



Conscious Life presents

The Weird Side of Psychedelics

Guest: Dr David Luke

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[00:00:15] Alexander Beiner

Hi everybody. I'm here with Dr David Luke, an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Greenwich, and an Honorary Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Psychedelic Research at Imperial College London.

His research focuses on transpersonal experiences, anomalous phenomena, and altered states of consciousness, especially via psychedelics. He's published more than 100 academic papers in this area and 13 books. Dave, welcome.

Dr David Luke

Hi Ali, nice to be here. Thanks.

Alexander Beiner

I've been looking forward to this interview conversation for a while because there's an area we haven't covered yet in this conference, which is parapsychology and the weirder more difficult-to-explain things that happen when people take psychedelics. Maybe we could start with your definition of parapsychology, what is it?

Dr David Luke

This is great, I'm glad you're including it. Parapsychology usually covers those kinds of phenomena and experiences that don't ordinarily fit in with mainstream scientific thinking.

[00:01:20] Dr David Luke

These experiences, if you take them at face value, seem to defy our current scientific understanding of the limits of consciousness and experience. That includes things like telepathy, and direct mind-to-mind communication. Clairvoyance, getting information from a distant location without using inference or your normal sensory apparatus. Precognition, getting information from the future, again without inference or sensory input. Occasionally, also psychokinesis, the direct effect of mind-over-matter. And also things like out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, and communication with spirits of the dead, or signs of some kind of afterlife, continuity of consciousness.

Alexander Beiner

How common are these kinds of experiences when people take psychedelics?

Dr David Luke

On an individual basis, we don't necessarily know when people take it just once, or how common they happen. But across the lifetime, if you look at psychedelic users, generally speaking, they're very common. At some point in your psychedelic career, let's say about 50% of people have taken psychedelics, have had the experience of telepathy, for instance, whilst under the influence, and also encounters with the spirit or intelligence of the plant they've ingested.

About 40% said they've had some kind of communication with a deceased human, a spirit of the dead. These experiences are very common amongst people who use psychedelics, and far more common than you'd expect across the normal lifetime, or even compared to any other kind of psychoactive drug.

Alexander Beiner

One of the things that always interests me about your work is that you're a very credentialed, very sighted academic, and you're studying two extremely weird areas, psychedelics and parapsychology. What's that been like over your career? How have things changed in people's response to your area of research?

Dr David Luke

Thanks for asking, I committed to double career harkiri or seppuku. Career suicide by investigating both parapsychology and psychedelics. 25, 30 years ago when I started out, parapsychology was the least taboo of the subjects. I did a PhD in parapsychology because you couldn't do a doctorate in psychedelic studies back then anywhere. Now this has massively changed and psychedelics are no longer taboo, in fact they're a hot-button topic. Whereas parapsychology is still very much marginalized and considered to be somewhat fringe, although it's fairly well established in the UK, at least peripherally.

The landscape has changed, but I think that it's important that we do explore these parapsychological phenomena when we explore psychedelics because people have these experiences very commonly. It's also important not to continue to disregard the full spectrum of human experience. I'm glad to say at least one of my career moves is starting to pay off.

[00:04:44] Alexander Beiner

I want to delve a little bit into the specific unexplained phenomena, or curious phenomena people are experiencing. Maybe two of them we could look at, and then we'll see where that takes us. I wanted to look at because I know you've done research on this, near-death experiences and the potential link between the psychedelic experience, and what people report when they have near-death experiences.

Dr David Luke

To give it a bit of context, I'll probably explain what a near-death experience is first of all. These tend to occur in people who've had life-threatening incidents or accidents. They're much more prevalent now than they used to be because of CPR and resuscitation procedures. The phenomena first became noticed in the 1970s as more and more people were being resuscitated.

However, if you have a cardiac arrest, you have a heart attack, chances are you'll probably die. Of those small percentage that survive, a few of them will also have a near-death experience. You also get it from other kinds of life-threatening incidents as well, other than just pure cardiac arrest.

The classic syndrome is that some life-threatening incident occurs, you get hit by a car or whatever, God forbid, and you're lying there on the floor. Then suddenly you feel like you've left your body, and you're looking down on your body, and you go, oh dear, look, that doesn't look good. Why am I not in my body? Am I dead?

Paramedics turn up, you watch them, see what's going on. Then you often have a life review, you see your whole life flash before your eyes, perhaps seeing things that you did that you probably slightly regret, and more so if you happen to keep repeating them, which would be my case. Then you see a tunnel of light, you move down the tunnel of light, and you're about to merge into the light at the end of the tunnel, which is seemingly drawing you towards it.

It seems to be like, it's a very increasingly blissful experience, and then suddenly one of your dead relatives pops up and says, oh no, it's not your time, you've got to think of the kids. And back into your body just as you've been resuscitated by the paramedics. That's the usual syndrome. You don't usually get all of those effects, but that's a classic near-death experience.

People have drawn parallels to the psychedelic experience as well over the years because some psychedelic experiences do overlap with some of those phenomena. You can often find features of the near-death experience in psychedelic trips, though certainly not in all psychedelic trips, but some. If you aggregate psychedelic experiences you'll find all of the features of a near-death experience occurring.

In our recent research we've been doing at Greenwich, we've been drilling down into the phenomena of near-death experiences and psychedelic experiences, particularly with DMT. It has been said that DMT is powerful psychedelic, we produce in our body, possibly in our pineal gland, and it may be released at the point of death, or when we have a near-death experience, and therefore explains near-death experiences because we have DMT in our body.

[00:07:59] Dr David Luke

We don't know why we have this powerful psychedelic in our body, or what it does. It's a great theory, it's been taken as gospel on the Internet quite a lot. But when we look at near-death experiences and DMT experiences, sure on paper, when you give people a measure, what's called the near-death experience scale, people score highly on that when they have a near-death experience. They also score highly when they have a DMT experience as well, generally as a group.

But when you look at individual phenomenology of people's experiences, you start to see differences. It's quite rare that people encounter dead relatives on DMT. Although it can happen, people don't tend to have a point of no return, which you get on near-death experiences.

The life reviews are also relatively uncommon as well. There are features of the psychedelic experience, such as with DMT you definitely don't get very often in near-death experiences. I won't go into some of the ruder versions that Rick Strassman reported, but things like geometric patterns, which pretty much everybody gets on DMT, you very, very rarely see with near-death experiences, I've come across one account. So there's a bit of a mismatch with it.

Although these are good models, and the fact we have DMT in the brain, and seemingly, at least in rodents, they found a jump in the increase of DMT in the brain at the point of death. It certainly doesn't explain everything, but it may be part of the explanation of near-death experiences.

Alexander Beiner

Fascinating, and it leads us to the next thing I wanted to ask you about which is... Firstly, I've never been convinced by that link because of the points you make, but also because I've never heard someone report a near-death experience and talk about insectoid aliens and jester-like entities flooding. I've often when people equate the...

Some people talk about the DMT experience as like the bardo, that place between life and death, in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which is an interesting theory. But anytime someone's asked me, do I think it is the afterlife? I always say I hope not, because... Terrifying.

There do seem to be these pretty significant differences. In one of your papers, you talk about the fact that the UFO abduction experience might be closer to the DMT experience. Could you talk about that a bit? Like what's the link there?

Dr David Luke

The UFO abduction phenomena again started coming to prominence in the 70s, and 80s. There have been accounts since the 1940s, but it was Whitley Strieber's book, uh, is it *Abduction*? I think it's called... That popularized the idea and it took off in the American imagination. By some estimates, hundreds of thousands of people had had alien abduction experiences, especially in the States, it turns out, but not so much elsewhere.

[00:11:14] Dr David Luke

Some psychologists started beginning this quite seriously, such as Harvard Psychiatry Professor, John Mack. He interviewed a whole bunch of people who had had these syndromes of experiences, which they called alien abduction-like phenomena. In that they would have large sections of missing time, encounters with some beings which took them off somewhere for some probes or inspections, super high-tech alien facilities, or some mothership, maybe involved in some breeding program or experimentation, and then were placed back in their body, but then had this period of missing time, and so on.

They're quite extraordinary phenomena. Whether or not there are alien abductions, people strongly believed that they'd had this experience. I think the experiences were real, but the explanation of it being an alien abduction is questionable. But there are a large group of people who have those kinds of experiences.

Rick Strassman hinted at it in his book about DMT, and his study he did in the 90s in that it could account for some of this phenomena. Given that DMT is endogenous, it's naturally occurring in the human body, it's intensely psychedelic, and it shares some of the features with this alien abduction phenomena when you take it.

Encounters with alien-like beings conducting operations on you, taking you off to some hyper-technologized place and occasionally breeding programs. Although we don't see that very much with DMT, we do see that phenomena with the classic pre-psychedelic era encounter with little people. Like folkloric accounts of people getting abducted by pixies, elves, gnomes, goblins, etc, which seem to be the pre-UFO folkloric experience of the alien abduction.

Those experiences look very synonymous, both spontaneous, that people have these experiences of being taken off by strange-looking humanoids. When you compare them, the folkloric accounts of pixies and elves match these almond-eyed, strange-headed, diminished alien characters as well.

In a way, it looks like the alien abduction phenomena is a modernized technologized version of the old folkloric accounts of pixie, elf, mini little people encounters. And that endogenous DMT could account for those experiences.

The theory being that at some point, our DMT levels in some people may just tip over a threshold, a tipping point, and give you a spontaneous experience which feels like you've been abducted by aliens. You probably can attest to this, some DMT experiences do feel a bit alien, to say the least.

Alexander Beiner

Yes to say the least, definitely. I've always found that link really fascinating. People are often alone in an isolated place from what I understand, and that's often a common feature of it, at night. It's interesting if people are interested in Rick Strassman's work, he's a guest at the conference as well, and they can check out that interview.

[00:14:58] Alexander Beiner

This idea of endogenous DMT seems hasn't had as much research as it could. He was suggesting that we should genetically engineer mice and rats to either have no DMT produced or have loads of DMT produced, a bit disturbing but interesting to see what might happen.

Dr David Luke

See if they get abducted by aliens.

Alexander Beiner

Do they report on the abduction scale with little paws?

The question that often comes up in these conversations is, okay, something is going on, whether it's psychological, or some aspect of being human, where we are encountering these other intelligences. For thousands of years in our folklore, and then now it manifests as potentially the UFO abduction experiences.

The question most of us are always curious about is, is it real? And how would we tell if it's real? So there is this question, I know you've done some research on this, could we go into these DMT spaces, for example, and come back with some information where we could then definitively say, or say with a reasonable level of certainty, look this is information I couldn't have gotten from elsewhere, ta-dah! What are some of the potentials and pitfalls of that kind of research?

Dr David Luke

It's clear that these alien abduction encounters, and other phenomena entity encounters, are not out there. They're out there. They're more likely in there. That doesn't necessarily mean they're not real, but that we don't have any externally objective information about their existence. It's all based on people's subjective experiences.

Now, that doesn't mean they're not real, and it certainly doesn't mean that they're not felt to be real, because, for instance, people who have a DMT entity encounter, the vast majority of them feel like the experience was real, that the entities themselves they encounter, which are very common, are real.

Something like 70% to 80% of DMT entity encounter experiences say that was more real than this real in fact. That leads us to want to explore them and not necessarily try and explain them away. But it's very difficult to try and establish the reality of a subjective experience when only that one person is having that experience. It gets more interesting say, if people have shared hallucinations, so-called or shared experiences, or shared visionary states, whereby two people independently encounter the same experience.

There's a lot... There's a growing body of data that may hint at that in some way, in that the kinds of beings that people encounter can fall into distinct types that occur more often than you expect. If it was just purely random neurochemical firing, such as encounters with the little people seem to be very common, 15% to 25% of DMT users have had that experience.

[00:18:17] Dr David Luke

Encounters with jesters, clowns, these trickster characters, also very common, circus ringmasters and Harley Quinn's, these weird trickster characters, they pop up a lot. And then some even more obscure/terrifying encounters, which are very specific, which don't fit into this, well, it's just an archetype, little people, tricksters, Harley Quinns.

Are very specific, like encounters with giant 25-foot tall often, or sometimes a little bit smaller, praying mantises, or giant insectoid creatures, which are nearly always leaning over the experian, and doing weird brain operations on them, often extracting their emotions, maybe farming them for their emotions. They don't seem to have any emotions themselves, mostly seen as neutral and occasionally benign. But people feel like they're having their brains upgraded often.

That's a really specific experience syndrome that people are having, and thankfully isn't that common, but common enough, it's slightly freaky. I've come across dozens and dozens of accounts of people having that experience, seemingly independently and naively of other people's encounters with giant praying mantises.

That's one level of data, the commonality of the experiences, which should be, by all of the means, somewhat random. But we can begin to explain a little bit, perhaps by the idea of memes, that people have been influenced by the cultural memes floating around associated with these experiences.

Listen to a Terence McKenna talk, he frequently says, you get elves everyone does. So therefore everyone's primed to see elves, or that's what we might think. We can never get beyond the possible cultural influences priming people's experiences.

However, from the very first DMT trip reports from the 1950s, people are having encounters with little people, and that was written up in some obscure journal in Hungarian, in a psychiatry journal which nobody had probably read for decades. We find these encounters from the get-go, so it's hard to extract the cultural influences. But I don't think we should disregard the possibility, there's something inherent about the DMT trip that induces encounters with little people.

The next level of trying to explain it is to try and verify it objectively, that people are going to some other realm and bringing back verifiable information that they couldn't get otherwise. We could do that through classic parapsychological experiments, like experiencing clairvoyance, or telepathy, or precognition, which I've been doing. I've done numerous experiments like this.

The results are often very significant in my studies, or significant enough, in that people seemingly are able to demonstrate accessing information outside of space-time, in a way in which they shouldn't ordinarily be able to do.

However, people don't need DMT to get that kind of results in the lab anyway. We see that from all kinds of alt states and even other experiments in parapsychology, the evidence for precognition and clairvoyance and telepathy, although the effects are very small, they are quite robust over the last hundred years of experiments, whether or not people are on DMT or not.

[00:22:34] Dr David Luke

DMT alone isn't enough to induce those phenomena anyway, so DMT may not be a good causative factor, maybe that isn't the best research. The next best thing we've been looking at is whether or not people can have actual... Well, whether or not they can bring back verifiable information that is somehow something that we couldn't possibly know.

Some people propose that you give the DMT entities maths tests, like solutions to unknown mathematical problems, and that would verify their existence. But these are all flawed explanations, because seemingly there's no potential limit to what is possible with unconscious psychic processes, according to the literature.

To give you a famous example, it should be famous, but it's not, nobody really knows about this research, it's very obscure. There was a psychic medium who... She wasn't professional, she was a housewife, but she also professed to have the ability to speak with spirits of the dead, which is a fairly common occurrence. Supposedly she had made contact with this dead chess grandmaster, and they arranged a match for her with a current chess grandmaster. The idea would be that if she can play a decent game, she might be genuine.

Of course, she played the game, and the living chess grandmaster said, well, that was amazing, only another chess grandmaster of my standard could play a game to that standard. This was before AI was able to beat chess grandmasters, it was done a few decades ago. Everyone was like, wow, so she must be channeling this dead grandmaster, or not, everyone really thought this is either that, or she's just getting the moves telepathically from the guy she's playing anyway.

We can never really account for communications with discarnate entities by psychic information alone, like clairvoyance, or telepathy, or precognition could always explain the information you're supposedly getting from some discarnate source. We have to accept, that it might only be telepathy or only clairvoyance, but it doesn't give us any evidence that this information is really coming from discarnate sources ie, entities, or spirits of the dead.

The approach we've been taking, which is a little bit more radical, is to look at shared visionary experiences, whether or not two people blindly, or under other conditions, are going into an experience together, or with the intention of sharing their experience, because this is something that people commonly report in ayahuasca ceremonies.

They'll say, oh, you know, I was there with the other person, the other side of the room, and we both had the same experience, and they had this knowing, and they come out of the experience like, were you also there? They were like, yes, I had the same thing as you. And people feel like they've had these shared experiences on ayahuasca.

We're trying to get this experimentally, and having people in pairs take DMT with the intention of having a shared experience. We keep them separate beforehand, they only interact by... They meet each other, say hello, they do a short breathing exercise together to get into the mood, they set the intention of having a shared trip. Then as soon as they come out of the trip, we separate them again and we interview them, and get them to do sketches of their experiences.

[00:26:39] Dr David Luke

We got to a point where we've got all that data, and I didn't think... I thought it was going to be a massive long shot to get any signal there. But at face value, I was quite surprised by some of the correspondence of some of those reports. It was seemingly, at face value some of them were pretty impressive. However, that isn't very objective, me just going, oh, well, that looks really similar.

We're now in the process of getting dozens of other people to blind judge all of these shared DMT experiences, relative to people who weren't in a shared condition, and rating them to see which trip reports are most similar to each other. It's a really intense process with a lot of statistics involved as well. We haven't finished that yet, but on the surface of it, some of them look quite astonishing. I reserve judgment for now.

Alexander Beiner

I love that, that's fascinating, and I'm really looking forward to seeing where that goes. Having had experiences on DMT, other psychedelics, and not on psychedelics, which are quite difficult to explain, me and many others, it's very common that people have had a loved one pass away and they have a sense of they found something, some object that's been lost for 20 years, and all these different stories. Seems like there's something going on.

The last thing I wanted to ask you about is, this is great because this is the version of a question I ask everyone else, but slightly different for you, because as psychedelics go mainstream, they're going mainstream in a few different areas, obviously medicine being one, retreat centers, creativity, research, etc.

I just had a vision just now of like Xavier's School for the Gifted, X Men type school. If you could start a school which was investigating the potential of psychedelics to help us tap into, or understand at least, these more, the stranger qualities or capacities we have as humans, what would be some of the things you'd want to...? Imagine you had not unlimited, but you have a massive research budget. What would be some of the things you'd want to start researching?

Dr David Luke

Some of these phenomena, particularly the nature of those experiences seemingly transcend time and space and possibly encounters with other seemingly sentient, discarnate beings. I think that's super important and vital. It's effectively what indigenous shamanic people have been doing for decades, hundreds of years, thousands of years anyway, but without the science labs and budgets, just culturally.

It'd be very important for me to see this collusion or collaboration between indigenous shamanic peoples, indigenous people who make use of psychedelics, and scientists. And to do that humbly in a way where we are really listening and open-minded about this because we have this group of people who've been using these things for thousands of years and go, oh yeah, you can transcend time and space, and bring back information which is useful for your community, and communicate with all these different beings, etc.

[00:30:17] Dr David Luke

That's just a given, that's a fundamental, and yet where we are currently in science, it's like, all that's really woo-woo, and taboo, and flim-flam, and juju, and any other weird juvenile words you want to apply to it. But we are the juveniles here because we haven't been exploring these things for very long, and yet we assume to know what's really going on, and what reality is, etc.

And when we don't have the answer I'd really love to see psychic abilities explored, encounters with other beings. I think the potential benefits for nature contact is hugely important as well, and not just increasing people's nature connection, which we know reliably occurs when people take psychedelics, but genuinely interacting with nature in a different way, as do shamans.

There are a few different approaches to this. One is the communication with other species which indigenous people feel that they often have when they use these alt states, and also even transforming into other species, not physically, literally, but mentally through one's consciousness. This is something that indigenous people reliably do. This also fits in with creative problem solving in that the anthropology of, what we call epistemology, which is how you obtain knowledge of the indigenous people of the Americas, is underpinned by what's called perspectivism.

That is, if you want to know something, you turn into that thing, and you do that by drinking ayahuasca, or eating peyote, or whatever it is. I want to understand this plant, and what its potential benefits and properties are, and its character, its personality, and all the rest of it that goes with it. You take a psychedelic and you sit with that thing, and you turn into that thing in your mind, you meld with it, you become one with it, and then you understand its medicinal properties, and how to utilize it, and how to set up a good relationship with it, etc.

This is something indigenous people in the Americas, those who still have intact traditions, reliably report, and they often do that with psychedelics. Now this is the complete opposite end of the spectrum from objective scientific approaches. We want to try and understand something, we try and step back from it as far as possible. We sample it, we take it out of its natural environment, we desiccate it, we atomize it, we chop it up, we stick it under a microscope, and we try and remove ourselves from it as much as possible, and remove it from its natural context. And we call that objective science.

Yes, you can learn a lot through that process, but you're missing out on a lot of other stuff about the nature of this relationship. Thankfully, this is something we're starting now to see occurring spontaneously with Westerners who make use of psychedelics. I think there's something huge to be gained here.

We can see examples of this perspectivism in scientific creative problem solving with people like Kary Mullis, who won the Nobel Prize for his discovery of polymerase chain reaction, whereby you can take a single strand of DNA and replicate it. Which is brilliant, it's the basis of all genome research, genetic testing, genetic sequencing, everything uses PCR. Kary Mullis rightly won the Nobel Prize for his discovery, but he basically said afterward that he'd taken loads of LSD, and he was able to fly alongside the strands of the DNA molecule and see what was going on.

[00:34:32] Dr David Luke

That is a kind of perspectivism that is effectively what indigenous people do when they want to know something, and they have access to psychedelics and other altered states. We're starting to see this now amongst non-indigenous people who take psychedelics.

Some of the surveys I've done looking at increases in nature-relatedness, and what the things are that are driving those experiences. We find that 25% of people who take an ayahuasca have had the experience of turning into another species. Now that could be culturally driven by people going off to retreats in Peru. It's part of the indigenous worldview that you take ayahuasca and you turn into another species.

But we also find it with very secular Western synthetic psychedelics like LSD. 10% of people who take LSD have also had the experience of turning into another species. That is the underlying principle of this perspectivism, which we see in indigenous cultures, and we can see how this can be used in creative problem-solving.

People like Merlin Sheldrake... We did an experiment looking at creative problem-solving with top-level scientists with PhDs, in maths, physics, biology, and engineering. One of them was Merlin Sheldrake, the biologist, and he came into the lab to work on a problem he had, to do with the relation... He'd been working on it for his PhD for three years. The nature of this relationship between a plant and a fungus, and seemingly in the fungus... The plant gets all its energy from the fungus and it doesn't photosynthesize, it doesn't have chlorophyll, unlike 99% of all of the plants.

It seemed like it was a parasitic relationship, but he didn't really know, he'd been studying for three years. He came to our lab, we gave him LSD, and he had the experience of turning into the fungus. For him, for the first time, he said he had a completely different perspective on his problem, which he had been looking at for three years as a human being, as Merlin Sheldrake, the biologist.

Yet the moment he has an LSD experience and turns into the fungus, it gives him a whole different set of ideas about the nature of this relationship. Because he said he was able to grow inside the rootstock of the plant and see what was going on from the perspective of the fungus.

This indigenous worldview and psychedelic-induced cognitive function like perspectivism can be utilized. I think that's the stuff we need to explore, if nothing else, to bridge this divide between shamanism and science, which is an archaic science anyway. And better utilize some of this wisdom in a way in which we don't continue to destroy the planet because our current objective, materialist... Materialist in both senses, thinking has led us to the brink of total ecological collapse and disaster.

As Einstein said, the same kind of thinking that got you into the problem is not the kind of thinking that's going to get you out of that problem. I think there's a lot we can utilize about cognitive functions and psychedelics, taking a shamanic perspective, and that includes psychic abilities, encounters with other beings, perspectivism, and creative problem-solving in connection to nature.

[00:38:08] Alexander Beiner

Fantastic, that's really, really interesting. Such an important piece to bring in around perspectivism.

If people want to check out another example of that, Bruce Damer's talk in this conference, talking about a new lens on the origins of life that he got through an ayahuasca journey is also fascinating. These examples just keep popping up, I think it's one of the most exciting areas of study right now.

Dave Luke, thank you very much, this was great as always.

Dr David Luke

Nice one, thanks, Ali.