Remarks on the Effects of the Mescal Button

by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell

| Dose: T+ 0:00 | 1.5 buttons oral Peyote extract |
| T+ 1:00     | 1 button oral Peyote extract    |
| T+ 4:10     | 4 buttons oral Peyote extract   |

Body weight: 0 lbs

[Erowid Note: The following report was published in The British Medical Journal in 1896. The author, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, was a well-respected American Physician who became the first president of the Congress of American Physicians and Surgeons. This report was accompanied by a report by his colleague Dr. Eshner describing his experience with a similar extract.]

At 12 noon of a busy morning I took fully 1 drachm of an extract of which each drachm represented one mescal button. I had in a half-hour a sense of great gastric discomfort, and later of distension. At 1 p.m. I took a little over a drachm. Between 2 and 3 p.m. I noted my face was flushed; the pupils were dilated midway, the pulse 80 and strong. I had a light sense of exhilaration, a tendency to talk, and now and then I misplaced a word. The knee-jerk and station were normal. Between 2 and 4 o’clock I had outside of my house two consultations, and saw several patients. I observed that with a pleasing sense of languor there was an unusual amount of physical endurance. I went rather quietly, taking two stairs at a time and without pause, to the fourth storey of an hotel, and did not feel oppressed or short of breath. This is akin to the experience, as I learn, of the mescal-eating Indians, and to that of many white men.

Meanwhile my stomach was more uncomfortable, and I saw the first evidence of any change in my colour records. On closing my eyes (while in my carriage), I held longer than usual any bright object just seen. As to this, however, I am not as sure as I am concerning the later phenomena. About 4:10 p.m. I drove home, and after taking half an ounce of extract [0.5 oz = 4 drachms] in three doses I lay on a lounge and read, becoming steadily more conscious, at first of a left frontal pain (not severe) and soon after of a dull occipital ache felt on both sides and at or about the occipital bosses. Yawning at times, sleepy, deliciously at languid ease, I was clearly in “the land where it is always afternoon.” At 4:30 p.m., rising to make notes, I became aware that a transparent, violet haze was about my pen point, a tint so delicate as at times to seem doubtfully existent. At this stage of the mescal intoxication I had a certain sense of the things about me as having a more positive existence than usual. It is not easy to define what I mean, and at the time I searched my vocabulary for phrase or word which should fitly state my feeling. It was in vain.

At this time, also, I had a decisive impression that I was more competent in mind than in my everyday moods. I seemed to be sure of victoriously dealing with problems. This state of mind may be easily matched in the condition of some men when pretty far gone in alcohol intoxication.

Gender of reportee: male
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My own mood was gently flattering—a mere consciousness of power, with meanwhile absolute control of every faculty. I wrote a long letter of advice dealing with a rather doubtful diagnosis, and on reading it over was able to see that it was neither better nor worse than my average letter. Yet the sense of increased ability was so notable that, liking to test it, and with common-sense disbelief in its flattery, I took up a certain paper on psychology, which a week before I had laid down in despair. I grieve to say that it was less to be comprehended than ever. My ignorance would have remained bliss had I not made the experiment. I next tried to do a complicated sum, but soon discovered that my ordinary inefficiency as to figures was not really increased.

A mood is like a climate and cannot be reasoned with. I continued to have for some two hours this elated sense of superiority. I was for this while in that condition in which some people permanently abide.

The further test of writing a few lines of verse was tried. I found there was much effort needed. I lay down again about 5:20, fort observing that the outer space field seemed to be smoky. Just at this time, my eyes being closed, I began to see tiny points of light, like stars or fire flies, which came and went in a moment. My palms were now tingling, my face a little flushed. About 5:40 the star points became many, and then I began to observe something like fragments of stained glass windows. The glass was not very brilliant, but the setting, which was irregular in form, seemed to be made of incessantly flowing sparkles of pale silver now going here, now there, to and fro, like, as I thought, the inexplicable rush and stay and reflux of the circulation seen through a lens. These window patterns were like fragments coming into view and fading.

Hoping for still better things in the way of colour, I went upstairs lay down in a darkened room and waited. In a few minutes the silver stars were seen again, and later I found that these always preceded any other more remarkable visions.

The display which for an enchanted two hours followed was such as I find it hopeless to describe in language which shall convey to others the beauty and splendour of what I saw. I shall limit myself to a statement of a certain number of the more definite visions thus projected on the screen of consciousness.

During these two hours I was generally wide awake. I was comfortable, save as to certain gastric conditions, which were not so severe as to distract attention. Time passed with little sense for me of its passage. I was critically attentive, watchful, interested, and curious, making all the time mental notes for future use.

Especially at the close of my experience I must, I think, have been for a while in the peculiar interval between the waking state and that of sleep—the “praedormitum”—the time when we are apt to dream half-half controlled stories; but as to this I am not very sure. As a rule, I was on guard with every power of observation and reflection in full activity.

My first vivid show of mescal colour effects came quickly. I saw the stars, and then, of a sudden, here and there delicate floating films of colour—usually delightful neutral purples and pinks. These came and went—now here, now there. Then an abrupt rush of countless points of white light swept across the field of view, as if the unseen millions of the Milky Way were to flow a sparkling river
before the eye. In a minute this was over and the field was dark. Then I began to see zigzag lines of very bright colours, like those seen in some megrims. I tried to fix the place and relation of these tints, but the changes were such as to baffle me. One was an arch of angled lines of red and green, but of what else I could not determine. It was in rapid, what I may call minute, motion.

The tints of intense green and red shifted and altered, and soon were seen no more. Here, again, was the wonderful loveliness of swelling clouds of more vivid colours gone before. I could name them, and, sometimes rising from the lower field, and very swiftly altering in colour tones from pale purples and rose to greys, with now and then a bar of level green or orange intense as lightning and as momentary.

When I opened my eyes all was gone at once. Closing them I began after a long interval to see for the first time definite objects associated with colours. The stars sparkled, and passed away. A white spear of grey stone grew up to huge height, and became a tall, richly finished Gothic tower of very elaborate and definite design, with many rather worn statues standing in the doorways or on stone brackets. As I gazed every projecting angle, cornice, and even the face of the stones at their joinings were by degrees covered or hung with clusters of what seemed to be huge precious stones, but uncut, some being more like masses of transparent fruit. These were green, purple, red, and orange; never clear yellow and never blue. All seemed to possess an interior light, and, to give the faintest idea of the perfectly satisfying intensity and purity of these gorgeous colour-fruits is quite beyond my power. All the colours I have ever beheld are dull as compared to these.

As I looked, and it lasted long, the tower became of a fine mouse hue, everywhere the vast pendant masses of emerald green, ruby reds, and orange began to drip a slow rain of colours. All this while nothing was at rest a moment. The balls of colour moved tremulously. The tints became dull, and then, at once, past belief vivid; the architectural lines were all active with shifting tints. The figures moving shook the long hanging lines of living light, and then, in an instant, all was dark.

After an endless display of less beautiful marvels I saw that which deeply impressed me. An edge of a huge clif seem [sic] to project over a gulf of unseen depth. My viewless enchanter set on the brink a huge bird claw of stone. Above, from the stem or leg, hung a fragment of some stuff. This began to unroll and float out to a distance which seemed to me to represent Time as well as immensity of Space. Here were miles of rippled purples, half transparent, and of ineffable beauty. Now and then soft golden clouds floated from these folds, or a great shimmer went over the whole of the rolling purples, and things, like green birds, fell from it, fluttering down into the gulf below. Next, I saw clusters of stones hanging in masses from the claw toes, as it seemed to me miles of them, down far below into the underworld of the black gulf.

This was the most distinct of my visions. Incautiously I opened my eyes and it was gone. A little later I saw interlaced and numberless hoops in the air all spinning swiftly and all loaded with threaded jewels or with masses of colour in long ropes of clustered balls. I began to wonder why I saw no opals, and some minutes after each of these circles, which looked like a boy’s hoop, became huge opals; if I should say fluid opals it would best describe what was however like nothing earthly.

I set myself later to seeing if I could conjure figures, for so far I had seen nothing human in form,
nor any which seemed alive. I had no luck at this, but a long while after I saw what seemed a shop with apothecaries’ bottles, but of such splendour [of?] green, red, purple, as are not outside of the pharmacies of fairy land.

On the left wall was pinned by the tail a brown worm of perhaps a hundred feet long. It was slowing rotating, like a catherine wheel [pinwheel], nor did it seem loathly. As it turned, long green and red tentacles fell this way and that. On a bench near by two little dwarfs, made, it seemed, of leather, were blowing through long glass pipes of green tint, which seemed to me to be alive, so intensely, vitally green were they. But it were vain to find in words what will describe these colours. Either they seemed strangely solid, or to possess vitality. They still linger visibly in my memory, and left the feeling that I had seen among them colours unknown to my experience.

Their variety and strange juxtapositions were indeed fascinating for one to whom colour is more than it is to most men; nor is it possible to describe the hundredth of what I saw. I was at last conscious of the fact that at moments I was almost asleep, and then wide awake. In one of these magic moments I saw my last vision and the strangest. I heard what appeared to be approaching rhythmical sounds, and then saw a beach, which, I knew to be that of Newport. On this, with a great noise, which lasted but a moment, rolled in out of darkness wave on wave. These as they came, were liquid splendours huge and threatening, of wonderfully pure green, or red or deep purple, once only deep orange and with no trace of foam. These water hills of colour broke on the bench with myriads of lights of the same tint as the wave. This lasted some time, and while, it did so I got back to more distinct consciousness, and wished the beautiful terror of these huge mounds of colour would continue.

A knock at my door caused me to open my eyes, and I lost whatever of wonder might have come after. After dinner I ceased to be able to see any further display of interest. Now and then a purple or pink fragment appeared, but that was all. For a day after I noted the fact that my visions could be easily recalled by a memorial effort, but with less and less sharpness.

These shows are expensive. For two days I had headache and for one day a smart attack of gastric distress. This came after the first dose, and was most uncomfortable. The experience, however, was worth one such headache and indigestion, but was not worth a second.

Dr. Prentiss and others describe mescal as causing insomnia. My first experience with the tincture was made early in the morning. I became deeply flushed by noon, but had no visions. I felt drowsy and slept very well the following night. The extract used, as stated, did make me sleepless up to 4 a.m., but neither restless nor uneasy. . . .

For the psychologist this agent should have value. To be able with a whole mind to experiment mentally upon such phenomena as I have described is an unusual privilege. Here is unlocked a storehouse of glorified memorial treasures of one kind. There may be a drug which shall so release a mob of verbal memories, or of musical records, or, in fact, of tastes and odours. I naturally speak of things seen under mescal influence as glorified memories—certainly nothing soon in these visions was altogether outside of my known experiences—but everything was expressive—forms were gigantic—colours marvellously intermingled. In fact, nothing was simply the vision of a thing.
remembered and recognised except the familiar Newport Beach.

I see no obvious therapeutic uses for mescal in massive doses. It is yet to be tested by continuous employment in moderate amounts, and may be of value.

I sought so to limit the influence of mescal as to remain in full possession of all my faculties. The larger doses secure, as Dr. Prentiss has shown, more remarkable results, but may lessen the power to observe and to comment. I should dread a little lest excessive amounts might leave too permanent effects. In fact, I constantly carried for days a quite vivid image of one of these jewel clusters, seeing it mentally whenever my mind was turned upon the subject of my visions.

I predict a perilous reign of the mescal habit when this agent becomes attainable. The temptation to call again the enchanting magic of my experience will, I am sure, be too much for some men to resist after they have once set foot in this land of fairy colours where there seems to be so much to charm and so little to excite horror or disgust. Were I to take mescal again I should dictate to a stenographer all that I saw and in due order. No one can hope to remember for later record so wild a sequence of colour and of forms.

But since to talk does not disturb these visions, a perfect account might easily be given. No one has told us what visions come to the Red man. I should like to know if those of the navy laborer would be like those of the artist, and above all, what those born blind could relate; and, too, such as are born colour blind.