

Marihuana - angel or demon?

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Marihuana (*Cannabis Sativa*) has become a constant subject of debate in our days, in perfect representation of the conflicting poles between supporters of a total liberalization of psychoactive substances on the one hand, and the opponents of any kind of tolerance towards them on the other hand. These existent positions almost automatically force us to choose between one of two "closed" options: the first one bashfully wraps itself in the cloak of tolerance, liberty and a seemingly "angelical" approach to the "herb"; the second one demonizes any induction of modified states of consciousness and refers to the indeed alarmingly high numbers of drug addicts around the world. Whoever brings up this subject, risks being seen either as a headsmen sent by the "establishment" to sustain moral order, or as an irresponsible remnant of a hippie era, unable to face the challenges of the modern world.

We wish to propose a third position, a middle ground located at an equal distance between both groups, both of which in reality reinforce each other by presenting a picture we consider distorted and to a certain degree based on self-deceit, if not imposture. However, we would like to address firstly the supporters of the unrestricted usage of cannabis; our position should not be suspected to be biased in favor of a blind prohibition of the use of all psychoactive substances. Since the first edition of this magazine, we have expressed that "the group that promotes a complete prohibition of psychotropic substances runs the risk of threatening individual freedom, participating in a devitalization of indigenous cultures, as well as stimulating drug trafficking" (Mabit J., 1992). Moreover, the Takiwasi Center has been demonstrating by means of a clinical registry of its therapeutic and pedagogic activities (Giove R., 1996), that a correct and respectful usage of psychoactive plants is not harmful, but can serve the treatment of drug addictions.

We believe it necessary to clarify from the beginning that we are convinced of the unquestionable value of *Cannabis sativa*. Its medicinal properties are undeniable, empirically demonstrated and corroborated over centuries. It also possesses the capacity to expand consciousness and grant teachings of a spiritual nature. It therefore clearly falls into the category of sacred plants, also called master plants ("plantas maestras").

It is precisely because of this that it deserves, as all natural psychoactive substances of ancestral and sacred usage do, an approach other than a generalized and blind condemnation, nor should it be the object of a degrading, indiscriminate, and, for that matter, disrespectful consumerism, which moreover is not free of dangers. Regrettably, defenders tend to adopt a position that is far from contributing to more tolerance, instead leading to greater confusion rather than promoting understanding. We believe it is necessary to elucidate this debate by analyzing the

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current place of marihuana in contemporary society, as well as looking at the gap between discourse and actual facts, taking into consideration the experiences and observations from our clinical practice.

Characteristics of the encounter with marihuana

It is known that the effects of any psychoactive substance depend on three conditioning factors: substance, consumer and context.

Anyone can see the difference between the consumption of a strong adulterated alcohol by a twelve years old child in a marginal urban gang, from the consumption of quality champagne in a familial context to celebrate a marriage or the ritual use of wine during a Christian Eucharist. It is always about the consumption of a psychoactive substance, in this case alcohol, in the context of which there are numerous scientific studies demonstrating its potential harmfulness, risks for dependence, as well as the substantial social and economic costs associated. No surgeon would refrain from prescribing morphine because of the Macao opium smokers or the heroin addicts of Geneva. One does not see campaigns against the abuse of refined sugar in spite of the significant health impairments it brings about and the non-negligible fraction of society that is in fact addicted to this product. And the list could go on... (cf. Mabit, J., 1995).

In the same manner, can one compare the consumption of bhang within the initiatic societies, or by the yogis in India, or the traditional consumption of hashish by farmers in Morocco, with the recreational consumption of "weed" amongst the youth of urban occidental societies, the consumption in conjunction with ayahuasca in the Santo Daime Churches of Brazil, and the mixture with cocaine base paste in the "slums" of the marginal urban neighborhoods of Latin American? What marihuana are we talking about? Which type of consumption are we referring to?

Substance

When we speak of substance-related factors, we refer to both quality and dosage, the latter implying quantity and frequency of usage. Cannabis has multiple forms of use, and a variety of qualities of plants exist. However, scientific studies demonstrate a toxic potential already known to traditional societies, as pointed out by the famous Indologist Alain Daniélou: "*the leaf is crushed between two stones and soaked in abundant water, which permits the extraction of the toxic elements. An almond milk drink is prepared, mixing in the equivalent of a thick olive of Bhang, which is ingested by each one with respect.*" (Danielou A., 1992). It is about a procedure of detoxification and an ingestion at cold temperatures via the digestive system, rather than a hot ingestion via the respiratory process. The inhalation of smoke modifies the pharmacodynamics of the product: the natural protection by the digestive barrier is circumvented, the trans-pulmonary assimilation process in the blood is increased, while the burning of the plant generates new metabolites.

Daniélou adds, with the authority granted by his forty years of intimate contact living with a group of initiates in India, to which he also belonged, that "the practice of smoking hemp is strongly discouraged in India, as the toxic elements are not eliminated..."



Subject

As for any psychoactive substance, a high degree of variation between individuals exists in terms of their sensitivity. Individual sensitivity expresses itself in the level of intensity of immediate effects, but also in the potential to develop a dependence. Some individuals show little effects from marihuana usage, while others respond quickly with strong alteration in ideation and behavior, or even reach confused states with disorganized behavior. This factor should not be disregarded when an unrestricted availability of marihuana is being proposed.

In the same manner, even though it is classified as a "soft drug", for certain people extremely potent dependences may develop. The characteristics of this type of dependence, according to our observations, are the following:

- **Gradual distortion of reality perception:**

The slow and subtle progression of this phenomenon does not allow the individual to identify it or become aware of it. Here we are not speaking of "dramatic" effects comparable to those of heroin, cocaine base paste or crack. This is why the process is easily overlooked; the person may not notice their own transformation.

- **Phenomenon of increased "mentalization":**

The perceptual field focuses on the mental level, imperceptibly erasing the emotional or affective one. The individual progressively substitutes his "heart" for his "mind" and confuses between "feeling" and "thinking". Curanderos (traditional healers) would say that their energy is concentrating in their heads. Those who use marihuana to perform an intellectual work or stimulate their mental capacity intuitively make use of this property of the substance. What could be an innocuous and temporary usage may become a permanent and pathologic way of perceiving the world.

- **Disembodiment:**

The mental hyperarousal gives rise to the sense of resolving numerous problems, having "great" ideas, understanding complex matters. However, it is common to observe that those same individuals have extreme difficulties in making their ideas concrete, translating them into practice, and realizing them in everyday life. An example are university students who generate "brilliant" ideas for their thesis, which they can never bring to an end. We could attempt to illustrate it by saying that the individual expands up in the air and loses grounding on earth, there is a tendency to dematerialize.

- **Projection in a virtual reality:**

The marihuana addict comes to believe that thinking and living are the same thing. A great part of his being is invested in an imaginary or virtual world, only perceived or shared fleetingly with his peers of consumption. This aspect seems dramatic to me when it concerns the spiritual realm, because it transforms a potentially embodied spiritual experience into a mere ethereal dream, a reasoning, perhaps brilliant, but incongruent with daily life, unrelated to ordinary reality. He recreates symbolisms, connections, and interpretations that never come to be sanctioned by concrete reality. From there grows an appetite for the esoteric, the magical, for parallel worlds...which facilitates the avoidance of the here and now.



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Context

The encounter between the substance and the individual takes place in a context that exerts a powerful influence on the effects of consumption. We frequently observe that the advocates of a free access to marihuana justify the benignity of the plant with the fact that it has been used in traditional societies for centuries, without exhibiting any pathological outcomes. However, this presents a certain contradiction, given that the contemporary defenders of this position usually do not belong to these traditional societies, nor have they thoroughly studied them from within (something that requires time and dedication) or do they respect their criteria for correct usage of the plant. In addition to the disregard for the mode in which cannabis is traditionally ingested, specifically the ritual elements for usage are ignored. These are however indispensable for correctly approaching the spiritual dimension, a dimension inherent in all sacred acts such as the ingestion of a master plant. The acquisition of such knowledge demands apprenticeship and initiation, guided by the very sources of this ancestral wisdom. Amongst the vast numbers of marihuana consumers (according to a recent official report there are at least 15 million consumers only in the United States of America), who has actually made the effort to do this work?

The usual consumption context of marihuana in modern society is primarily recreational. It represents a means of identification with marginal contexts and expresses a distancing from the formalism of the establishment. It gives rise to a rebellion with adolescent features, located between the messianic-political movement of the "rasta" and an evanescent spirituality, free from all association with any institution or church. It allows a pleasant sharing with friends devoid of much social commitment, evoking an atmosphere of relaxation, euphoria, sensual pleasure, where food can eventually be associated, along with drink and sex. For some, it represents the repose at the end of the day or weekend, an escape into a pleasurable dream state where one's imagination is allowed to run loose, to delve into the most fanciful ideas, letting one's thought digress, letting go of the tensions induced by the many obligations of the modern world. It is like giving oneself a break, the right for a timeout.

In itself, the recreational aspect is not objectionable and responds to a natural need of the human being. What we find regretful is the exclusiveness of this manner of consumption and the systematic way in which this context eventually removes the possibility to approach something truly sacred, but instead encloses the experience into a value system that is childish or adolescent at best. It is no longer about rest, but about escape, and it is here where the addictive attitude arises. In this pattern of consumption, the person feels no impetus to intervene in the social network, manifest active compassion, or be an active agent in their environment. They tend to get stuck on a discursive level, verbal or written, and many times even quite prolific, up to excessive; the contents may be brilliant (in terms of intellectual fascination), but indigestible (of a density that does not allow translation into acts). Some new-age spokesmen seem perfect prototypes of this phenomenon: their speeches fascinate the mind, stimulate one's neurons, but lack enthusiasm ("in-theos") and the inspiration from an ardent spirit. Only the latter, however, possesses the capacity of touching the heart. They finally become the most passive and submissive individuals in relation to the social order which they originally had aspired to be different of, and against which they are now satisfied to fight verbally, without taking any action. In this context, being "cool" seems to stand for a state of resignation rather than an authentic serenity.

It is noteworthy that in the case of marihuana, the onset of consumption in ninety percent of cases is during adolescence (12-14 years). This corresponds to a phase in which the adult



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world, perceived as boring and burdensome, is generally rejected. In the face of the adult obligations that begin to crystallize, it is tempting to stay in childhood, not to grow, to favor fantasy and magic over reality which presents itself in a far too sad and monotonous manner; it seems mechanical, lacking inspiration, enthusiasm, or adventurousness. What is understood as a classic puberty crisis becomes cause for concern, if the individual becomes stuck with adolescent behaviors at an older age. Regular marihuana use since adolescence with this social context does not help individuals to develop, but tends to keep them in a prolonged state of immaturity, reminiscent of the figure of the "puber aeternus", the "eternal adolescent".

We understand that it is the collective societal context, which offers little stimulating prospects for the individual, that favors the appetite for this type of escapism. However, we also believe that blaming society alone again corresponds to an attitude that relinquishes individual responsibility. No one is forced to smoke marihuana or to continue to do so.

However, entering consumption in adolescence or even childhood leads to a premature weakening of an individual who has not yet formed their own personality, and facilitates the establishment of dependence to marihuana. It is undeniable that numerous real and serious cases of marihuana dependence do exist; some of those cases have come to get treated at our center. As pointed out earlier, it is a dependence that is rarely recognized by concerned individuals themselves, and even more so when the "alternative" context fosters a pernicious agreement about the harmlessness of marihuana. The "pothead" feels comforted by the "new-age" movement in his zealous consumption, similar to the alcoholic's sense of justification in a society culturally constructed around wine. When smoking marihuana represents the group norm (students, artists, journalists, etc.), then who can even perceive the distortion, as it is widely shared?

No one disregards the fundamental role a fertile soil plays in the development of a full-fledged addiction; there certainly exist societal antecedents that create conditions which favor the development of substance use disorders. We believe that the majority of individuals of post-modern western society do not surpass a childlike or adolescent personality structure; rites of passage have been lost, the transmission of ancestral knowledge (considered inferior to the "latest advance of science") has ceased, existent systems of social protection tend to remove individual responsibility, etc. - society is sick! This is why we think that individuals with a tendency for falling in love with marihuana are so numerous. The figures are certainly much higher than those acknowledged by the active marihuana defenders, who without a doubt tend to exclude themselves from the group of dependents.

On the other hand, in some cases, once the belief in the harmlessness of marihuana is adopted, the consumer may look for more intensive effects and explore his responses to stronger substances. In our experience, ninety percent of the inpatients that seek treatment at Takiwasi for dependence to the destructive cocaine base paste have initiated their drug use with marihuana. During treatment, we observe that symptoms tend to disappear in reverse order, i.e., the syndromes that are cleared first are the ones that had appeared most recently. It stands out that once the behaviors and cognitions related to cocaine base paste are overcome, only then do the ones produced by marihuana begin to manifest. Although the explosive effects related to cocaine base paste are difficult to deal with for the concerned individual, confronting those of marihuana at a next stage represents a great challenge and often an even larger obstacle. A strong resistance is notable, along with a tendency to disassociate the effects of cocaine paste and those of marihuana, as if they had not occurred within the same individual and been supported by the same personality structure. For these reasons, the treatment of



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marihuana dependence is difficult and often more arduous than in the case of other substances that are seemingly more harmful. It is difficult to ignore this data when a free access to marihuana is being proposed.

At Takiwasi, the use of medicinal plants is done according to the traditional Amazonian shamanic teachings, which involves the induction of visionary states that enable the healer to perceive the energetic body of the patient during the therapeutic sessions. The energetic body of a regular marihuana consumer is always characterized by a marked opacity, an excessive concentration of energy at the mental level, a lack of grounding, and at times a disconnection of the physical body and the energetic body. All of this generates confusion and disorder, both internally and externally. When an energetic cleaning is undertaken with the help of purgative plants (*Aristolochia didyma*), a major blockage of energy is often observed at the hepatobiliary level, which often provokes vigorous and resistant vomiting. It is initially more difficult for such individuals to access the teachings from ayahuasca, especially in terms of their capacity for introspection and self-knowledge, as there is a marked tendency to project their internal world onto the exterior. What purpose does it serve to stroll about in intergalactic worlds and have conversations with cosmic beings, compose sophisticated theories and elaborate metaphysics, if there is no capacity to regulate one's relationships with the direct surroundings and balance one's daily life? How should one be able to rise above, without first having established a solid foundation upon which to lean?

Marihuana and spirituality

Cannabis is used in a religious context in various cultures, and with undeniable benefits. In these traditional societies, such usage is embedded in a sacred context, which necessarily includes a ritual, passed down a lineage within an initiatory tradition. The plant is considered as a master, as it is inhabited by a living spirit, capable of teaching us how we should approach it. In other words, the ritual is not an inventive construct fabricated by an individual, but a communicational code dictated by the very essence of the plant, by its nature or structure. Thus, we are not dealing with an artistic creation based on aesthetics, nor with a theatrical display aimed at suggestive processes, in which anyone could improvise as their own priest. Rather, we are speaking of an operative, effective type of act, a sacred technology which is the result of long apprenticeship. As any language, it requires rigor and precision in order to be efficient and not harmful. The objective is to allow a communication with the essence of the plant, its "soul", a living and intelligent entity.

It is understood that an attitude of profound respect is proposed towards the "gods", and that a sacred act with a sacred plant requires the development of sacred space, both internally and externally. Thus, Danielou for example insists on the attitude of respect adopted in India which includes a ritual bath and wearing of clean clothes; he specifies that "the spirit of the hemp, if invited whilst one continues with other activities, is upset and offended" (op.cit.).

Addiction, then, is understood as the result of a transgression, where the offended spirit of the plant takes possession of the individual. The cure for this possession will therefore involve an exorcism, aimed to appease the implicated spirit, and to convince it to let go of the individual that has become its victim.

He concludes by saying: "The spirits of the hemp, tobacco, poppy, and coca plants are divinities friendly to humans, who help to alleviate their suffering and open them the doors to



the subtle worlds; their prohibition, as well as their irrational usage, are equally wrong and provoke malevolence from the divinities that are being offended." (op. cit)

For many people who are in the process of a personal "search", marihuana has a tendency to block their development. They get caught up in mental games and sometimes even get lost in serious states of confusion that lead them to engage in inappropriate or dangerous behaviors, as we have observed on various occasions.

As previously noted, addiction to marihuana is rarely acknowledged by the affected. In the addict's typical search for justification, the manifold subterfuges individuals may come up with never cease to surprise. Their "enamouredness" is such that a reasonable discourse is often absent, which can result in a state of profound irrationality. However, in the case of a sincere person, it is possible to evaluate the absence of this alienation through a trial period; the individual abstains from cannabis consumption for a period of time and the degree of the dependence may be assessed.

There exists a whole range of states and more or less close relationships with marihuana in between the inveterate consumer and the abstemious one. Numerous consumers have control of their usage, just as many people know how to savor a good wine without becoming alcoholic. In this case we do not speak of a spiritual quest, but the consumption reflects an attempt of creating moments of relaxation. Marihuana defenders point out, and correctly so, that many people with an episodic or regular usage can still "function" well. It is argued that their habit does not lead to immediately harmful consequences for the rest of society. But, I ask myself if in relation with sacred plants "being able to function" is really what it is about, and, if the absence of noticeable short-term consequences for society does not in the end reflect an underestimation of the long-term impact, i.e., the progressive detachment from concrete participation in society, a gradual inability to manifestly transform reality for the common good. The limited physical strain induced by marihuana reinforces the idea of its harmlessness, even though the actually incurred damage is most frequently found on the energetic and psycho-spiritual levels.

A posteriori, some acquaintances with a cannabis dependence agreed to abstain for a period of time and could give testimony to an unquestionable improvement on the physical, psychological, and spiritual level, a counter-evidence seems quite convincing. The same phenomenon can be observed in patients that come to Takiwasi.

The echo of the new-age

The aforementioned phenomenon of mentalization is echoed in a certain type of pseudo-spiritual literature, one that allows its readers to float in amicable divagations without major changes in reality. We wish to briefly illustrate this with the example of two prominent figures of the new-age phenomenon: Castañeda and Osho (and a visit to an "esoteric" library or book counter of any international airport transit zone may serve to complete the list).

Effectively, the parallelism between marihuana consumption and an affinity with the works of Carlos Castañeda is initially striking. The "weed smokers" feel perfectly at ease with this type of literature. This author has the merit of having sensibilized many people to other aspects of reality and of having pointed to the existence of a powerful current in Western society involving a thirst for spirituality and for a change of perspective. He knew how to translate the



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contemporary existential uneasiness into a fine and stimulating literary expression. Nonetheless, he presents a fantastic world without a clear methodology for how to proceed in it, one which is practically inaccessible for an individual of normal constitution. Furthermore, he remains silent about the most essential: affective life, everyday life, its concrete aspects. We find ourselves immersed in magic, witchcraft, parapsychology, strange phenomena...an evanescent world where human beings of flesh and blood, ordinary people such as you and I, do not seem to exist. We come close to a virtual reality, ever drifting further away, slipping past all apprehension, with a particular type of discourse that feeds confusing mind games. Even Castañeda himself remains a phantom being: the authenticity of his experiences continues to be debated, as is his nationality, social status, his actual degree of knowledge and personal development. Why so many secrets and occlusion when there are dozens of thousands of his books being published? Perhaps the truth is hidden, the light is covered? After much time spent in the midst of this current of searching people, I am still waiting to find the disciple of Castañeda who can speak clearly, systematically transmit their experience, and demonstrate an evident advance in personal development. Castañeda allows us to dream, but does not provide the recipe to make the dream a reality: this is where I see the link with smoked hemp in our society, both volatile and disembodied, seductive and confusing.

Moreover, I would like to briefly refer to the influential Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, promoter of the consumption of marihuana and of a philosophy of undifferentiated love. The vast amount of his books goes hand in hand with an inflated ego, which for his supporters seems more convincing, the more incredible it gets. The "illuminated master" does not hesitate to resolutely assert: "I am the beginning of a totally new consciousness", nothing short of that. According to our observation, supporters of Osho show a considerable lack of adjustments to ordinary reality, and in healing sessions with Amazonian plants, significant energetic disturbances are evidenced. Marihuana and indiscriminate sex are the basic tools utilized by Osho to seduce and convince new disciples. This corresponds to a typical western tendency of consumerism, inordinateness mistaken for freedom, an escape from suffering, a blind devotion to a guru who takes on a pseudo-fatherly role, which divests the individual from responsibility. This type of developmental backwards movement, via a process of fusion and indifferentiation (especially in terms of sexuality), is opposed to the internal path of individuation (in Jungian terms) and differentiation, which necessarily involves passing through suffering and a solitary confrontation with oneself.

It is important to note that these "masters", both of whom preached detachment from material things, did not stand out for a reputation of being particularly uninterested in money and material goods.

Finally, the introduction of smoked marihuana into the Brazilian Santo Daime (ayahuasca) rituals has been a preponderant factor in the split of the initial group around Maestro Irineu, stimulating conflicts and competition, as his wife explained to us. It acted as an element of division and confusion, inflating and destabilizing some disciples and leading to successive schisms: today about ten different sects exist. The ad hoc association of ayahuasca with marihuana seems to respond more to a demand from urban sectors rather than stemming from an initiatory process with ayahuasca. The traditional healers we know from the Peruvian Amazon categorically object to the smoking of marihuana during ayahuasca sessions. However, being a dynamic medicine always open to enhance itself with efficacious methods, the empirical investigation of the virtues of this sacred plant is encouraged. The Amazonian tradition disposes of a specific methodology for this end, which essentially involves entering a state of visionary trance with the help of entheogenic plants, and progressively ingesting an



infusion or decoction of the unknown plant, in order to "see" its spirit and establish a respectful relationship with it. Clearly, this procedure requires an experienced master who has been adequately prepared; a daring novice does not suffice.

Conclusion

I am afraid that the principal defenders of unrestricted marihuana usage might end up being the main contributors of arguments in favor of its prohibition. Much of this is due to a negligent attitude in relation to the associated social risk: for a child or an adolescent, the unguided consumption of a substance that can potentially cause confusion, lead to addiction, and the introduction of further severe dependencies, is undoubtedly inappropriate. That is why its free availability and promotion as an innocuous product is unacceptable, as is its blind prohibition. I also fear that the psycho-affective maturity of numerous adults in our society remains at an adolescent level... Any debate about legalization requires a prior consideration of the relevant criteria of legitimacy.

If we are taking its ancestral usage as a reference, it ought to be specified that, according to this ancient wisdom, marihuana should not be smoked, and that precise conditions for its correct ingestion are given. Further, we would have to distinguish between the different types of usages of marihuana: medical, recreational or religious. Each one requires a different mode of preparation and an adequate context of ingestion. An entheogenic plant can be applied at those three levels. If preparing a relaxing infusion is what is aimed for, a complicated and lengthy ritual is not required, since what is being asked from the plant is merely a physical effect. But if one is asking the plant for a teaching, a discovering of subtle worlds, or an exploration of the unconscious, the indicated ritual, together with a sincere interior attitude and consideration becomes indispensable, in order not to operate a Promethean transgression, which may eventually cause damage.

Marihuana is not just a substance, a term which objectifies it and deprives it of its aliveness, its energetic and spiritual dimension. It is first and foremost a sacred plant. The habitual mode of contemporary usage reduces it to a simple product of consumption, adopting a typical materialist western attitude. Here is where the strict opponents and adamant defenders are found: both are rigid supporters of a virulent materialism, promoters of a mental overbearance, lost within a group of negators of the heart. As Danielou wisely concludes: "It is because of its misunderstanding of the reality of the subtle world, that modern materialism has become its victim"

It is time to find a path that enables protecting the access to the sacred plants, creating the conditions for a respectful, controlled, and guided approach, which assures innocuousness and an authentic spiritual experience. The western motto "everything, now, and for free" -a common one for addicts as perfect representatives of this desacralized society- has no validity in this third way. This motto typecasts the addictive attitude or psychic matrix which unfortunately predominates among marihuana users. The solution will be a progressive one, not immediate, with an individual, as well as a collective cost, which involves for each one a share of voluntarily accepted suffering.



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