

Psychic phenomena

The first thing to note about paranormal or psychic phenomena – for example the existence of formless beings and so on – is that they all exist in the real world, they are not a distortion of perception; altering and giving rise to false perceptions of the world is what delusions are doing, and as such they are dangerous. Therefore we need to stay clear and discriminating in this sense if we are to safely explore or even consider the psychic realm. Secondly, we should bear in mind that any such phenomena are all impermanent, they all belong to the world just like the mundane realities. And this very impermanence is the highest truth and the truth of liberation. Considering this keeps the whole thing of psychic phenomena in a cooler perspective. On the other hand, there is no doubt that such phenomena, or the mysterious energies or abilities that manifest within the spiritual world, can be of use and help us along the path. This can for example be with various kinds of healing or as a source of information we would otherwise not have access to.

The temptation or tendency, however, is to get a bit carried away by these things, or to seek to understand how it all works beyond the range of what is really necessary. This can make us end up putting all our faith in devas or getting bogged down by metaphysics. Certain perceptions or attitudes are, however, much more helpful than others. It can be very healthy to look upon energies or abilities not as our own but as impersonal and universal qualities of some kind, in order to avoid conceit. So to see any paranormal abilities simply as the work of devas can be a useful idea on this level, especially in cases where there is no further need to understand how something works. It is also worthy of note that in such fields curiosity can actually kill the cat – too much thinking, no more powers.

On another note, it can be better to talk about qualities rather than energies or powers. The term ‘energy’ can make us presume certain characteristics – an ‘energy’ is generally taken as something, rather than as an absence of something, and as working on a physical level or through a physical medium, for example. But actually none of these may be the case. Likewise, in terms of healing, to empty the mind leads to a stopping of the mind from interfering with the body; this could be the healing of samādhi rather than our minds giving birth to a mysterious energy, for example. And why would it then not be possible for this emptiness to extend beyond our own bodies and effect another person?

These distinctions can become important when we seek to cultivate such qualities. Are we trying to generate something or are we trying to get out of the way for something to arise? The latter attitude is also the model that keeps the spiritual path at large going in the same direction – the direction of letting go. This is important, without this letting go our benevolent intentions end up imprisoning us in one way or the other rather than setting us free.

There is also the relationship between different kinds of samādhi – on the one hand mundane jhāna, which is associated with psychic phenomena; and on the other hand supramundane jhāna, which is associated with knowledge of path and fruit, with the spiritual attainments of stream entry and further on. A meditator on the Buddhist path is likely to, though will not necessarily, attain mundane jhāna and some of its associated psychic abilities along the way to supramundane jhāna; but since both kinds of jhāna can involve a kind of Knowing there is this close association. The difference is that mundane knowing is still out in the world; the supramundane knowing of the path will be initiated by letting go of the world and is an entirely inner affair.

So if we are looking for lasting liberation we are advised to stay at the heart and not to go out into the world, normal or paranormal, however fascinating.

I offer this for your reflection.

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