

Working with Non-Ordinary States

A guide to preparing and
integrating experiences with non-
ordinary states of consciousness



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Are you preparing to work, or have previously worked with non- ordinary states?

This booklet is designed to provide guidance in preparing for and integrating experiences with non-ordinary states of consciousness, such as breathwork, yoga, mindfulness, vision quests and plant medicines.

This booklet is for education purposes only, and is not a substitute for integration support with a qualified therapist. I acknowledge, however, that it is not always easy to find a therapist or group, and wait times can be lengthy. I encourage you to seek additional support from a qualified therapist where possible

Disclaimer: I do not endorse the illegal use of psychedelic substances. I do, however, recognise that people in our communities are working with these compounds and do not hold judgement towards those who are doing so.

This booklet is for harm reduction purposes only

Working with non-ordinary states

A non-ordinary state of consciousness is a state of consciousness in which one's ordinary level of wakefulness, attention, or awareness is temporarily shifted in some way. This can be achieved through a variety of mechanisms such as breathwork, yoga, meditation, plant medicines, drumming, ecstatic dance and more.



Whilst there can be a number of benefits to working with non-ordinary states, such as having profound insights, increased feelings of

connectedness and increased flexibility in the way with think about and perceive the world around us, there can also be a number of challenges that can result in significant distress or a "bad trip."

Mitigating some of the potential negative impacts of working with non-ordinary states can occur through proper preparation, attention to "set" and "setting," and a plan for ongoing integration, which will be covered later in this guide.

There are some health and mental health conditions that may be contraindicated with working with non-ordinary states, particularly breathwork and plant medicines. Therefore, I strongly urge anyone considering working with non-ordinary states to seek medical advice prior to preparing for their experience.

Factors to consider during preparation

There are a number of factors to consider when preparing to work with non-ordinary states, particularly breathwork and plant medicines, as there may be some health conditions that are contraindicated with these modalities. For example, certain medications and heart conditions may be contraindicated with certain modalities of working with non-ordinary states. Again, please seek medical advice prior to commencing this work.

Another factor to consider includes the quality and integrity of the facilitator guiding you through the session. It is not recommended to do this work alone, particularly if you encounter any challenging moments. The supportive presence of a trained, experienced facilitator can help to mitigate the potential for a 'bad' experience by safely holding space.



Some questions to ask your facilitator include:

- Do they offer preparation and integration?
- What training do they have? Are they trauma- informed/trained?
- How do they hold space safely?
- What supports will be there on the day?
- What support is provided afterwards?

Desired qualities of a facilitator:

- Empathic presence
- Meet you where you are at- a non directive approach
- Highly knowledgeable in physical, psychological and spiritual effects
- Grounded and patient
- Practicing from a place of integrity



Factors to consider during preparation

Connection to Community

The after care and support available after working with non-ordinary states may include the therapist or referral to another integration support service. Other forms of support to consider include community based supports- for example, communities of people who are doing this work and connecting together to facilitate integration. This can help to create a safe container for this work and support the ongoing integration process

Tools for Self Regulation

When preparing for an experience with a non-ordinary state, it is important to have a range of supportive 'tools' in your tool kit to assist during the integration phase and self care. This will be discussed in further detail later in the booklet. Some common tools may include things like:

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- A photograph of three women practicing yoga in a park. They are in a lunge position with their arms raised, performing a variation of the Warrior II pose. They are standing on a paved path next to a stone archway, with lush green trees in the background. The woman on the left is wearing a black tank top and leggings, the middle woman is wearing a black tank top and patterned leggings, and the woman on the right is wearing a blue tank top and black leggings. They are all looking upwards with their arms extended.
- Journaling
 - Self soothing and distress tolerance strategies
 - Yoga and embodied movement practices like dance
 - Art work
 - Time in nature
 - Mindfulness

Having an individual therapist where possible is highly recommended

A decorative geometric pattern, possibly a mandala or a stylized snowflake, located at the bottom center of the page. It features a central point with multiple layers of triangles and lines radiating outwards, creating a complex, symmetrical design. The colors are primarily purple, pink, and white, with some blue and orange accents.

Setting an Intention

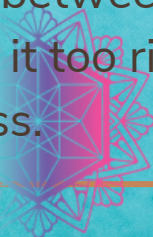
Setting an intention when working with non-ordinary states can help us to clarify what is drawing us towards doing this work, and what we hope to gain from the experience. Intentions can also act like an anchor- something to focus on and come back to in order to ground us during any challenging moments, as well as to provide some context in the integration phase.

Sometimes the connection to your original intention in the experience is obvious. Other times the connection is not as clear. However, by revisiting your intention, you can use the original intention as a way to frame the experience and to help further explore and understand the nature of your experience, and any insights that may arise.



Intentions can support the integration process by providing a starting point- for example, if the experience was guiding me to realise my intention, why did the experience unfold as it did? What is it trying to tell/show me?

Ideally, we want to find a balance between using the intention as an anchor, but without holding on to it too rigidly, so that it interferes the the natural unfolding of the process.



Setting an Intention

In setting our intention, we might engage in self inquiry to get a sense of what is drawing us towards this work, things we might want to understand, learn or change. Journaling with reflective questions may help you to establish the intention. Some questions might include:

- Are there any areas in your life where you are feeling stuck?
- What are you hoping to move towards? What are your values?
- Are there any areas in your life that might benefit from your increased attention or awareness?
- Is there a question you have, or something you would like help with?
- What are you hoping to learn about yourself?

Try to be curious- exploring your values and priorities, things you might have been avoiding or experiencing as challenging

Some example intentions might include:

- To look to the present day experience with a positive focus i.e “to show me the joy of being”
- If there is something you would like to work on- “Can this experience help me to see/show me how.....”
- Understanding the cause of something or to process something that remains unprocessed- “Help me to be able to work through....”



Some factors to consider

When setting an intention, we also want to be careful to manage our expectations of the experience. Sometimes our intention might lead as to have the expectation that the experience should unfold in a certain way or produce a certain outcome. In reality, there are many different experiences that can be had when working with non-ordinary states.

Some experiences may be big and powerful, others quite low in intensity, others might be boring, some might be light and joyful, and others can be incredibly challenging.

Ideally, we want to be able to surrender to the experience and allow it to unfold without attempting to direct or force the experience to go in a certain way, and trust that we will be able to align the experience with our intention, whatever the experience brings. This is where it is essential to have a safe, trustworthy support system in place, and a trustworthy, experienced facilitator to be there to provide support as necessary. We will discuss this further in relation to 'set' and 'setting'

Sometimes, it might be helpful to remember with challenging experiences or experiences that we perceive as 'boring' that

'we don't always get what we want, but we get what we need'



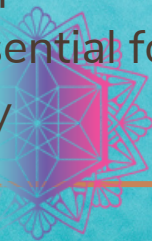
Set and Setting

Another aspect of preparation that is important to consider when working with non-ordinary states is 'Set' and 'Setting.' 'Set' refers to the current mindset you are in and what is happening for you internally- i.e the emotions that are present, your beliefs, mood, expectations and intentions.

'Setting' refers to the environment that the journey is taking place in- the comfort and set up of room or outdoor space, the people that are also present, the music or sound, smells, weather, lighting and even the broader cultural context.

The reason set and setting is so important is our internal state and the external environment are the lenses through which we process our experience, and the person journeying with the non-ordinary state needs to feel safe and comfortable in order to be able to relax and allow the experience to unfold.

We can also become more sensitive and susceptible to sensory input during an experience with a non-ordinary state, therefore having appropriate, supportive music, soft, calming lighting, blankets and layer to allow for the regulation of body temperature and a trusted support person to provide assistance if required is essential for cultivating an environment of safety



Set and Setting

Some things to consider in term of 'set' when preparing to work with non-ordinary states include:

- What is my intention here- am I wanting to work with and explore a particular question/emotion/experience, or I hoping to 'escape' from something?
- What is my current emotional state? Am I calm and prepared, or anxious and flustered?
- Are there any significant stressors occurring in my life at the moment?
- Do I have the capacity to create enough space in my life for this experience and the integration that follows?

Some things to consider in relation to your **setting** include:

- Support system- who will be present during the experience? Who will be there to support you immediately following? Is there someone you can check in with if you need support? Will there be medical and/or emotional support available if needed?
- Are you familiar/acquainted with the environment in which you will have your experience? Have you had the opportunity to adjust and have some familiarity?
- The music playlist (or other people playing instruments/vocals), water and snacks for post journey, pillows, blankets for comfort, a journal, art supplies etc to support feelings of comfort and safety

Proper attention to set and setting will help to mitigate the potential for a "bad" or negative experience. Although an experience may be challenging, adequate preparation and support before and during the experience can reduce the potential for the experience to becoming distressing and unpleasant.



Integration

Working with non-ordinary states can push us outside of our comfort zone and our usual way of thinking and perceiving the world around us. This means it can take some time to adjust and 'land' from the experience. The goal of integration is to weave the experience with non-ordinary state into one's daily life in a way that helps evoke meaningful, positive and enduring changes beyond the temporary experience of the non-ordinary state.

Ideally, we take the learnings and the insights of the experience, and learn to incorporate these into our day to day lives through meaningful, actionable steps. We keep working with the learnings and the insights, and allow time and space for this to unfold in the coming weeks and months. This process can continue to unfold and for some experiences, integration can take many months.



Experiences with non ordinary states can bring up memories, emotions and connect us to parts of ourselves that we have not connected with before, or that have been repressed for a long time. Our beliefs and our ways of thinking about and perceiving the world around us can be challenged during an experience with a non-ordinary state.

Therefore being supported to process the material and work through challenges is essential, in order to process emotions, feelings, integrate insights and move through to a stage of acceptance



Integration

The integration of non-dual experiences can be different to other non-ordinary states. A non-dual experience is an experience of pure consciousness and one-ness, where there is a complete loss of the ego, increased sense of connectedness and the sense of a single, infinity reality. Whilst there may be a real felt sense during the experience, the experience can also be *ineffable* (challenging to put into words or describe, however the content may then arise during the integration process itself).



When working with non-ordinary states, it is essential to carve out adequate time and space needed for landing from and processing the experience. The initial phase of integration (the first 24-28 hours) is crucial for landing, resting and self care. In our present day lifestyles, we tend to be very busy with work and other commitments, so it is even more important to allow for sufficient time to rest and digest before returning to one's normal duties and responsibilities. The following section will look at the different stages of integration.



Stages of Integration

Stage one (a) - the first 1-12 hours

The initial phase of integration is the 'landing'- where we are slowly reintegrating and reorganising our perception and self concept. Initially, we are taking care of our physiological needs- keeping hydrated, having a light snack, keeping warm and comfortable and remaining in a contained place where we feel safe. Ideally you will still have a trustworthy support person with you during this time. During this phase, we typically want to avoid any deep conversation, or the desire to start to add a narrative or interpret the experience. This stage is for rest, reorganising and reintegrating.

Some people may benefit from engaging in non-structured artistic endeavours during this time, such as drawing, painting or journaling whatever comes to mind. Mandala drawing (Mandala is a Sanskrit word meaning 'circle' or 'completion') has become a popular tool in the early integration phase, as utilised in the Maryland Psychiatric Research Centre in Baltimore, and then adopted in Stanislav Grof's Holotropic Breathwork. Some people may wish to have some quiet time outside in nature, but again it is important to make sure that we are in an environment that is safe, contained and supported if we are following an experience with a non-ordinary state.

Supportive practices may include:

- Hydration- water, tea
- A light snack- fruit, chocolate etc
- Art work- painting, drawing, mandala drawing
- Quiet time in nature- with a support person and if a safe, contained environment is available
- Journaling



Stages of Integration

Stage one (b)- 12-24 hours

The next part of the first stage will generally be focusing on grounding techniques to continue to support reorganising and reintegrating, as well as allowing space for any emotions that may arise during this time. We may benefit from a gentle, supportive practice to allow the emotion to move through us. This could include sensory soothing techniques such as a warm shower, a warm beverage, mindfulness in nature, or verbalising/naming what is coming up with a supportive listener. At this stage, we still want to refrain from too much interpretation or heavy conversation and keep the focus on grounding, self soothing and a sense of safety.

Self care can include physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual self care. If self care has not been a significant feature for the person in the past, engaging in a regular practice that differs to what they have normally done/not done can help to stimulate the brain by creating new neural connections and pathways in the brain, and ultimately create change. The more the person engages in these new practices, the stronger these new neural connections become.

Supportive practices may include:

- Warm shower or bath
- Warm beverage
- Allowing space for emotion to arise and flow through with supportive practice such as:
- Sensory soothing techniques- taste, touch, sight, smell, sound, pressure, motion
- Mindfulness practice
- Breathing techniques
- Time in nature
- Gentle movement- walk, stretch, dance to support coming back to the body
- Light sharing with a support person



Stages of Integration

Stage two (1-10 days later)

Once we have really landed from an experience and feel more grounded, the next phase may include starting to add a more structured narrative to the experience. In these phase, we could have a more structured journaling approach as to record a narrative about the experience, including any emotions, themes, images and aspects of the experience that may have arisen. For example, this may include themes related to our self worth, self concept, our place in the world, connection to self and other, and nourishing our relationship with the natural environment.

This phase of integration may lead to considering the following:

- What might I need to change that is keeping me such/no longer serving me/preventing me from living authentically?
- Is there something I need to let go of, or welcome in to my daily practice?
- Does my work/life balance need adjusting? What about my attention to my emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual self care?
- Do I need to make any changes to my environment that may be impacting on my wellbeing?
- What would it look like moving forward to embody these ideas/concepts into my day to day experience?
- How might I implement these changes moving forward in the next days? Weeks? Months?
- What resources/tools will I need to acquire in order to integrate these insights and learnings moving forward?



Stages of Integration

Stage two (1-10 days later)

We cannot work on everything all at once, so some may find it useful to make a plan to break this down into small, actionable goals. Coming back to our values here may be helpful, as goals could be aligned with values and broken down into immediate, short term and longer term.

Self care and general wellbeing practices in this stage are also essential, as processing will continue which means that we may still experience emotional, physical and psychological changes during the unfolding and reorganisation of the ego. Working with a skilled therapist who is familiar with integrating non-ordinary states, or attending a group integration circle, is beneficial for many people during this phase



Stages of Integration

Stage 3- 2 weeks- ongoing (until integrated)

In the third stage of integration, we are continuing to reflect on the experience and what it really means to take on board the insights that have unfolded and the ongoing implementation of this into our daily lives. That way, we are not just having a 'peak experience' which may fade over time and leave us back at square one, but actually taking that information and committing to making changes moving forward.

We do not encourage making any big changes in the immediate aftermath of an experience with a non-ordinary state, however in the weeks and months following, part of integration for some people may include consciously ending aspects of their life that no longer contribute to their wellbeing or serve them, such as unhealthy relationships, changes to their work life, working on behaviours or habits that interfere with wellbeing, working on challenging unhelpful beliefs that may be ways of thinking and perceiving that were necessary in a time of trauma etc. This included the ongoing implementation of practices and activities that promote wellbeing and a sense of connection and belonging.

This phase may also include ongoing work with a skilled therapist to address any themes that may have arisen in the process, such as themes of unresolved trauma.



Future Work

Multiplicity, Trauma and Parts of the Self

Most of us can resonate with the concept of having ‘parts of the self’ and experiencing some sort of internal conflict, ie “part of me wants to do_____ but another part of me wants to do _____” We may also identify with having an ever-present ‘Self’ in addition to these parts. Certain frameworks or therapeutic modalities may refer to the parts as part of the self, ego states or alters.

Culturally or spiritually, these may also be experiences as archetypes, connection with ancestors, Spirit etc. There is not always distress or impairment associated with this, however people that have a more complex trauma history may experience a higher degree of fragmentation that impacts on their wellbeing and may cause distress, particularly if the Self isn’t always accessible.

Parts can have different roles, such as to hold on the painful emotions of the past, to act protectively and proactively to prevent connecting with the pain of the, or to act reactively and more impulsively to protect the inner system.

During an experience with non-ordinary states, some people may connect with parts of themselves that they have no connected with before, or obtain information or insights about the origin of the pain that parts of themselves may be carrying. It is highly recommended to work with a skilled therapist in these circumstances for ongoing integration support and trauma focused therapy.

Some suitable therapies working with this parts framework include Internal Family System, therapies for Structural Dissociation of the Personality and Ego State Therapy.



Additional Resources

I hope this guide has provided you with some useful guidance on your integration journey. As mentioned, it is highly desirable to work with a therapist experienced in working with non-ordinary states, that is trauma-informed and can assist with the processing of any phenomena that may arise in the experience throughout the integration phase

Other useful resources are listed below:

Psychedelic Support

<https://psychedelic.support/>

The Fireside Project

<https://firesideproject.org/>

Psychedelics Today

<https://psychedelictoday.com/>

Australian Psychedelic Society

<https://www.psychedelicsociety.org.au/>

