know there's some psychedelic experiences that are analogous to that But for most people most of the time there's a residue of this experience and with something like MD MA they can be quite quite vivid um where you recognize OK there there was a way of being that is quite different than what

I'm tending to access by default and it is different in in ways that are just uh you know obviously better and and and psychologically more healthy I mean it's possible to be healthy psychologically in a way that I I never imagined right And then then when you then when you link it up to the traditional literature around any of this stuff again so much of it is shot through with with superstition and other worldliness of of religion And you know as as you know and I think your listen listeners probably know I've spent a lot of time criticizing all that but there is a baby in the bath water to all of that Right So I guess it's not that somebody like Jesus or the Buddha or any of the matriarchs and patriarchs of the world's religions It's not that they are were all conscious frauds or you know temporal lobe epileptics or like there's there's a there's a pathological lens that you can put on top of all that But once you have one of these experiences on psychedelics or on a drug like MD Ma you know that there's a there there you know that unconditional love is is a possibility right You know that that um feeling truly one with nature right I mean just so one with nature that you you could spend 10 hours in front of a tree and find that to be the most rewarding experience of your of your life right That's a possible state of consciousness Now it may it may not be the state of consciousness you want all the time You know you don't want to be the crazy guy by the tree you know who can't have a conversation about anything else But uh once you have one of these experiences you recognize OK there's the there's some reason why I'm not having the beatific vision right now and I can't even figure out how to aim my attention so as to have anything like it And that's a problem right Because it's it's available right And it's it's the best you know it it is among the best things that has ever happened to me right And now I can just only dimly remember what that was like Um So how do I get back there on some level And that see so that invites again a logic of changes a logic of seeking changes in the contents of consciousness which set someone up for this this um protracted or seemingly protracted and and you know fairly frustrating search to you know game their nervous system So as to have those kinds of experiences more and more um and again it's not that that's in principle fruitless but it is from the point of view of the kind of the core insight of you know the core wisdom of you know what I would take from a tradition like Buddhism which is not you know it's not the only tradition that has given voice to this but it's I I would argue it's given it voice to it the most in the most articulate way Um Again leaving aside any of the superstition and and other worldliness and miracles that you you know uh we don't have to talk about at the moment and you

certainly don't need to endorse in order to be interested in this stuff Um And so that's the the the bifurcation between the all of the utility of psychedelics and what I'm talking about under the rubric of meditation is at this point of OK once you realize there's a there there what do you do And what's the logic by which you're led to do it And it's possible like if if your only framework is the good experiences the good feels you had on on whatever drug it was and a a further discussion of of like what that path of changes you know uh can look like and that can come in a religious context It can come in just a purely psychedelic context or or you know some combination of the two Um I think you can be misled to uh you can just be you can be misled to just seek lots of peak experiences You're just trying to string together a lot of peak experiences hoping they're gonna change you every one of which by by definition is going to be impermanent right I mean it's it's it's first it wasn't there then it's there and then it's no longer there and then you've got a memory of it right The que what I think it's what everyone really wants whether they know it or not and their right to want is a type of freedom that is compatible with even ordinary states of consciousness which which can ride along with them into extraordinary states of consciousness I mean so what I I hadn't done psychedelics for 25 years because I mean again they were super useful for me in the beginning Then I discovered meditation on the basis of of those experiences got really into meditation and realized OK this is a much more this really is the you know conceptually this makes much more sense to me this is delivering the goods you know in terms of my experience um there's no need to keep having these you know seeking these peak experiences with with with drugs But it had been you know 25 years since I had done that And and there was this resurgence in research on psychedelics and I was being asked about psychedelics and I was talking about their utility for me But again these were distant memories And so I and there was also one type of psychedelic experience I was I was aware that I had never had I had never done a high dose of mushrooms uh blindfolded you know like every every mushroom trip I'd ever had I'd been out in nature and interacting with you know you know it it's just been a very transformed sensory experience of the world and of other people but I'd never done it alone blindfolded just purely you know inwardly directed And at AAA high dosage I'd done high doses of LSD but um but not mushrooms Um So I did that you know and it was very useful and III I spoke about it on my podcast and there's actually there's I I think if you search uh Sam Harris mushroom trip on youtube you get the the the 19 minute version of that of my

describing that trip It was incredibly useful and but what was what was doubly useful was my mindfulness training in the context of that explosion of synesthesia I mean it was it was it was such an overwhelmingly strong experience Um And there were so many moments where it could have gone one way or the other based on my sense of just OK I'm gonna try to resist this You know it was like it was it was it was in truth irresistible because it was just so much But um there were moments where I was aware of OK this is like letting go of self you know in this context is is the thing that is going to you know turn to make the difference between heaven and hell here You know and because there's there are experiences that are so extreme that you can't even tell if it's agony or ecstasy It's just it's just it's everything has turned up to 11 right And it and the difference between the two is like you know the tipping point is just it's not really is kind of a high wire act in some sense you know you could just fall to one side or the other And um yeah so what I think people want is um they certainly want to be able to extract from the psychedelic experience wisdom that is applicable to ordinary states of consciousness It's like what is the thing you can realize in a moment of having a conversation with your child that isn't distracting you from that relationship It's not a memory of when the world dissolved or you know when you were indistinguishable from the sky But it's just a way of a way of having free attention and unconditional love in this you know totally ordinary and potentially chaotic human experience you know which can be psychologically fraught and you can meet you know iterations of yourself that you don't like that are that are not equipping you to be the best possible person in that relationship And what we want to do is cut through all of that And actually you know be in love with our lives and with the people in our lives more and more of the time you know and um that's part there's I'm not saying that the psych you know that repeated psychedelic journeys aren't can't be integral to that project But but you know that it can that the project can't be being high all the time right So whatever is extractable from that the the occasional you know psychedelic trip has got to be MAPP able into ordinary waking consciousness And the point of con the real point of contact does kind of run through this you know what I've been calling the illusion of the self And again it is that part is discoverable without any changes in contents right So you don't have to suddenly feel the energy of your body be rush out and be continuous with the you know the ocean of energy that is not your body right Like that's an experience that's there to be had right I mean there's no doubt but this uh the truth is I mean just looking at this cup is just

as formless and as mysterious as that right when it's seen in the right way
And that's and that's that's what you know meditation encourages you know
want to recognize