



Terence McKenna

Shamanism

Presented somewhere in the early 1990s...

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Well, in 15 minutes to try and say something about shamanism and hallucinogens, we're just going to touch the surface; and I figure the simplest way to do this is just to sort of unload on you how I see these things.

Shamanism is not some obscure concern of cultural anthropologists: shamanism is how religion was practised for its first million years. Up until about 12,000 years ago, there was no other form of religion on this planet; that was how people attained some kind of access to the sacred. And so shamanism then becomes about technique, and if any of you are students of the literature of shamanism, you probably know that one of the great overviews of shamanism is contained in Mircea Eliade's book, *Shamanism: The Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. The archaic techniques of ecstasy. In other words, shamanism is not so much a religion, as ordinarily conceived, as it is a kind of pre-rational science; a kind of methodology for attaining a certain kind of experience.

And then the question becomes, What experience, and what's so great about it? Well, the experience that is attained – if we can attempt to rise to some kind of cosmic overview, so that we are not dealing with the experience in the context of what the Mazatecs say, or the Huitoto, or some other tribal people – but when we attempt to pool all of this descriptive data, then what is the experience that the shaman is having that is making him or her an exemplar in their own society and, in a sense, almost superhuman? Well, if you analyse thousands and thousands of these shamanic experiences, both drug-... both plant-induced and non-plant-induced, the overwhelming connecting thread is boundary dissolution. This is what the experience is that we are all seeking, that we call terrifying, wonderful, desirable, horrible, but what it is, is it's the experience of having the roof fall in and the floor fall out – all at once! Boundary dissolution. Why should that be so important, so wonderful? Because it acts psychologically, in the human being, like a birth experience. The world is made new. Everything is seen through newly opened eyes.

Now, there are many techniques of shamanism, or attaining this state: celibacy, withholding food, ordeals, flagellation, mutilation – that doesn't sound like a program for a lot of fun, does it? – and then, hallucinogenic plants. Now, it's a question which always emerges at these conferences: "All of you people are talking about drugs and plant substances. Isn't there another way to do this? Isn't this what the great yogic systems, the great tantric systems of thought, have opened up for us, without the self-polluting act of ingesting a plant into our bodies and polluting our precious bodily essences?" The answer is, *No!* No! [laughter] And the further answer is, the reason the universe is constructed this way is so that you will be forced to humble yourself into the admission that you *can't do it alone*. Why *should* you be able to do it alone?! Where is it writ in adamantite that Joe Blow should be able to walk directly into the antechamber of the Most High simply because he or she wants to? Nowhere! The *sine qua non* – fancy Latin for you can't get along without it – the *sine qua non* for attaining a psychedelic

experience is humbling yourself to the point where you admit that you must submit to the experience of the plant or the drug. This active surrender is the major technical function you will be called upon to perform during the psychedelic trip. You just keep saying, "Take me, I'm yours! Take me, I'm yours!" – and it will do the rest.

Well, this is much too much to get into in 15 minutes, but *why* the tension between boundary and boundary dissolution? Why the tension between the closed personal world of reinforced neurotic constructs that we call ordinary psychological health – why the tension between that, and this vastly expanded and opened state of being where life, Dao, seems to flow through us? Well, the tension between these states has to do, I think, with the fact that there is a blind spot in the human mind. We do not like to have called to our attention the animate and caring nature of the universe. Because the universe is something that we have had to fight our way through to get to our present position. I mean, how many reindeer bit the dust that we could sit here this morning? How many forests were cleared? – you see, we have a long history of resistance and conquest to Nature; and when we experience the boundary-dissolving qualities of a hallucinogen, we learn what Pogo learned: *We have met the enemy, and he is us*. And closing that loop then creates a dimension of moral responsibility; and this is why the shaman is a special person – because the shaman has somehow closed the loop of moral responsibility, and in so doing, becomes tremendously authentic to the people in the society that is constellated around the shaman.

The shaman basically is an exemplar, a model, for how to be. Not simply how to be in the psychedelic or the trance state, but how to be in the act of wooing; how to be in the act of hunting, child-rearing, so forth. It's a kind of exemplar that bursts through cultural conditioning. Cultural conditioning is like bad software. Over and over, it's diddled with and rewritten so that it can just run on the next attempt! But there is cultural hardware, and it's that cultural hardware – otherwise known as authentic being – that we are propelled toward by the example of the shaman and the techniques of the shaman. You know, if someone tells you that vast spiritual riches await you if you will but give up sex, interesting food, and your own thoughts for 10 or 15 years, and follow along with them, then something will be attained; this is no challenge to most of us, because we have our lives to lead, mortgages to pay, children to feed, car payments... but if someone tells you, "Eat this plant, and you will come into your birthright", that's a real existential challenge. The excuse that it's difficult, or unattainable, has been removed. There can no longer be shilly-shallying around that issue. Shamanism therefore is a call to authenticity.

Well, then the last point that I want to make – this authenticity is generally presented, and has generally been presented throughout the evolution of the psychedelic movement in the United States, as a kind of personal integrity – a kind of psychological health, as though you had confronted all your demons and slain them, and you are now balanced, or individuated, or whole – something like that. That's true; that is the first stage of the shamanic integration. But that is not the goal of the shamanic integration, otherwise it just becomes a kind of chemically assisted psychotherapy. The goal is then, having attained that balance, that wisdom, and that connection, to then rise up to a level of universal meaning. In other words, to break through the machinery of cultural conditioning in the same way that the shaman does, and to attempt to discover something authentic – something authentic outside the self-generated language cloud.

And to my mind, what this authentic thing is, is... it's hard to know how to put it, but – it's the animate quality that resides within the psychedelic experience. That the universal mind is alive; is sentient; is perceiving; is there to meet you when you come through from the other side. So we're not

talking about psychedelics as a spotlight to be turned on to reveal the detritus of our own personal unconscious; it is not a spotlight. It is not shining from behind you: it is shining ahead of you. It is actually that the same organisational principles which called us forth into self-reflection have called forth self-reflection out of the planet itself; and the problem, then, is for us to suspect this, act on our suspicion, and be good detectives and track down the spirit in its lair! And this is what shamans are doing: they are hunters of spirit.

Now, anthropology tends to want to – well, *place in a museum diorama* is too harsh a phrase – but wants to *freeze* these things in context, so they become artifacts; so then we say, well, “How *do* the Huitoto think about the shaman?” and I’ve even seen papers, “What do the Huitoto Think of the Shaman in Winter?” “What do the Huitoto Think of the Shaman in Summer?” – well, not only is this a stupid question on the face of it, but since they don’t *have* winter and summer, it’s a stupid question beneath the surface! Shamanism does not exist in the same way that other culture-bound institutions exist, for us to catalogue and reflect on. Rather, this is a case where we played the role of the prodigal son – the descent into *Physis*, the descent into matter. For 15,000 years, we have wandered a desert, and we are now very well adapted to the deserts of rationalism, materialism, state politics, patriarchy, so forth and so on. But there is no food in a desert! Eventually, there has to be a Promised Land; and I believe that many people in this room know that personally, that Promised Land is the psychedelic experience.

The larger challenge – and it is a larger challenge; it’s easier to fix your own mind – the larger challenge is to somehow make this private doorway a public option. Empower ourselves to speak of this in such a way that it cannot be put down. It cannot be rolled over, it cannot be pigeonholed, it cannot be handed over to a clique of experts, but rather it has to be confronted as the authentic thing which we lost so long ago that we no longer have any image of the thing lost; we simply have an ache... an ache that cannot be gotten rid of. The solution to this is a re-empowering of the shamanic meme: a taking of the idea of shamanism, pouring it into the best our own self-exploration has given to us – which to my mind means art, psychotherapy, and, er, art [laughter] – and to try to empower these institutions to give back our authenticity that was lost. The cultures that possess shamanism function – the entire culture – as a shamanic model for those of us who wander in the Prodigal’s desert of materialism.

And through the work of people like Gordon Wasson and Richard Evans Schultes, and the 19th-century Richard Spruce, the tools have been catalogued. The magical plants. And I don’t believe that shamanism without hallucinogens is authentic shamanism or comfortable shamanism. Now, this is a great debate in anthropology. Mircea Eliade, on one side, saying “When shamanism turns to narcotics, it has entered a decadent and final phase”. The very use of the word “narcotics” betrays such a botanical naivety that you know you’re not going to be happy with what follows! [laughter] Wasson, on the hand, said, “A shamanism that does not resort to hallucinogenic plants is a shamanism that has lost its roots”; a shamanism that relies on ordeals, pathological personalities, and withholding of food, is a shamanism that has lost a sense of its techniques and its efficacy.

The last thought I would like to leave with you is – and I hope I’m preaching to the converted, but if there’s a single person in this room who doesn’t know what I’m about to say, then it’s worth repeating – and that is, we are not bullshitting you! This is not yoga! This is not NLP! – not to knock those things [laughter]... This is real! It is so real that you can take the most hardened, rational, reductionist asshole and drop him into that environment, and he will meet his Maker, you know?! [laughter and applause] ... It dissolves you into a confrontation with authentic being, and this is what we are

starving for; this is how we've gotten into the messes – and mess – that we're in. Take seriously the techniques of shamanism. Study the plants. Make real choices... and then, don't dabble the dose! Once you've done your homework, *go for it!*