

Walking in Space
by Jaq D. Hawkins

To write about the use of psychoactive drugs within magical communities is a very loaded subject. It is a subject where people tend to fall into opposing camps. On the one side is the “we have to keep our image clean and/or our bodies clear of unnatural substances” set, and on the opposite side is the “we have the natural right to do as we will,” crowd, who will also quote historical precedent for psychoactive drug use in shamanistic societies. Both viewpoints have valid arguments.

There are other points to consider as well. For example, not all psychoactive drugs are unnatural; these substances, used in meditation or ritual, have the potential to contribute to the experience in useful ways; there are negative legal implications; and, so on.

First of all, let's point out that there are many magical people who will not use drugs at all, full stop. The reasons vary from keeping their systems clean, to fears of legal entanglements, to simple disinterest. Drug use is far from being a requirement for any area of magic. While I have met with groups where some form of drug use, whether it was just smoking grass or MDMA parties, was quite common among its members, I have never met anyone, group or individual, among the magical people who have crossed my path who would force or coerce a person to use any substance against their own will.

The percentage of people with some form of new age interests who use any form of mind-altering substance probably compares evenly with the rest of the population in any given area. The only difference is that people who practice magic MAY justify use of these substances for ritual or meditative purposes, as opposed to outright recreational use.

Let's have an honest look at some drug use practices among shamanic peoples of the past as compared to those of people in magical communities today.

Historically, there have been many shamanistic societies where some form of natural psychoactive drug use occurs. Peyote use among American and Mexican Indian tribes is well known. Extreme mind-altering substances have been used by Carribean peoples. There are many examples to draw from, but the important thing to keep in mind when looking to historical precedent is that, invariably, these societies included a member of the community who is trained in the application of these substances. S/He may be known as a medicine man, a wise woman, shaman, or whatever term is equivalent in the language of the people, but this person will have learned through an apprenticeship to the previous holder of this office much about the application and proper uses of whatever substances are in use.

In some societies, it is only the shaman and the apprentice who ever actually partake of the substance, in order to elicit visions for religious purposes. In others, they are used for specific purposes by a tribe of people who have some familiarity with the substances as part of their cultural heritage, still with the medicine man among them who can advise proper use and perhaps guide the participants through vision quests or whatever the purpose may be.

The 1960's brought to our modern civilization, among other things, a widespread interest in the effects of hallucinogenic drugs. People have reported all sorts of experiences from the use of these drugs, including some which they interpreted as religious experiences. The LSD trippers of the 60's came from diverse walks of life, and have gone in a wide spectrum of directions since then, ranging from junkies to corporate executives. A small percentage of those who had the hallucinogenic experience back then may have taken an interest in some area of magic before, during or after that period of their lives. How those experiences or experiences with other hallucinogenic substances may have effected subsequent magical experience would be an interesting thing to survey.

There are people today who seek magical visions through use of a mind-altering substance of some sort. However, not all drug experiences are quite so spiritual in intent. Let's get real about this. There is a difference between using a drug in meditation or ritual, or a group of magically inclined people having a drug party. A party is a party, regardless of whatever common interests the participants may share, and an addict isn't glamorous just because s/he practices magic on occasion. If a person chooses to use any sort of mind-altering substance, it is worth seriously considering the reasons why, even if the answer is simply, "because I'm going to have a good time". One may also wish to examine the possible physical effects of the chosen substance, keeping in mind that one's companions or sources more often than not lack any sort of medical qualifications. The recent death of actor River Phoenix serves to remind us that we, and our friends, can misjudge our limits.

There is an issue of responsibility to consider as well. It was pointed out to me once, by one of my more level-headed friends who is very active in pagan networking, that if people who become voices in our magical communities, through writing or whatever, were to be publicly arrested for something more serious than the odd smoke, it could have far reaching consequences for all of us. We all know that there are religious fanatics who would just love a chance to point fingers and accuse pagans of being drug-crazed devil worshippers. Yet the rights to do what we will with our own bodies cannot be dictated by fanatics. It is something worth thinking about.

The one thing that I would like to ask is: Where is the dividing line between a recreational drug party and a legitimate ritual which happens to include a substance induced experience? If a group of people spend twelve hours tripping, and half an hour of it in ritual, is it an extended ritual experience or just a drug party that happened to include a short ritual? I'm not going to try to answer that question for anyone else. For me, it would depend on how the other eleven and a half hours were spent.

I bring up these questions because I feel that we must be honest with ourselves. If you are going to attend a drug party, call it a drug party. If you want to take some odd combination of substances from someone who claims to be a modern day medicine man, you may want to examine his qualifications. If you are getting high all the time and telling yourself that it is for ritual purposes, even though most of the time it seems to be more of a social occasion, you may have only mastered the art...of fooling yourself.

I will admit to having experienced a variety of psychoactive substances in my time, but I will also be honest with myself and confess that the majority of occasions were recreational experiences. I do believe in the potential value of substance induced ritual experience, but I will not use it as an excuse for habitual drug use. Anyone who qualifies a 'habit' by saying s/he is in a magical trance all the time is failing to accept the truth of and resulting responsibility for their own actions.

Magical trance is an experience like nothing else. It is something that most religious systems encourage in some manner or another, whether it is substance induced, achieved through a form of meditation or prayer, through deprivation or other physical practice such as spinning or a sweat lodge. The choice of a path to vacuity, trance, or whatever, is one for each magic user to decide for themselves, but once one has achieved that state of mind, I would recommend to each person that s/he periodically examine what is being accomplished through it, and what purpose truly lies behind the chosen method. Do you have the courage to face the mirror of truth?