

Spiritual Magic, healthy and unhealthy

The unique abilities of the spiritual mind can come into play in terms of what we might call magic of one kind or another.

This magic can have pitfalls however if we become deluded as to the nature of our spiritual experiences and confuse them with more mundane phenomena. Pitfalls emerge from the different levels at which spiritual and mundane phenomena get mixed up with each other. This happens in various ways:

a) Only if done correctly, purely, is the magical mind working on the world, rather than being caught up in itself (even if it is perhaps itself on a higher level). The most important example of this is that the emptiness which we experience has a brightness and a power to it that can be very deluding. If we take that there is something there – if we make the emptiness into something – then we can be confusing material and immaterial phenomena. It is not that this emptiness, however, has no power. The absence of something can be as significant and powerful as the presence of something. To take a relatively mundane example: The benevolent effect of loving kindness on the body could be simply the absence of negative emotion with its associated tensions and psychosomatic symptoms.

More generally speaking ‘upakkilesa’ is a technical Pali term for the ‘corruptions of insight’. These are the corruptions of insight. In this case we are considering delusions essentially through which *being* enters into *knowing* and hence mental phenomena are made into something material. Hopefully the examples will make this clear. Different kinds of upakkilesa tend to manifest in the Western and Eastern contexts so these are treated separately.

The Western tendency – it is sometimes common that mechanical language is used about something mental, thereby making it seem physical. Another way we make something mental more concrete, however, is through the formation of a view. In this case the formation of a conceited view of ourselves can creep in and substitute for any genuine transformation.

Ultimately, from 'The Cloud of Unknowing', the correct view would be that:

*“Everlasting wisdom without beginning, who are in yourself the First Cause, transcending all being,”*¹

However, most spiritual traditions, Western or Eastern, take the ultimate to be an eternal being rather than an eternal knowing. This is the ultimate in conceited views.

Ch’i Kung – a practical example.

Chinese Ch’i Kung exercise uses movement combined with the breath for health and healing. The movements are said to move a universal energy (ch’i) around the body. I practised this and T’ai Ch’i for many years. I would get faint feelings of warmth and tingling moving through the body as I practised. I was told by the teacher that this was ch’i. The practice felt good. I learned to be more at ease in my body. The movements had a beauty and grace that made my mind calm and composed. I felt that this discipline was helping me to gain control of my body and hence my life. I was calming down and making wiser, more morally conscious decisions. I was less anxious and self-concerned and more generous.

Then, one impossible day, I was walking along and felt so exhausted I said to myself, “If I collapse

¹ Anon. *The Cloud of Unknowing and other works*. (Penguin Classics) From *The Mystical Theology of St Denis*. Page 1.

right now I don't care, I give up.” As soon as I thought this and let go of all effort at holding up my body I had a very strong feeling at the crown of my head, feeling as though I was being held up by some mysterious force. Immediately I remembered the description of such an energy in T'ai Ch'i. I had had a faint tingling sensation at my crown that I had thought was it but this was different altogether. It was very strong and very pleasant. “This must be the real thing,” I thought.

After this experience I realised that the way I had understood T'ai Ch'i had been wrong and this misunderstanding had been blocking the deepest dimension of this ancient practice. I realised that I had been trying to do something instead of simply letting go. I realised that this 'energy' in its deepest form was not an energy that I was generating or even something that I could try to open up to or channel. It was merely the result of letting go, of not trying at all. So its manifestation was defined by the gaps in my efforts – and yet there was a lot of mindfulness required to keep letting go and access it. The flowing movements became a kind of continuous letting go of stillness rather than active movement, not letting the mind hold on to anything. In the mind what was required was a continual overcoming of the blockages or obstacles that arose, active or habitual. A continual contemplation was necessary of what was arising so that the mind naturally let go of whatever it was holding on to. Then the 'energy' shone brighter and brighter. Most radically, perhaps, if I let go of this energy itself it also got brighter. Letting go of space leads to more space and emptiness.

Ultimately it is the experience of samādhi, of the completely pure empty mind, taken to be an eternal essence, energy or being in the mind, that is the source of delusion in the Asian context in this case rather than a view. In this case this emptiness is a more stable state leading to this illusion of a permanent soul. It is rather the stable knowing of space.

The deepest confusion is between the knowledge of specifics and universal knowledge (between 'vijjā' or transcendent knowledge and abhiññā). Abhiññā is the Pali term for what in the West would be called psychic powers.²

The Western tendency – Again to quote the correct view first of all, in a Western voice, from 'The Cloud of Unknowing',

*“Give up this everywhere and this something, in favour of this nowhere and this nothing. Do not worry if your senses have no knowledge of this nothing, (...) Who is it that calls it nothing? It is our outer man, to be sure, not our inner. Our inner mind calls it Everything; for from it he learns well to have knowledge of all things, bodily and spiritual, **without specific regard to any one thing by itself.**”³*

Here we can see the clarity of what belongs to the senses and what does not – and the value of both. Here we see that the mind can positively move toward the ultimate without this being deluding when the ultimate is itself seen as a Knowing rather than a Being. This is not to say that spiritual beings do not exist but that the essence of their being is mind, not materiality. The truth arises through a great master and his presence is quite literally, not merely figuratively, born again into the world.

The Eastern tendency – In Asia psychic ability is associated with ultimate knowledge in the sense that individuals who possess them can be seen to possess higher, universal knowledge (and/or these individuals themselves can believe this.) Within certain states of mind, an individual may believe

2 This term in itself is one that gives abilities of the mind a physical or mechanical definition. This is already a result of confusion and a source of further confusion. It is very hard to translate.

3 *The Cloud of Unknowing and other works*. Page 94. (My emboldening.)

everything that comes to their mind, purely because of the esoteric nature of those things that arise, thinking that all knowledge at this level must be somehow true. People might tend to assume that their 'spirit guide' will always tell them the truth, for example; or that our samādhi will tell us how to build the dams or the bridges (there have been a few dams built by great monks that have failed).

b) Also it can become apparent that the phenomena that arise within this emptiness are not like the usual contents of our minds but of a different nature. It can be, however that if we have not experienced this emptiness, we will not realise this difference or its importance; or we will try to make our more mundane experience spiritual. For example we could have three different experiences of a 'Deva' where we can confuse one for the other – we could have an imagined experience, or we could have a spontaneous vision (or a 'nimitta') of one, or we could be visited by the real thing. In practice circles this confusion is called 'vipallāsa' – this term is used colloquially in Thailand to denote states of delusion that may arise around spirituality – the confusion between what is real and what is imagined (or projected onto things) or what is truly within the pure, empty mind.

Examples:

The Western tendency – Most Westerners think that the inner world resides in their bodies and so project it there, battling with the stuff of our karma in its dark recesses. We generally know nothing of the genuinely inner world of the mind which has let go of the things of the senses. The general malaise of western materialist meditation is described well in 'The Cloud of Unknowing':

“The madness I am referring to is produced in this way. They read and hear it said that they should give up outward activity with their senses, and work inwardly; and because they do not know what inward working is they work wrongly. They turn their bodily senses inwards into their own bodies against the course of nature, and contort themselves as if to see inwards with their bodily eyes, and hear inwards with their bodily ears, similarly with all their senses, smelling, tasting and feeling inwards. And thus they turn themselves inside out, against the course of nature, and with their ingenuity torment their imaginations so excessively that at last their brains are turned in their heads.”⁴

The Eastern tendency – Sometimes among Asians there is a tendency to understand their imagination as though it were a vision ('I saw' is usually merely 'I imagined'), or to take their dreams as prophetic, essentially believing too easily. Consequently also phenomena within their own mind will be seen as ghosts or devas. Many Asians see the dark side of the mind as a ghost that needs to be tamed and trained, with little ability to discriminate between their own mind and the minds of others, human or otherwise; in the positive case good feelings become devas. This lack of discrimination can be considered foolish in Western circles, and yet it can serve to prevent the mind from getting caught up in such phenomena in a psychological way and instead clearly discriminate in terms of good and evil and look for a skilful response.

Solution: Vipallāsa is resolved by seeing the movements and actions of the mind, not merely its content. We see what we are creating, because we see the very act of creation. Hence we also know that there is another order of phenomena that come to our minds which we have not created – the stuff of real spiritual visions or the visits of spiritual beings.

c) The making of connections between physical and spiritual results in the various forms of 'tantrism' which vary from genuine magic to delusion or deception of various kinds. When the spiritual realm is properly understood and phenomena are properly ascribed, then it can be possible

4 *The Cloud of Unknowing and other works.* Page 76

to use spiritual skills to help the world without danger or confusion – without raising up something worldly to a spiritual level. Problems occur when material and immaterial are confused with each other.

Generally speaking, the Western tendency, both in views and practices, is to make spiritual phenomena physical or bodily and the Eastern tendency is to make physical or bodily phenomena, including the imagination, into spiritual phenomena.

A Western spiritual source I'd like to return to, 'The Cloud of Unknowing', describes the essence of all this very well:

*“Unless it [the imagination] is controlled by the light of grace in reason, it will never cease, asleep or awake, to form alien and disordered images of bodily objects, or else some delusion or other, which is nothing but a bodily conception of something spiritual or a spiritual conception of something bodily.”*⁵

What is recognised is that when we talk about things within the mind what we are saying only applies to phenomena within the pure empty mind of samādhi, free of hindrances, the light of grace.

Table 1 – a summary of the three pitfalls, comparing Eastern and Western tantrism as seen in the modern practice of Yoga, specifically in terms of how the phenomena of ‘chakras’ is related to:

	Western	Eastern
vipallāsa	Chakras are imagined and taken to be physical energies and their connection to the mind is ignored.	Chakras are created by the imagination and then taken to be real, spiritual energies.
upakkilesa	Chakras are experienced and taken to be physical energies of a mysterious nature.	Chakras are taken as representing an eternal self or soul at different levels of refinement.
abhiññā	Chakras are seen as physical, the potential of the light of phenomena, such as chakras, as sources of awareness is not recognised.	Chakras are associated with specific knowledge at different levels, rather than as the light of awareness of different intensity.

Real Magic?

So is there such a thing as real magic or is it all some kind of delusion? If the above pitfalls are avoided and there is clarity as to what is material or immaterial, and to what what is real or imagined, then there is the possibility of real magic. In fact we can be seeing the magic of all things. There is the magic of the material realm in the sense that truth, within the DNA, can form a living being. Then there is the truth of information within the mind of various kinds – the deeper truths or intuition that can guide us in our lives, and the ultimate, universal truth of the Dhamma.

Spiritual knowledge, both in terms of specifics and universals, can be the source of real magic. The former is the magic of benevolence (associated with the so-called mundane path) and the latter of transcendence (the so-called supramundane path). In an impermanent world the latter is the more

⁵ *The Cloud of Unknowing and other works.* p. 90.

important.

Let us now consider a more in-depth example from the East through the eyes of a Western scholar to see if there could be any possible validity to it. Referring to the Jinapañjara, a chant that places the 28 Buddhas in and around the body for protection, Justin McDaniel says:

“(...) a common logic at the very foundation of Thai Buddhism that links the body of the Buddha and the body of each human being in a universal algebraic net. This body-centric practice is based on created ephemeral bodies at the time of danger (...) for the protection through the use of non-semantic and syllabic interpretations of Pali words and the mapping of those words onto the physical body and physical world. In this way the phases of the moon, the days of the week, the parts of the body, the names of Buddhist texts, previous Buddhas and teachers are seen as existing in their own syllabic, mathematical, temporal and spatial relationships. The Jinapañjara invokes these relationships and uses them for protection. Those adept in this Buddhist algebra of replacing unknowns with knowns and transforming signs into symbols and back into signs are able to reveal a network of power in this world that is accessible to everyone provided that they know the access codes.”⁶

If we are clear about the mind and the phenomenon of the mind as immaterial sources of information, then it can be possible that words or chants that have mental power may affect the things of the world through their truth. Our definition of mental here is, however, very different to the normal. As we have said, phenomena can be considered to be within the mind only in the state of samādhi, the genuinely inner mind. If we take an ordinary definition of inner mind as thoughts or feelings in this respect, then we arrive at some kind of superstition (or an “inverted superstition” so to speak).

If we take this extraordinary definition instead, we may see advanced meditators attempting to describe actions and phenomena of mind which are of a different kind altogether. Although seemingly irrational, a magic spell arising from such logic could still have such power within the individual, or greater inner mind or field of consciousness. This is the magic of the mundane path. If there is seen to be any material force or energy involved at the source, this is delusion and will be a further source of delusion or danger.

In addition, perhaps we can see many examples of truths within the psychic realm that, in the hands of people without psychic ability, become the half-truths of educated superstition or degenerate into pure superstition or blind faith – a little knowledge being potentially the most dangerous thing.

To see the mental nature of such phenomena is one safeguard, to see the ultimate impermanence of all such phenomena is another. Our magic undermines the ultimate spiritual goal of letting go if the phenomena of this world are not seen as also impermanent.

I offer this for your reflection.

Ajahn Kalyāno
<http://www.openthesky.co.uk>

6 In his book *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk* (Columbia University Press 2011) p. 119 .