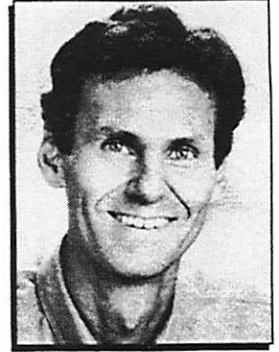


the macho ingestion syndrome

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MANY COURAGEOUS INDIVIDUALS continue to explore the opportunities for expansion and growth offered by the ingestion of plant allies, empathogens, and other mind altering substances. Efforts to research and document the impact of substances on a wide variety of people with various conditions appear to be growing in strength. Along with these promising themes is emerging a disturbing trend. Perhaps this trend is not new at all, but actually an ancient pitfall that is re-emerging as experimentation continues. That trend is what I would call the macho ingestion syndrome. This syndrome has several assumptions at its core.

The first assumption is that it is more valuable to ingest greater and greater dosages of plant substances at a sitting than it is to ingest a small amount. The belief is that the greater the ingestion of substance, the greater the confrontation with the shadow side of the psyche. The second assumption is that the greater the willingness to confront the shadow in this way, the more spiritually macho one is and concomitantly, the more enlightened one is. If one does not ingest large dosages, then one is considered to be only diddling around or unwilling to face oneself. Interestingly I have noticed that the people more inclined to get into this kind of belief system are men who have not looked at their competitive drives. Some of these are falling into the old trap of the macho shaman syndrome, "I'm more powerful than you are". Women are more inclined to feel put down and negated but less likely to succumb to taking large doses. In this case they tend to show more sense.

As a psychotherapist I have had the opportunity to work with many clients who, for personal growth reasons, have sought out ceremonial groups where they ingested plant and other mind altering substances. I have seen that clients can gain tremendous insight into their process through the ingestion of peyote, mushrooms, and other substances in ceremonial settings. These experiences have often contributed and accelerated their hard work in the counseling setting.

However, on a more cautionary note I have had many reports from clients that they felt pressured by ceremonial leaders to ingest ever greater dosages with the suggestion that if they did not, they were not serious about their growth. Upon taking the larger dosages many, normally well functioning clients have reported horrendous experiences of paralysis,

fear, delusions, paranoia, nausea, and in some cases serious thoughts of suicide. After having such painful experiences, these people were told that the event made them see how stuck they really were and that if they were more enlightened they would not have such reactions. Some were told that the death of the ego was necessary and they would just have to learn to let go of it. They were further told that only by continued encounters and ingesting larger dosages could they break through such limitations. Often these people suffered from deep anxiety, panic attacks, sleep disturbances, inability to concentrate and other disorders for weeks and even months afterward.

While sudden traumatic experiences of facing subconscious fears can at times lead to growth and breakthrough, I believe that the afore mentioned assumptions are dangerous and naive. In the case of a person with deeply hidden fears, I personally believe that gradually facing them over time with plenty of confidence building is the approach of choice. I do not believe that the complete stripping away of all ego defenses that large doses promote is productive or desirable. Secondly, I do not believe that bigger doses are necessarily more productive than smaller doses and any attempt to belittle someone for their choice of a small dose is not only arrogant but unenlightened. Thirdly, I believe that the psyche was never meant to question its own integrity or viability, a phenomenon that appears with commonality among people who take large doses of substances. When the person ingesting the substance becomes suicidal, fears instant annihilation, or travels into a horrific hell and cannot get out, that is an indication that the dosage is overwhelming the integrity of the self. It is a sign to back off, not to ingest more.

Ideally the experiences are meant to reveal a larger context to the world, insight into the nature of reality, revelations of love and beauty, and provide lessons of an insightful nature often focusing on relationships, habits, belief systems and the like. The lessons provided may include insight into fear, grief, or anger. These revelations can lead to transformation if they are experienced at a level that is well paced. Pacing has much to do with dosage.

These transformative substances are powerful tools for integration and evolution. Let us not distort their effectiveness and inflict harm through the traps of macho mentality and competition. •

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