

UNITED WISDOM

Altered States of Consciousness: Experience and Interpretation

World and Consciousness

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

W18 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *all sorts of gradations and mixtures*

— A sentence fragment from William James's discussion of varied mystical states, The Varieties of Religious Experience, Lectures XVI–XVII, p.382 in the English 1917 edition read here. This identified excerpt is not a separate aphorism by James.

What this article is about

After an ordinary walk, someone says, “For a few minutes, everything became remarkably clear.” Another person recalls a prayer in which the familiar boundary between personal effort and what was happening seemed to disappear. A third describes the impact of music without considering it religious. These scenes, invented for this article, cannot be given one explanation simply because each involves something unusual. What changed: the sense of time, bodily experience, attention, personal agency, or the meaning of events? What was added while telling the story? We approach an altered state as a reason to describe carefully, distinguishing experience, report, research model, and religious interpretation. We compare primary texts by James and Teresa of Ávila with a contemporary study of meditation reports. Our map supports questions; it offers no way to induce states, no ranking of spiritual maturity by intensity, and no final explanation of an experience.

I. A name does not replace a description

“Altered state of consciousness” can easily sound like an explanation when it initially indicates a difference from some familiar condition. Understanding a report requires knowing the person's point of comparison. One compares an episode with an ordinary working day, another with earlier prayer, another with a familiar dream. Different comparisons may hide behind the same name. Here the expression provides a broad framework for discussion. It is not a single medical category, a list of acceptable interventions, or evidence of special access to truth.

Imagine two people who both say they lost their sense of time. The first explains that they were not watching the clock and were surprised by how long a meeting lasted. The second says that the distinction between before and after itself seemed to disappear. Both reports can remain in the record without becoming one event. Asking for clarification does not require an

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

artificially detailed answer. Sometimes the honest limit is simple: “I cannot distinguish those possibilities now.” That tells us more than a confidently used term whose meaning has not been agreed.

Several independent questions help with this article's purpose. Did the familiar sense of the body remain? Did the person feel they were directing attention, or did events seem involuntary? Were there images, words, clarity, joy, or fear? What is remembered about the sequence, and what was inferred later? These are editorial questions about a report, not a diagnostic scale. They are not compulsory features. Missing a feature does not make an experience less deserving of attention, and the questions do not require readers to identify themselves with a category.

A description can remain uneven. Someone may value an episode without knowing its duration, remember fear confidently while being unsure about an image, or recognize that words have failed. We need not force that record into perfect coherence. An invented scene in which a listener immediately supplies an interpretation shows the cost of haste: after “Was that enlightenment?”, the original account recedes behind the proposed label. A more precise conversation starts with what the speaker has already reported, rather than the word the listener hoped to hear.

II. Four marks and a historical map's limits

At the beginning of Lectures XVI–XVII, James proposes four working marks of mystical states: difficulty expressing them, a quality of knowing, transiency, and passivity. He also acknowledges largely secondhand acquaintance with his subject. This is a historical philosophical map, not a present diagnostic procedure. His qualification about gradations and mixtures matters: not every report must fit four boxes perfectly. James's questions help distinguish qualities of experience; they do not establish that every unusual state is mystical or settle the cause of any particular episode.

Difficulty expressing an experience appears in ordinary conversation when someone tries a comparison, rejects it, and tries another. Here that movement deserves preservation. “As though distance disappeared” need not mean the literal absence of distance. “It was clear” need not mean a testable proposition emerged. A listener who immediately translates an image into an external claim supplies content of their own. A listener who forbids images as inaccurate removes a possible way to speak. Between those responses lies a question: what does the comparison convey, and what does it leave out?

The quality of knowing needs particular care. “How convincing did this feel?” differs from “What grounds can another person assess?” In an invented example, a concertgoer feels they understood the value of friendship with complete clarity. They may take that as a personal

reason to write to a friend. A conclusion about that friend's specific intention requires a different basis. Inner certainty belongs to the first report; information about another person belongs to the second. The strength of one episode does not make those claims interchangeable or establish someone else's thoughts.

Comparison with the contemporary questionnaire below reveals another limit. The philosopher chooses marks to discuss experience's meaning and authority. Researchers pose questions and analyze patterns among answers. Four marks and several statistical factors serve different purposes. A later model would not confirm everything James argues; a historical list would not determine which participants answered correctly. A meaningful comparison preserves each source's question before noticing where their questions intersect. It also leaves room for disagreement about categories without requiring either source to provide the other's kind of evidence.

III. What a questionnaire studies

In MPE-92M, Alex Gamma and Thomas Metzinger analyzed retrospective reports of awareness experiences among meditators. Of 3,627 submitted responses, 1,403 entered the analysis. Based on 92 items, they proposed a twelve-factor description explaining 44% of response variance. This studied selected reports, without physiological measurement or testing the world's nature. Limitations include self-selection, incomplete responses, memory, and differing understandings of questions. Those percentages concern questionnaire data; they are not proportions of people with a particular spiritual status, nor a scale on which to place an individual reader.

An editorial analogy helps distinguish that work from one person's story. Several visitors describe an exhibition using the same question list. Analysis might find that some answers often vary together. That does not turn the exhibition into only those features or mean that every visitor experienced the same event. The analogy explains the organization of answers; it does not reproduce the study's calculations. A model can support more precise questions while remaining limited by the task, participants, and chosen words. The range of possible questions remains larger than the resulting description.

Scientific description also requires distinguishing what is observed from what is explained. Here the observable data were answers submitted through a questionnaire. Experience itself was not present before researchers as an object available to everyone. That does not make answers worthless; otherwise studying personal experience would become impossible. But the reader must know what a conclusion concerns. A coherent group of answers may support distinctions within the material studied. By itself, it gives neither a universal definition of consciousness nor the mechanism producing one particular person's particular episode.

The meeting between this questionnaire and James's map therefore compares ways of asking. Historical language emphasizes conviction that is difficult to express. Contemporary work makes part of a description comparable across participants. Each approach has a cost: a historical account depends on selected testimony; a questionnaire also depends on proposed wording. Neither must be chosen as the only legitimate method. We need to identify when we are reading a witness, discussing a working category, or referring to a particular research procedure. Those distinctions make the comparison assessable rather than merely reassuring.

IV. An experience and its later account

MPE-92M's authors separately discuss selecting an impressive episode, possible influence from previously learned concepts, and retrospective memory. These concerns can be compared with James's attention to an experience's lasting significance. Similar questions do not mean memory must be false or a vivid account should be rejected. They mean there is a path between what happened and the present report. Following that path matters to subsequent reasoning. Declaring it either perfectly transparent or inevitably unreliable would settle the question before looking at what the speaker actually knows.

Imagine someone who initially wrote, “I felt peaceful; familiar concerns seemed to recede.” Weeks later, after a conversation, they begin calling it an experience of unity. That name may connect the episode with valuable reading. Still, keeping the date when the name appeared helps distinguish early words from a later interpretation. This is the article authors' proposed way to organize an account, not a validated technique for restoring memory. It cannot recover lost precision or establish an event remembered only as an impression. Its usefulness lies in keeping different statements visible.

Memory of a quality also differs from memory of an external detail. “I remember extraordinary clarity” and “I know what someone else thought about me then” have different objects. The first reports personal conviction; the second assigns content to another mind. Respecting the first does not require confirming the second. A possible reply is, “I understand that it felt convincing to you; we do not yet have information about their thoughts.” That preserves common ground without making the speaker choose between unconditional agreement and humiliation, and leaves the external question open.

A later account has value of its own: it shows how someone understands their life now. Sometimes that is the conversation's actual subject. Discussing a present relationship to loss need not first settle every question about a distant episode. Claiming that a specific external event occurred changes the task. Separate circumstances, independent information, and the limits of knowledge then become relevant. Distinguishing tasks, rather than assigning one universal level of trust, helps us treat an account carefully. We can value its present meaning while asking separately what supports its factual claims.

V. Testimony within a tradition

In Chapter XX of her autobiography, Teresa of Ávila distinguishes names and describes involuntariness, fear, bodily impressions, and religious meaning. We read David Lewis's translation, the enlarged third edition of 1904. This testimony belongs to a particular Christian life. Its language of grace and relationship with God cannot become a general psychological label without losing content. Reports of unusual bodily events remain the author's reports. The text itself provides no independent verification of what happened around her, and attentive reading does not supply the missing external observations.

Such testimony calls for attention in two directions: the distinction important to Teresa herself and what is available to a reader. If she distinguishes union, rapture, and other states, “ecstasy” should not erase that distinction without explanation. Yet accurate reading does not require accepting every explanation as publicly established. We can say “Teresa describes” or “Teresa understands this as.” Those formulations preserve religious content and identify the source of a claim, without pretending to be external observation. They also let us discuss her position without silently adopting or dismissing it.

Comparison with the questionnaire reveals different contexts. Teresa addresses someone involved in religious discussion of her life; questionnaire answers enter a formal procedure. In both, words are connected to an audience and a task, but the tasks differ. The first helps show how an experience enters spiritual discernment; the second shows conditions for comparing responses. Teresa cannot be made a participant in a modern experiment. Questionnaire participants cannot be assigned her understanding of grace. Their juxtaposition is useful because the differences remain visible, not because the descriptions can be converted into each other.

Historical reading also does not turn self-severity into present advice. Particular ways of treating the body, fear, and obligations belong to a narrative and its time. Here they provide no practice program. Studying testimony differs from proposing that its circumstances be repeated. We can read religious experience carefully without testing ourselves against its dramatic character. A text's significance emerges through understanding its questions; readers need not create a comparable state to discuss its limits. Attention to the account does not require imitation, nor does declining imitation make the reading incomplete.

VI. Agency and the right to stop

James's passivity and Teresa's descriptions of involuntariness support another comparison. Both let us ask how personal agency was experienced, without offering one theory of its source. Teresa understands events through a relationship with God; the philosopher identifies a quality for discussion. “I was not controlling this” therefore does not yet tell us who or what was controlling it. It may describe a loss of familiar agency accurately, while an explanation of its origin remains a separate claim requiring its own grounds.

This distinction raises an editorial question for present conversations: who makes decisions after the episode? In an invented situation, someone finds an inner impulse powerful and invites an acquaintance to join a project. Making the invitation is permissible. The experience's conviction, however, does not remove the acquaintance's right to decline, request information, or suggest another date. Consent concerns a real shared action, not the unusual source of an idea. People can interpret the event differently and still agree about particular work, its conditions, and whether they want to participate.

The boundary becomes clear when a listener assumes authority as interpreter. “Because you experienced that, you must continue” joins a report to a prescription without separate consent. As an authorial principle for conversation, we propose making that transition explicit. A spiritual obligation within a tradition needs its tradition, grounds, and relationships identified. In a voluntary meeting, the right to end participation does not depend on having a remarkable experience. An involuntary episode gives others no indefinite permission to govern its continuation or decide what it must mean for the speaker.

“Control” itself needs care: it may describe an experienced quality or the possibility of an outward action. Someone may say feelings came unbidden while still choosing whom to speak to and what to publish now. The first statement should not become an assumption that choice has vanished. This example is not a clinical assessment. It shows how the language of a report can expand mistakenly into interpersonal relations. Distinguishing meanings leaves room for unusual experience alongside ordinary requirements of consent, including the right to revise a decision.

VII. Clarity, images, and explanations

MPE-92M notes the risk of conflating philosophical emptiness with a spatial image of a void in question wording. Teresa, meanwhile, distinguishes inner understanding from ordinary hearing. Comparing them does not confirm either explanation through the other. It reminds us that a word may name an image, an experiential quality, or a doctrine's proposition. Before drawing a conclusion, we need to know which meaning the speaker uses. A clear report begins with identifying how a metaphor works, rather than forbidding metaphor or treating every image as a literal event.

Consider “It was as if a vast space opened before me.” Different clarifications might follow: a visual image, relief from constriction, or a comparison for freedom from a familiar concern. One sentence cannot determine which. We can ask whether this resembled seeing or expressed another quality, then accept an incomplete answer. Keeping the original metaphor beside the clarification lets readers know what is actually claimed. It prevents an editor's guess from becoming a detail of the experience and preserves the possibility that the speaker has no more precise words.

The same applies to “energy.” In personal speech it may express liveliness, tension, intensity, or a religious concept; measurement uses a specifically defined meaning. This article does not translate every use into a physical quantity. Where a report contains no measurement, scientific wording should not create the appearance of one. When discussing a teaching, we should present its own definition. A meaningful dialogue remains possible without a shared explanation, provided participants know which language they are using and where its application ends. Agreement on vocabulary is not yet agreement on a cause.

Images can also connect people whose beliefs differ. One describes quiet clarity as God's presence; another mentions only a distinctive quality of attention. They can notice a shared difficulty expressing the experience without merging their explanations. Different readings may remain, so long as neither is imposed as established fact. This preserves more than “Everyone means the same thing.” It reveals both a comparable question about human experience and a substantial difference in answers. Their encounter can be valuable precisely because it does not require a common doctrine.

VIII. Careful study without producing another state

Attending to an experience does not require deliberately repeating it. For this article's purpose, an existing account chosen by its speaker is enough. We can discuss words, dates, sources of interpretation, and subsequent decisions without altering sleep, breathing, food, or ordinary medical care. Neither historical testimony nor a questionnaire promises that a technique will benefit a particular reader. The practice here concerns reading and conversation. Its result may be a clearer record of a question, not another state of consciousness or a route to experiencing what the author described.

Care includes the right not to tell. Someone may keep an episode private, share its general meaning, or decline details. Refusal is neither evidence of spiritual closure nor proof that a report is false. In an invented conversation, a participant says, “This matters to me, but I do not want to discuss bodily details.” Continuing requires understanding what they consent to now. Shared interest in a topic creates no shared entitlement to a biography. Publication and retelling need a separate clear agreement, rather than being assumed from the initial conversation.

A discussion may sometimes increase strain instead of understanding. An authorial option is then to stop or turn to ordinary support the person accepts. When an experience involves danger, marked distress, or difficulty managing everyday life, literary analysis should not replace appropriate professional help. We infer no diagnosis from an account and explain no cause at a distance. That boundary matters because an unusual description can have a context unavailable to the reader. Vivid words do not supply knowledge of the circumstances or make a remote interpretation sufficiently informed.

Safety in conversation also differs from promising a safe way to produce a state. Omitting dangerous instructions does not imply every historical path mentioned suits everyone. We recommend no reproduction of the described circumstances. Even a calm name for a practice does not assess its effects. Within our question, voluntary reading is enough: a person can stop, choose another text, and leave questions unresolved. This ordinary measure of participation remains valid whatever importance a tradition assigns to a particular experience. Respect for a text need not take the form of experimenting on oneself.

IX. Meaning without a final explanation

James distinguishes authority for the person experiencing a state from a demand that outsiders accept its interpretation; Teresa describes her own grounds for religious discernment. Their positions cannot become one universal test. Reading them together nevertheless reveals a question: for whom is this reason sufficient, and for what claim? Personal significance can be preserved while a public inference is limited. This is precision about different tasks an account is being asked to perform, rather than a compromise that requires faith and research to surrender their distinct questions.

In an imagined scene, an unusual episode leads someone to spend more time with loved ones. Discussing the decision calls for questions about available time, the loved ones' consent, and a feasible promise. A metaphysical dispute need not be settled first. Claiming reliable knowledge of another person's future changes the task: a specific prediction needs its own grounds. Respect for the person does not depend on accepting those grounds as sufficient. We can discuss a decision's consequences without assuming the authority to explain the episode finally or agreeing to every conclusion drawn from it.

This approach allows an interpretation to change without rejecting an entire biography. “I understand it differently now, but it remains important” need not betray the earlier experience. New words may reflect a new question, audience, or understanding of what is known. Conversely, an unchanged explanation is not automatically confirmed. An attentive reader preserves both formulations' dates and contexts, instead of selecting whichever better fits their own convictions. Revising a description and evaluating an external claim are related tasks, but they need not have the same result.

Studying consciousness can therefore begin with a modest outcome: understanding more clearly what someone claims. That supports separate work with a tradition, a research design, independent information, or a chosen action. Not every task must arise in one conversation. Some experience may remain hard to express; some explanation may stay open. A conversation can still be precise and humane when the account does not stand for all reality, a scientific model does not become final metaphysics, and the person's right to choose stays beside our interest in the unusual.

What this means in practice

Choose an existing account, your own or a published one, that you can read calmly now. With another person's account, add no private details. Do not try to induce the state. Write one or two sentences about what is actually reported: time, bodily impressions, clarity, imagery, or agency. Leave gaps where the text provides nothing. This clarifies reading; it does not restore missing memory or assess the speaker's health. An unfinished description is allowed, and no category has to be assigned before you can continue.

Beside it, record the interpretation and its origin. Did the word appear immediately, or after a book, conversation, or encounter with a tradition? That may be unknown. Then identify separate claims about the external world. Keep “It felt convincing” with personal experience; “It shows what happened outside me” needs its own grounds. Rejection need not come first. Identify information that supports the claim and information merely assumed because the report sounded confident. The distinction remains useful even when no independent evidence is currently available.

Compare two primary passages actually read: for example, James's working marks and the questionnaire's qualifications about understanding a question. Identify one concrete similarity between questions and one difference between tasks. When Teresa helps, retain her Christian understanding instead of replacing it with a general term. One accurate distinction is enough; agreement need not be pursued at any price. If reading becomes uncomfortable, it can end without a conclusion and resume only if you choose. No additional experience is required to complete this comparison.

Finish with a question that belongs to present life. Do you need to clarify a published sentence, agree on a retelling, revise a promise, or preserve an episode as a personal memory? Choose an action that does not require proving more than is known. Allow revision and promise no repeated experience. Without a clear action, “I will leave this open for now” is a valid outcome. It marks a limit of working with a description, not a deficiency to be repaired by seeking a stronger state.

Key quotation

> *They are, however, much more clearly understood than they would be if they were heard by the ear.*

— Teresa of Ávila, Life, XXV.2; a complete sentence in David Lewis's English translation, enlarged third edition 1904. “They” refers to the words of the inner address she describes. This presents her testimony about clarity; it proves no external source of the address and supplies no rule for judging present experiences.

Connections between traditions

Two grounds	Meaningful connection	Boundary
James, XVI–XVII, four marks; MPE-92M, Methods/Results	Different ways to make descriptions comparable	A working philosophical map and statistical factors are not interchangeable
James, lasting significance; MPE-92M, Limitations on episode selection/memory	Experiencing differs from later reporting	Vividness proves no external fact; limitations do not make all memory false
Teresa, XX.1–14; MPE-92M, questionnaire procedure	Audience and task shape reporting	An autobiography is not a modern experiment
Teresa, XX.3–9; James, passivity	A question about experienced personal agency	Involuntariness establishes no shared source of agency
MPE-92M, Factor 8 discussion; Teresa, XXV.1–6	Terms, images, and felt clarity need clarification	Questionnaire emptiness and Christian inner address are not one doctrine
James, authority discussion; Teresa, XXV.3–6	Personal grounds and public inference have different tasks	Comparison claims no identical criterion of truth

Primary sources

1. William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, Longmans Green, the 1917 edition read; lectures 1901–1902 distinguished from the copy's date. Reading: the opening of XVI–XVII, pp.379–382; selected discussion of authority, pp.422–429, and the opening of XVIII. Historical clinical vocabulary and temporal estimates are not current diagnoses or norms. The epigraph is an identified excerpt; its Russian version is an original United Wisdom translation.

2. Alex Gamma and Thomas Metzinger, MPE-92M, PLOS ONE 16(7), e0253694, 2021. Reading: methods, selected results, factor discussion, and complete limitations/conclusion; table images and raw data were not analyzed. The description concerns selected retrospective reports. The 2024 correction, actually read, corrects a data link and confirms no universal or metaphysical model. The private detailed ledger records exact reading boundaries.

3. Teresa of Ávila, The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus, David Lewis translation, enlarged third edition 1904; Benedict Zimmerman's editorial additions distinguished from the autobiography. Reading: XX.1–14, XXV.1–6, and edition information; XXV.4 takes account of the editor's stated translation correction. Religious testimony without independent verification of external events.

The key quotation is a complete sentence from XXV.2, with an original United Wisdom Russian translation.

Tags

consciousness, experience, description, interpretation, attention, time, embodiment, clarity, memory, testimony, religious experience, mystical states, meditation, questionnaire, research, primary sources, William James, Teresa of Ávila, Christianity, philosophy, claim boundaries, personal conviction, consent, voluntary participation, imagery, metaphor, passivity, reading practice, choice, uncertainty

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.