

Image Literacy: Preparation during Psychedelic Psychotherapy

Andrée Salom, MPS, ATR

Abstract

The images that arise with classic psychedelics have an affinity to artistic expressions, for they involve the five senses. This text raises questions about the usefulness, for the client or participant, of exploring personal history (respecting imagery), familiarizing with images and non-verbal language, and developing comfort around images before a psychedelic experience. It also offers themes and concrete prompts regarding image literacy to consider during psychedelic psychotherapy preparation to facilitate the integration. Concerning imagery, choices and resources are available every step of the way.

Keywords: Imagery, preparation, integration, psychedelics, psychotherapy

INTRODUCTION

Visual images converse without words and communicate through how they affect. Think of green, for example, and its range of expression in various hues alone: pistachio, lime, pear, pickle, mint, basil, olive.

Tensions establish an artistic composition in relation to content and style and are also present in psychedelic imagery: luminosities and shadows, centers and peripheries, sharpness and diffusions. There may be color, tone, line, shape, volume, texture, direction, movement, and size in both.

Classic psychedelics have an affinity with artistic expressions. The bond is visible in the petroglyphs of mushroom-topped figures, in the porous contours of ancient stone sculptures, in ritual objects made of clay, wood, and gold, and in outfit, ornament, and altar configurations; in the textures of textile arts and fresco paintings (Allegro & Swain, 1970)^[1]; and in the work of visionary artists (Alex Grey, Allison Gray, Victor Escobedo, Android Jones, David Normal, Pablo Amaringo, etc.).

Not all imagery is visual, although, visual or not, it is intimately linked to sensations. Writers rely on language to create mental impressions emanating from our sensory experiences. Describing bitterness, softness,

mustiness, and pitch, besides intensity, can evoke memories and sensations and offer meaning. Accordingly, psychedelic aesthetics are also present in the non-visual-arts. They are, in the wisdom of storytelling and myth, in the literature of the members of the Club des Hashischins (Charles Baudelaire, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, Gerard de Nerval, Honore de Balzac, etc.) and in the writings of the Beat Generation (Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, etc.). The psychedelic-image connection is palpable in traditional drumming, singing, *Icaros*, jazz, and dances worldwide.

Numerous studies have explored the connection between psychedelics, artistic expression, and creativity, encompassing a wide range of participants, including non-artists, visual artists, musicians, writers, architects, creative thinkers, scientists, and college volunteers^[2-13]. Psychologist Betty Eisner incorporated post-session art as part of integration in psychiatric hospitals. Joan Kellogg (in Thayer^[14]) classified mandalas, including those drawn after holotropic breathwork sessions, into 12 categories related to the life-death-life cycle. Stanley Krippner^[15] studied the impact of psychedelics on the content, approach, and technique of art pieces. He gathered queries that analyzed art processes,

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production, and creative problem resolution before, during, or after psychedelic sessions.

Leo Zeff (in Stolaroff ^[16]) asked his clients to gather a series of biographical photographs before attending an individual psychedelic session. Baby ones, teen ones, and grown-up ones. Alone, bonding, family ones.

“Look at it a little while. You may not experience anything. It’s all right. Put it aside, pick up the next one, then look at it. If it provokes any memories, kinda sit with the memories a little bit, let them go where they want to go. Whatever feelings you have, allow them to be there. (p. 66).”

Zeff said that by gathering the prescribed list of pictures beforehand, individuals arrived at the session already “in the middle of their trip ^[16]” (p.66).) After the psychedelic experience, once again, he asked clients to contemplate their images of self. Biographical images started and ended voyages. They prompted content and then gathered it.

It is natural for psychedelics to be closely related to the arts. Imagery in the psyche (psychedelic, mental, somatic, oneiric, imaginative) or the paper carries symbols and metaphors. Alternatively, perhaps symbols and metaphors shape imagery –whisper, shout-out, meanings, or suggestions–. An image is an informer primarily through foreground, background, distance, closeness, heaviness, or wisp. It uses means to capture our attention, evoke sensation and emotion, and fuel flickers of cognitive thought.

IMAGE LITERACY DURING PSYCHEDELIC PREPARATION

Given the richness of imagery during classic psychedelic journeys, the question posed here is: How can doctors and therapists assist clients in embracing their personal connection with images (and with their nonverbal languages) before embarking on a

psychedelic experience? Beginning with image literacy from the moment of preparation and doing so according to the uniqueness of each client may ease the experience and the posterior integration. Clients can discover that images are portals. However, images need not necessarily be used to induce content unless specific evocations are planned for and desirable. Familiarity with psychedelic images can encompass various domains.

PERSONAL HISTORY WITH IMAGES

First, therapists can inquire about clients' previous engagement with images. We have alliances and animosities to artworks, dreams, memories, mental representations, and reflections from a mirror. Some of us can easily see or hear phenomena in our mind's eye or ear. Others of us can not. We may be able to easily grasp the theme of changing imagery or not, eagerly link images to spirituality, or, quite the opposite, understand them as unfavorable idolatry.

Whether we have effortless or challenging relationships with images and their meanings, they warrant exploration. Images will likely arise during a psychedelic journey, influence our mood, and carry personal information. An empathic stance towards the client is also empathic towards the client's history with images and the images themselves. Any content in an image may be welcome if there is trust that the content can be incorporated or worked through.

Accordingly, the therapist can reflect, help titrate, paraphrase, propose resources for emotional regulation, or encourage skills for meaning-making while embracing what shows up.

IMAGES AND ALTERATIONS DURING THE JOURNEY

Second, decisions must be made about what information to offer clients about psychedelic imagery. Who will benefit from knowing the kinds of phenomena and alterations that can arise? Who might welcome the surprise? Psychedelic visions can vary widely and encompass bursts, squiggles, figures, kaleidoscopic displays, or no visual visions at all. Sounds range from nuanced, overblown, unintelligible, vibrational, or even silent. Touch, smell, and taste may be pleasant, painful, amplified, intensified, fluxing, or heightened. The senses can mix and combine during journeys (as in synesthesia), and perceptions from each of the senses (or from their combination) can be hallucinatory, according to Benny Shanon^[17].

Compassionate conversations can focus on managing expectations, potential disappointments, concerns or fears, and or on being available to explore what arises with curiosity. Acknowledging psychedelic phenomena as naturally unfolding and autonomous, can prompt relaxation. However, the readiness for biographical, spiritual, or vacuous themes may be explored.

Given the particular disposition of each participant, it may be useful to discuss the limits of mental imagery –their inability to physically harm the body, their immateriality, for example–. Regardless of the vividness, images remain just that: images.

RELATING TO IMAGES

Third, mental imagery (and images) are inherently relatable, and we may learn to befriend them, even when they seem daunting, perplexing, and deeply felt.

Understanding alternatives may enhance trust, especially if an image is frightening or uncomfortable. Clients can learn that an image may be sought from a different perspective: closer, from above, shrunken, or diffused. Alternatively, images can be greeted and turned from (towards an image of

something else). Journeyers may appreciate the option of approaching images –rather than running from them–: to actively become part of a psychedelic experience –by opening the doors, riding the dragons, or going inside them “through the pupils” according to Cosimano, Richards, & Richards (2023)^[18],--. By being the energy. “The drinker may be outside the scene of the vision, statically inside the scene, or in movement within the scene^[17]”, wrote Shanon (2002, p. 101). Again, there are options and resources in relation to images throughout. The following sections expand on the attunement to clients’ preferences and opportunities.

DISCUSSION: ENGAGING WITH IMAGES TO SUPPORT SAFETY, FROM THE START

Broadening the repertoire of interactions that a person can have with psychedelic images, from the start, may facilitate both the journey itself and the subsequent integration, irrespective of the emotional charge of the imagery. Artistic expression is not the point. Exploring possibilities and understanding individual needs and inclinations in relation to interpretation can provide congruence for both client and therapist. Decisions must be made according to the uniqueness of each person’s essentials for wellness, engagement, and relaxation. Some, but not all, individuals may thrive with an in-depth array of information. A thoughtful selection regarding image literacy may support centered, safe, and serene states.

CHOICES FROM THE START

Images during psychedelic psychotherapy are often regarded as life-affirming. They serve as a path towards wholeness whether they offer insight, crucial information, a new perspective, or exalted experiences.

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Clients may benefit from recognizing images' relationship with each of the five senses as a way to explore them. Inviting clients to connect to rising sensations may be useful before translating images into verbal narratives. On the other hand, images with high contextual content (memories, beliefs, expectations, intentions, etc.) can be slowly translated into emotions and sensations from higher-order cognition, according to Aquil & Roseman (2023)^[19].

Journeymen may want to engage with an image in empirical ways: "To participate in it, to enter into its imagery and mood, to want to know more about it, to understand, play with, live with, carry, and become familiar with [it]—as one would do with a friend^[20]" (Hillman, 2013, p. 179). This approach may be appealing to animistic-minded individuals. It has some similarities with Native American and African cultures, which view images as from the spirit world: carriers of sacred information for the individual or the collective; they may be prophetic, healing, initiatory, or guiding.

Regardless of the approach towards meaning-making (and there are many: Freud^[21]; Grof & Grof^[22]; Hillman^[20]; Jung^[23], etc.), it is essential to remind participants that they can decide what to share, how to share, how much to share, whom to share with, and when to share. They choose when to reveal an experience and when to keep it private (like a cherished gift).

Individuals may ask for questioning and prompting or very little intervention. Regardless of what they prefer, therapists can remind them to tend to what they need, for they always have options respecting imagery.

Concrete prompts for relating to visions before a psychedelic session (and after) may comprehend basking in their presence, free-associating, or visually contemplating^[Table 1]. The bond may happen by animating dialogues with the images, giving them a voice, analyzing them, writing descriptions, or

developing artistic works about them (or as them). Literature that produces mental imagery, picture taking, art appreciation, image making or guided imagery, can be used as exploration and preparation tools. Like all articulation, image literacy leads to informed alternatives.

Individuals will require attuned, active listening and unconditional positive regard for their images. Compassionate present-moment witnessing can lead participants to trust their resourcefulness, personal voice, and innate wisdom. Furthermore, deep therapeutic bonds can be strengthened through common images in our minds. The terror or the transcendence lived, may be thus conveyed non-verbally. Images are doors to empathy.

PATIENCE IN THE PROCESS OF MEANING-MAKING

Relating to images may be straightforward, random, or take time and patience. Knowing this may prevent post-journey disillusionment.

Some evocations are epiphanies and make sense quickly. They speak directly to the psychonaut, the dreamer, the maker, and the seer. Beyond or preceding the need for rational or linear thought, they yield an extraordinary experience. They emboss an imprint. An inkling may lead to action, a breakthrough, or change. Relating to an approachable image provokes an unfolding of meaning or a welcomed pleasantness.

Other iconographies, like the ones in enigmatic visions, take time to assimilate or to connect. It may be useful to inform clients that images may stem from unknown cultural traditions. That, maybe, we are foreign to the languages they propose. They might speak in a variety of tongues that include thoughts, emotions, feelings, sensations, impulses, and movement (Gendlin, 1998)^[24] or be void-like and indescribable. Clients may appreciate knowing that the messages of some images

emerge slowly –as if in the intricate process of a pointillistic painting– or that parts of their content may be hard to interact with (we have all encountered monsters). Addressing charged topics with the proper care, time, and support is integrative.

Engaging with images intimately takes engagement and consistency, as does any relationship. In the face of gentleness, interest, or affection, images deliver substantial information during and after the experience. They may do so in subtle ways, perhaps sub-perceptual, perhaps in time. There is no rush, and not knowing is valuable. Despite the uncertainty, by developing comfort in, or tolerance of, their presence and influence, psychedelic imagery becomes approachable.

PERSONAL INTERPRETATIONS

Explaining the therapist's frameworks and personal foundations around imagery provides clarity throughout. Nevertheless, the guiding premise should be about the approaches that serve the client best.

Clients can consider prioritizing personal interpretations rather than relying on those from a therapist, external diagnosis tools, or superimposed definitions. This may grant personal agency and celebrate innate healing intelligence. Meaning-making may be developed between an image and the individual who experiences it. Then, a camaraderie may unfold, an active engagement with personal visions, and possibly a commitment to them.

However, in certain contexts, external guidance may be clarifying, asked for, or even central: symbols are passed down generationally, discussed with the community, or taken to an elder for interpretation. A conversation about preferences can give the client a sense of agency in meaning-making from the start.

ONGOING RELATIONSHIPS WITH IMAGES

Images may be both passing and, simultaneously, long-lasting. Understanding paradox may ease confusion. Information about psychedelic images' ephemerality can come as a relief. Therapists can teach clients to actively alter an image tangibly by working with a permanent marker over a photograph or drawing or through the process of collage. But imagery can also be altered in the mind. A memory may be touched on lightly, given a different outcome, visited with a protective part, seen in slow motion or very fast and or explored in the empathic presence of another.

Delightful psychedelic images' elusiveness can come as sad news. Some people may need reminding that an image's after-taste can be beckoning, lasting, more vivid than waking, or even life-altering. Depending on the goals of the client and the beauty of visions, therapists may emphasize that images can be incorporated into the mind and heart. If they are not captured, like a photograph, they may evaporate. Gratefully, images are like fluttering in aesthetics. Linking them to creative action will help keep them alive: Imagining, calling, describing, contouring, printing, or bonding them to a haiku or a three-dimensional object. Keeping images available (in perceptible form) can strengthen the dynamic relationship and maintain a connection for future reference. Images can be keepsakes and memory keepers, and when in need of a token or of a resource, they may be summoned.

Ongoing relationships with images, past the initial conversation with them or the first appreciation of them, can promote their integration or their ongoing flavor. Self-discovery, through exploring an image, can be fostered over time as meanings and resilience evolve. Not everyone knows, from the start, that images may lead to the change of a trait: images may remind us to saunter in nature,

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call a loved one, or feel into who we really are. Yet, encountering imagery and understanding the actions they insinuate can be learned. A newfound commitment and an awareness of lasting value can be fastened through their acquaintance

Consider Image Literacy During Preparation

During psychedelic psychotherapy preparation, consider the following:

- Ponder on your relationship to images in general.
- See if symbols or iconographies have ever helped you transform moods or habits.
- Consider the pros and cons of looking at images before a psychedelic experience. If you decide that it is beneficial, choose the images carefully.
- Look into your patterns of meaning-making in relation to the non-verbal (pictures, songs, dance). Know that you can access the patterns that serve you and/or develop new ones.
- Think about your recollection of sensory details and emotion in relation to images (Do you remember your dreams? Do you have vivid memories?). Practice expanding your recall by looking at an apple and then drawing it without looking.
- Examine your grasp of a common theme in the face of changing phenomena—practice summarizing the main theme of a picture, a movie, or a text in one sentence. Title your dreams. Then, title your psychedelic journey. It may have more than one title.
- Look at an art image from a magazine, a movie, a dream, listen to music, or taste a dish. Notice what the experience of observation brings up in relation to smell, touch, taste, sound, and sight—practice describing the experience in writing.
- Use active imagery as a practice. See how you relate to imagery, and if trust in emerging phenomena can be further developed.
- Investigate your alliance to dreams, daydreams, nightmares, flashbacks, mental images, pictures, images aroused by texts, and your personal bond with metaphors.
Recognize or develop strategies useful for dealing with difficult images so that you may have exercises available when you need them
- If a mental image is frightening or uncomfortable, you may approach it from a different perspective: get closer, see it from above, shrink it in your mind, change its color, or shift between it and an image of beauty and joy.
- Describe, in detail, an image that has served as a resource in the past. See if you can find more images that are resources from the psychedelic experience after.
- Notice and describe the effects of an image from a dream or painting on your body. You may choose to do the same with psychedelic images to explore the somatic information.
- See if doodling on big pieces of paper, or small, can shift your bodily sensations. Explore the difference between making round, linear, angular, vertical, and horizontal traces. What soothes you? What materials work best?
- Develop openness towards your reading of an image. The meaning may expand.
 - Practice free-associating around an image.
 - Animate a dialogue with an image and give it a voice.
 - Speak as the image.
 - Write descriptions or develop artistic projects about it.
 - If you wish, analyze it cognitively. Ask yourself what the image can

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teach you about yourself, others, or the world.

- Explore the sensations, emotions, and thoughts about an image (in that specific order or vice versa).

Draw a circle and, in it, a sketch, a painting, or an illustration of an experience. You don't need artistic ability, just oil pastels, crayons, or pencils. Perhaps start with a texture, a color, a trace. Trust the process.

- Decide if it is beneficial to translate an image into art, and plan how to do so, and when. There is no rush for additional actions; waiting before making any important life decisions is advisable. Micro-steps in change can lead to new destinations (Mary Cossimano, 2023)^[25].
- If you wish, have images available (in perceptible form –make them, write about them, record them, recollect them, document them–), for future reference.
- Consider the pros and cons of telling about a psychedelic image versus keeping it private for self-care. Consider who to share with, if anyone, when, and how much to share. If you do, share an image and explore the mutuality around it.
- Consider, with trust, your own interpretations and your felt sense of an image.
- If you want others' interpretations of an image, take what serves you and let the rest go.
- Offer images spaciousness. Give yourself time to relate to an image. Let your relationship with images evolve

CONCLUSION

In psychedelic psychotherapy, a person-centered approach can provide choices (and resources) related to image literacy from the start to support a sense of safety and comfort. Exploring relationships with images makes it possible to diminish fears, increase agency and trust, fine-tune expectations, develop skills for the journey, make sense of what

may arise post-experience, and understand the possibilities of reshaping images or having ongoing bonds with them. Image literacy can focus on the benefits of being curious in the presence of any mental and somatic phenomena that may occur.

Whether in matter, in the mind's eye, or produced by molecules, images are holdable, watchable, tastable, smellable, and hearable. They reverberate through various dimensions and can synthesize somatic, emotional, mental, social, ecological, animistic, cross-cultural and or spiritual themes. Through a relaxed familiarity, imagery can be an agent for “altered traits,” expanding transformation, and past altered states (Smith, 2003, p. 97)^[26]. Being conduits for participation, they provide an expanded array of experiences for change.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Andrée Salom, MPS, ATR
(andreesalom@yahoo.com)

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