

COMPANIONS OF THE STONE

A First Degree Lecture on a Draft General Letter

On Wine and Strange Drugs

The fact that our Order's position on the use of "wine and strange drugs" is clear does not mean that it can not cause some confusion. But to clarify what this position is, let's first lay it out. It can be summarized as follows.

1. The Companions of the Stone prohibits the possession, distribution, or use of any illegal or legally controlled substances at any official Order activities.
2. The Companions of the Stone will ask anyone at official Order activities who is known to be intoxicated, or under the influence of illegal mind-altering substances, to leave the activity.
3. The Companions of the Stone does not in any way teach the use of psychoactive substances, legal or illegal, in its training programs or courses, and any member found teaching such things in the name of the Companions of the Stone will be subject to disciplinary action, which may include severance from the Order.
4. Although the Companions of the Stone does not pry into the private lives of its members, or impose regulations on their actions in any capacity other than as members of the Order, it recommends that its members seriously consider eliminating or sharply reducing not only their use of illegal and controlled substances, but of all substances and agents which, when made habitual, come to seem part of the normal background of life and which, on removal, occasion distress and craving.

Prudential considerations

Now, the most obvious reasons for these policies are prudential: illegal activities provide others with a lever than can be used to one's detriment. They also provide, in another sense, a way in which teachings can be discounted or discredited. However, from a certain point of view these prudential considerations (and others of the same sort) could be regarded as simply pusillanimous or even hypocritical posturing.

This would be the case if these were the only reasons for these positions. There are others. They can perhaps be best dealt with as responses to objections.

The Traditions and Practices of Other Cultures

It is well known that various psychoactive substances, some of which are very powerful, and some of which are highly regulated or banned in the US, have been and still are used in magical and other ritual contexts, very effectively, in various parts of the world. The people who do these things are, by credible report, often leading members of their communities, active, effective, and helpful. Doesn't this indicate that these things can be used well? And

furthermore, doesn't it create an obligation for esotericists to investigate these things?

First, simply on prudential grounds again, the legal and social position of these things differ from one country to another. Far more important, however, are the certain other points.

First, the use of particular substances can be more or less well integrated into a particular society or culture. Thus, the introduction of distilled alcohol into the Americas caused even more problems for the aboriginal peoples than I did for the Europeans who introduced it. Some of these differences may also (as with alcohol) be metabolic rather than cultural.

Second, the long use of particular substances in magical, ritual or religious contexts leads to a very different pattern of use, and a very different cultural context for such use, than can possibly exist for a newly-introduced substance, or a new way of using such a substance. The first documented uses of coffee were in a religious ritual context, and in that context it produced results very different from that of the fortieth cup of the day in the frazzled body of a graduate student with a deadline. For such a graduate student to obtain the same effect from coffee as did its early Sufi users could be very, perhaps impossibly, difficult.

Third, what such substances are, and what things count as such substances, also depends to as large extent on cultural context -- and not simply the context for the substance itself, but for its effects. Someone from a culture in which the admired state is one of gentle, profound melancholia will not respond the same way to caffeine as someone from a culture in which the admired state is a level of excitation comparable to that of a used car salesman in a television advertisement.

Fourth, in cultures which have long worked with them, agents which, in recent times in Europe have precipitated profound breaks with society, actually serve to integrate users more fully into it. This subject could be explored and debated quite extensively, but the most important point is that esoteric training of the sort the Companions wish to provide does not aim at making it more difficult for students to function effectively in this society. Effective functioning does not mean acquiescence or obedience. A dissatisfaction that expresses itself in sullen, disoriented withdrawal does not achieve much.

Western Traditions

Are there not also traditions of use of such things in Western esotericism? Were they all signs of corruption or evil, or a best of grave error?

Yes: in fact, the records of Western culture and esotericism are rich in examples, both horrifying and impressive, from the activities of the bacchantes on onward. Interest in psychopharmaceuticals can be found in Medieval and Renaissance records, and in the activities of respected members of the Golden Dawn (as well as of its more controversial members). A long list of their use in folk and high magic could be provided fairly easily.

But these materials were not integrated into recent Western culture as ritual or magical materials: their effective use was not part of the general cultural matrix. Nor are their records of systematic training in their effective use in magical or esoteric circles (making guests at a banquet have delirious hallucinations for the amusement of the host does not, really, serve as a good example). The exploratory work of trained, competent researchers is very different from the experiments of the untrained.

Furthermore, the one substance that has been relatively well integrated is alcohol: but its ritual and magical uses have been restricted to specific groups, and have followed specific patterns, not all of which are compatible with the work of the Companions, for reasons that will be discussed below. The major point here is that there is no developed training pattern, in any tradition, in the Hermetic or magical uses of alcohol.

The Nature of the Dangers

There are, in fact, certain dangers attendant on the use of these things, beyond the usual legal and social problems.

First, there is the problem attendant on all technical methods that are stronger than the containers of lore and training available to contain them: that of the Four who entered the Garden (to die, to go insane, or to cut the shoots).

Another danger, even greater, is that of banalization: the use of the substances can indeed be assimilated -- but as coffee and tobacco have been assimilated.

But the greatest danger is perhaps the most subtle, and it is one against which neophytes are warned both in the Golden Dawn and in the Companions. It is presented in terms of passivity, of allowing oneself to be controlled. But this is only a kind of symbol, or indication.

Magic is act: "In the beginning was the deed". Magical training aims at the realization that one is an agent, an of training one's ability to act -- not to be tossed about on the flux of currents of the phenomenal world. To be dependent on external things to achieve one's results is to miss the whole point. The magician in our tradition should not be trained through use of external substances, any more than the magician should be trained to respond to the actions of another person. All our work is aimed at the realization of autonomy: self discipline, self-control, and self-direction. Although the Lodge work involves extensive apparatus, none of it is, ultimately necessary. No adept, or even trained initiate, can ever be cut off from the inner realms because there is suddenly no source of robes or wand.

This is not, it should be pointed out, training in isolation: it is training in independence. It is only, ultimately, of mature, independent people that mature communities can be formed. The results of attempts to form communities of the immature are not hard to find.