

## NATURE OF SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA

*'Your magic talisman is powerful, but are you a Solomon to make it work?'*  
Proverb

### Deception, Fraud and Deceit

There are many instances, both past and present, of bogus "spiritual masters" and others deceiving their audiences and playing upon the gullibility of the masses. Many apparent supernatural occurrences are actually due to works of deception, stealth and deceit. The accuracy of reports by observers of these so-called miraculous happenings may be compromised by such factors as fraud, misreporting, poor memory and imaginative elaboration. The first step in any assessment of supposed supernatural phenomena should be the elimination of the possibility of deception, trickery or cheating:

Clearly one (or more) stage magicians are a helpful adjunct in exposing those frauds, and Randi, in a special report "Tests and Investigations of Three Psychics" shows how either the supposed psychics were actively involved in cheating, or else were unable to perform when conditions were really closely controlled. Of course this doesn't prove that fraud is present in *every* such case, but the widespread exposure of so very many cases leads to the supposition that it would be prudent if it were to be anticipated at all. It is a sort of psychological version of Gresham's law – an excess of fraudulent 'psychics' discredits any (presumptive) genuine ones. In fact the point of view may well be taken that if the outcome of a psychic performance can be replicated by a stage magician, or others, using 'ordinary' methods, then it should be *presumed* to be the result of trickery, even if actual cheating was not detected. And it is only a small step to take this a little further and claim that even if you don't know how it is done, it should still be presumed to be by some sort of trickery. After all, how many, including other magicians, know how a particular stage trick is performed? And most scientists are unaware of the ingenious procedures of the professional trickster, and so can be easily caught out, particularly if they are one of those who subconsciously *want* to believe. (1)

What may appear as a wonder or miracle may really be due to faulty assumptions, observation or misunderstanding. The result is an incorrect interpretation of events. Sufi teacher Idries Shah sounds a cautionary note when attempting to interpret a seemingly miraculous event or happening without a complete picture of the facts:

Q: Why should we not accept that that miracles do occur, especially when we have the testimony of many reputable people that they have happened?

A: I am not denying that miracles occur. What you have to do is to be very sure that something is a miracle, and not the product of an imposture or a misunderstanding. (2)

There are a number of descriptions in the spiritual literature detailing how “tricks” are performed which mimic actual supernatural abilities and can easily fool unaware audiences and observers. Gurdjieff trained his students to perform some of these “extraordinary” feats as a way of understanding the different levels of non-ordinary phenomena:

We shall now present some of the so-called ‘supernatural phenomena’ studied at the Institute. Mr. Gurdjieff puts all such phenomena into three categories: tricks, semi-tricks, and real supernatural phenomena. As an example, let us take the well known one of finding a hidden object. Something is hidden without the knowledge of a person, who, though blindfolded, finds it, through holding the hand of a member of the audience. The audience believes that the finder reads the thoughts of the other person. It is deceived. A phenomenon really takes place without any trick on the part of the performer, but it has nothing in common with the transmission of thought. It is done through the reflection on our muscular system of our emotional experiences. Since there is a muscular reaction to every small vibration of the physical body, either by relaxation or contraction, it is possible with much practice to sense the most feeble vibrations, and these occur in the most stolid, even when the person is specially trying to subdue them. The hand which the blindfolded person holds responds unconsciously to the owner’s knowledge of the hiding place; its slight, almost imperceptible changes are a language which the medium interprets – consciously if he is versed in the secret, instinctively if he is ignorant of the law – and which leads him to guess where the object is hidden. Similar phenomena, produced through laws different from those to which they are ascribed and at the same time are not artificial in their essence, Gurdjieff calls semi-tricks. The third class of phenomena comprises those having as the basis of their manifestation laws unexplained by official science: real supernatural phenomena. (3)

## False Experiences and Self-Deception

People who have partial or imagined paranormal experiences often falsely believe that they are genuine and meaningful. Other individuals are caught up in self-deception when they misinterpret certain events or influences in their lives which may originate from a higher level of reality: “Assistances come to worthy people, but carry with them the probability that such undeveloped individuals will ascribe them to wild and unlikely sources.”

Magical exercises and procedures which are designed to elicit supernatural experiences are generally fragments, taken out of context, of an originally comprehensive system of inner development. When used for lower, subjective purposes they represent a deterioration of a real and effective spiritual teaching:

The magician who seeks to develop powers in order to profit by certain extra-physical forces is following a fragment of a system. Because of this, the warnings against the terrible dangers in magical dabbling or obsession are frequent, almost invariable. It is too often assumed that the practitioners imposed a ban on casual magic because they wanted to preserve a monopoly. From the long-term viewpoint it is far more evident that the practitioners themselves have an imperfect knowledge of the whole of the phenomena, some of whose parts they use. The "terrible dangers" of electricity are not dangers at all to the man who works continuously with electricity, and has a good technical knowledge. (4)

When extrasensory abilities such as telepathy, telekinesis and clairvoyance are learned and exercised without a proper preparation and suitable context, the ability can actually turn against the practitioner and result in mental, emotional and physical problems. Scholar Ernest Scott, writing in *The People of the Secret*, observed that "individuals and communities exist – generally unknown to the public – who possess telepathic and paranormal functions and use them for selfish ends. Although they have limited success temporarily, these people in the end destroy themselves and the destructive influence extends to their associates in proportion as they have been attracted by similar motivation."

It is possible to produce visions, hallucinations and other unusual experiences in certain people through changes in physiological functioning as a result of fasting, rhythmic breathing or intense physical movements. These experiences are invariably interpreted as spiritual in nature rather than the product of physiological modification and manipulation.

Throughout history and across cultures human beings have reported various altered states of consciousness. In some cases these are genuine mystical experiences, and in certain instances may be accompanied by unusual states of an extra-dimensional nature, transcending time and space. But more often than not they are false or illusory. In *The Sufis*, Idries Shah describes an unusual phenomenon known as *tajalli*, which is a form of emanation or 'irradiation' transmitted from one person to others: "*Tajalli* influences and affects everyone, though it is perceptible only to a few. A person, for instance, may find he is "in luck" or "does just the right thing," or that he "cannot put a foot wrong." This may be a consequence of accidental *tajalli*."

The false *tajalli* experienced by those who do not carry their development along in a balanced way may give rise to the conviction that it is a true mystical state, especially when it is found that supra-normal faculties seem to be activated in this condition. Sufis discriminate between this experience and the true one in two ways. Firstly, the teacher will at once identify the counterfeit state. Secondly, as a matter of self-investigation, it can always be discerned that the gains of perception are of no exact value. There may be, for instance, an access of intuition. One may know something about someone – thought reading is an example. But the actual function, the value of the ability to read thoughts, is nil. The person suffering from the false *tajalli* will be able to report some fact or series of facts about someone else, indicating breakthrough of the limitations of time and

space. The test of the *tajalli* to anyone who cannot instantly recognize that it is genuine is whether the “supernatural” perception is accompanied by a permanent increase in intuitive knowledge – the seeing of things as a whole, for instance; or the knowledge of the course which one’s self-development will take; or the course of that of another; or performing “wonders.” (5)

## Emotionality and Sensation-Seeking

A common human tendency is to be fascinated by the miraculous and the supernatural. Wonders and miracles tend to impress those who are seeking excitement and sensational experiences. Individuals who concentrate on amazing things divert energy from higher human development to lower-level preoccupations: “A person who is attracted to a thing because of its sensation value is probably not ready for enlightenment.”

Emotionality and excitement interfere with the subtle workings of supernatural forces and energies. As well, greed, feelings of self-importance and hypocrisy defeat the manifestations of paranormal capacities and abilities. Wonders and miracles are useless as instruments of inner development if they only impress emotionally or stimulate the imagination. “If a miracle acts only on the imagination, as with the crude mind, it will stimulate uncritical credulity or emotional excitement, or a thirst for more miracles, or a desire to understand miracles, or a one-sided attachment to, even fear of, the person who is apparently responsible for the miracle.”

One of the greatest barriers to the operation of extra-sensory abilities is emotional tension, often produced by strongly wanting something:

Q: Why is it so often reported that people at times of emotional tension gain paranormal insights, and why do scientists, who are detached, not get results?

A: People at times of emotional tension *never* have paranormal insights. They only get them (if they do under these circumstances) when they have worn out their emotional state, by over-running their emotions. At this point, they are temporarily without desires, and get flashes of perception. As for scientists, they get few or no results precisely because they are *not* detached: they want to produce results. This is important to them. And so they inhibit the appearance of the function, and disturb it in others. Their experimental subjects, too, are similarly in states of emotion which have the same effect. The process is described in the last book of Rumi’s *Masnavi*, where he speaks of man’s mind as a canal filled with rubbish, preventing him from reading thoughts. When the water has been cleansed, the reflection of what is beyond appears in it. ‘Indulgence,’ he says, ‘is the simile of the pouring of defilements into the water.’ These include fantasies and delusions, occupy the mind and prevent it from working properly. (6)

A student's reactions to extra-dimensional phenomena are often observed in esoteric schools to see if their responses are emotion-based rather than calm, balanced and objective:

Incidentally, these 'powers' are said to be used by the Sufis also to test the stability and condition of the student. People who are subjected to such experiences, either on themselves or seeing them happen to others, are observed by the Sufi, in order to ascertain if they are emotionally moved by the experience. If they are, the training stops until it is found that they can observe rather than be impressed. This technique is, of course, the reverse of that of the charlatan, who would use it if he could to impress, not to test and select those who did not respond. Many Sufi techniques are, be it noted, based on the conception of a 'lack of response is better' theme: a direct reversal of our customary way of looking at things. (7)

## Science and the Supernatural

It is difficult to account for supernatural phenomena at the present stage of scientific knowledge. The preoccupation of the scientist or skeptic is to explain (or discredit) unusual or paranormal events in terms of existing scientific knowledge. The general scientific belief is that if something cannot be readily measured and understood from the viewpoint of conventional beliefs and 'facts' it not real or true.

In order for scientific research on paranormal phenomena to yield valid results certain fundamental considerations and requirements must be met: "Under what conditions might these unusual experiences occur? To whom? Can people be trained to increase their perceptions? Are there more subtle research measures which might more consistently index these functions? Are there measures which might increase the yield?"

The scientific study of parapsychology has been with us for over a century, without making any impression on the mainstream of psychology or physics. There are several reasons for this. Many orthodox scientists in psychology and related areas, as a function of their dominant paradigm, have consistently refused to consider any outside evidence. The great nineteenth century German physiologist Hermann Von Helmholtz, for instance, wrote that "Neither the evidence of my own senses, nor the testimony of all of the Fellows of the Royal Society" would convince him of the truth of parapsychologic data . . . This inherent conservatism in human perception is at its peak in the scientific study of phenomena which are by definition unusual and challenging. Indeed, the claims of parapsychology are a distinct challenge to our contemporary psychological and physical world-views. If some people can perceive events before they "happen" (or at least before the remainder of us perceive them), if there are modes of interpersonal communication unknown to many, if people can influence actions or events at a distance greater than the range of normal influence, then perhaps we should revise our conception of hu-

man abilities, of seriality, of space and time, and of our conception of how events become manifest. Since the burden of documentation is on those who claim that these capacities exist, their contentions on the nature of the mind and the physical world should be accepted only after much evidence has been accumulated. (8)

Reliance upon logic, rationality and the ordinary senses may be inadequate to properly evaluate and explain higher order experiences. "The more you try, the less you will understand - because the way of understanding things used by the conventional mind cannot encompass this kind of thing at all."

The scientific understanding of the supernatural requires a certain flexibility of approach on the part of the scientific investigator:

Q: Do you think that researchers will one day explain the physical basis of ESP, or do you think it will always elude them?

A: If I say it will elude the scientists, it will annoy the people who are able to get enormous grants for research into ESP. But I think, yes, a great deal more can be discovered, providing the scientists are prepared to be good scientists. And by that I mean that they are prepared to structure their experiments successively in accordance with their discoveries. They must be ready to follow anomalies and not hew doggedly to their original working hypothesis. And they will certainly have to give up their concept of the observer being outside of the experiment, which has been their dearest pet for many years. (9)

There are a number of preconditions or prerequisites involved in any approach or study of the supernatural. These include proper preparation, the understanding of certain ideas, and being in a suitable psychological state. The meaningful investigation of higher-order phenomena calls for an approach characterized by a "capacity for a critical observation indispensable to the study of real phenomena, which requires a perfectly impartial attitude and a judgment not burdened by pre-established beliefs." The state of consciousness and level of being of the investigator are also of paramount importance:

One thing I understood even then with undoubted clarity, was that no phenomena of a higher order, that is, transcending the category of ordinary things, observable every day, or phenomena which are sometimes called "metaphysical" can be observed or investigated by *ordinary means* in an ordinary state of consciousness, like physical phenomena. It is a complete absurdity to think that it is possible to study phenomena of a higher order like "telepathy," "clairvoyance," foreseeing the future, mediumistic phenomena, and so on, in the same way as electrical, chemical, or meteorological phenomena are studied. There is something in phenomena of a higher order which requires a particular emotional state *for their observation and study*. And this excludes any possibility of "properly conducted" laboratory experiments and observations. (10)

One of the most important considerations in the scientific study of paranormal phenomena is the mental attitude and psychological condition of *both* the subject and the experimenter. "If the experimenter is, say, too eager or excited, this could conceivably distract the subject in the experiment. We need to consider the character and mental attitudes of the subject and the experimenter as possibly *essential* elements in the enquiry. And unless they are known and controlled we cannot, in any case, claim that conditions for an experiment can be properly replicated."

It has been suggested that a certain degree of objectivity and disinterest is necessary to properly approach the study of supernatural phenomena: "People who are likely to be able to understand and develop capacities for ESP are more likely to be found among people who are not interested in the subject."

Certain psychological states and conditions (demand for attention, expectations and imagination) actually prevent the appearance and perception of supernatural occurrences:

If we suppose that extra-sensory perception might be of the nature of a universal human potentiality, then it might be that the threshold for awareness is impossibly high in "noisy" persons, people so full of themselves that their attention is fully absorbed in themselves to the exclusion of other possible low level inputs. "Mental quietness" then becomes a prerequisite for ESP to operate. It can then be seen as a matter of *access*: if the brain is too busy, weak signals just don't get through to our attention. (11)

In order to properly understand the supernatural, the external observer needs to develop perceptions of a more refined nature rather than seek "explanations" in familiar terms. "The outside observer, especially if he is what is generally considered to be objective or educated, is heavily hampered when approaching this problem. His pressing need is to explain the phenomena in terms understood by him. He has no sense of duty to extend his own perceptions into the phenomena which he is investigating."

A man may think that he sees something which is not in fact there. He may also see something other than what is really there. How he sees it and what he sees will depend upon his own capacity of understanding. I am not now talking about deliberate deceit and conjuring tricks. To assume, just because a thing can be explained in rational terms, that this is the only explanation for it is not an absurdity in ordinary experience. But it is incorrect if one is living on a level where several different explanations are actually seen to be possible, in accordance with the quality of the percipient to profit by them. Modern science has not yet acquired this special refinement of differentiation – its dimensions are not sufficient for this purpose. (12)

One of the most significant prerequisites for evaluating and understanding the supernatural is proper prior training and inner development of potential investigators: "The greatest barrier

preventing the objective study of the supernatural is the lack of scientists prepared to undergo the rigorous training necessary to become adepts.”

The method which most people seem to adopt in their search for the answers to the questions implied in [supernatural phenomena] has usually been the same. This method is to seek out things which seem to indicate the supernatural. Then the phenomena are studied and attempts are made to create or duplicate these phenomena. Alternatively, people who seem to control or to be controlled by these phenomena, to whatever degree, are sought and followed. One moment's thought would show the weakness of this method of approaching the supernatural phenomena. Ask yourself what method you have established that you are competent to judge either theories or so-called proofs. This has never been established. The method which you are using is to try to understand something by means of something which is not objective: your ordinary, or even abnormal mind . . . Few people in their right minds would attempt to discuss, or evaluate, nuclear physics without preparation for the task. Yet almost every human being feels that he can have a reasonable opinion about the supernatural. He asks for information, it is true, for phenomena, for tales and demonstrations. But he does not ask for basic training to enable him to understand. This is like the child who goes to school for the first time and expects to be taught a foreign language at an advanced level, without having any basic knowledge about the language, and what makes it up.

(13)

Scientific experiments which seek to verify the existence of extra-sensory phenomena are often designed *a priori* in such a way as to mitigate the possibility of obtaining meaningful results. The investigators invariably lack experiential knowledge of the practical workings of such phenomena: “The person who already knows how and why these things work will not attempt to structure the experiment in the way which is adopted by the ordinary experimenter.”

The scientific requirements for ‘repeatable experiments’ and ‘controlled conditions’ may actually prevent the appearance and understanding of paranormal phenomena: “There are those who insist on repeatable experiments. But supposing another pitfall is that those who try for repeatable experiments are relying on a mechanism which itself frustrates the manifestation of what they are trying to produce? It is by no means unknown among members of authentic mystical schools that trying to force something is the best way to stop it happening.”

It is certainly *easier* to investigate something if it can be repeated in a handleable form in the laboratory: but lack of such replication surely doesn't remove it from the realm of legitimate investigation. Ball lightning is accepted as a valid phenomenon though we know little about it, and it certainly can't be (yet) produced in the laboratory. The same can be said for falling meteorites, which appear on the scene at unpredictable intervals, not when we choose to call on them. It may be



that at some future time genuine ESP can be demonstrated reliably in a controlled setting, but if this can't be done now that is surely no reason for discounting it. (14)

## Unknown Laws of Nature

Most scientists reject the possibility of paranormal experiences such as telepathy because there is no credible physical explanation which would account for them:

Quite apart from being put off by widespread fraud, there is another reason why most scientists are unwilling to give credence to ESP – they don't see "how it can work." From one point of view this is almost *a priori* reasoning against ESP. It used to be the case that a scientist would investigate a new phenomenon and only later discover the mechanism operating therein. To ask for the mechanism first is like putting the cart before the horse . . . Einstein, for instance, while willing to be persuaded by adequate evidence, had reservations about ESP because, among other things, of the apparent invariance of the effect with distance. Physical forces with which we are familiar decay with distance, but ESP apparently does not. I think it might be constructive to note that a proper distinction can be made between the *physical principle* on which a phenomenon operates, and the *effect produced*. For example, I can transmit intelligence by talking, but those at the back of the room can understand me just as well as those in the front, even though the sound of my voice is much weaker at the back. I can make a trans-Atlantic telephone call just as effectively as one across town. So long as the net effect at the receiver is sufficiently *above the noise threshold* the intelligence gets through no matter what the weakening with distance of the transmitted forces. (15)

Extra-sensory or supernatural phenomena cannot be explained through conventional logic or currently understood laws of nature. Yet the possibility exists that future research may discover the 'mechanism' underlying these happenings: "If it is indeed true that, as knowledge grows, the frontier shifts between what is scientifically verifiable and what is assigned to the world of the spiritual or paranormal. Whether telepathy is regarded as more miraculous than television depends on the culture within which the observer is operating."

Supernatural events and actions may be explained by laws of nature that have not been identified and/or correctly understood by modern science. "Many so-called supernatural powers are in fact reflections of hitherto little understood forces, which may very possibly be harvested to individual and collective advantage."

Esoteric tradition avers that certain laws of nature which are responsible for supernatural and magical phenomena have been known to initiates of higher knowledge for many millennia:

These universal laws were known in very ancient times. We can come to this conclusion on the basis of historical events which could not have taken place if in the remote past men had not possessed this knowledge. From the most ancient times people knew how to use and control these laws of Nature. This directing of mechanical laws by man is magic and includes not only transformation of substances in the desired direction but also resistance or opposition to certain mechanical influences based on the same laws. People who knew these universal laws and how to use them are magicians. There is white and black magic. White magic uses knowledge for good, black magic uses knowledge for evil, for its own selfish purposes. Like Great knowledge, magic, which has existed from the most ancient times, has never been lost, and knowledge is always the same. Only the form in which this knowledge was expressed and transmitted changed, depending on the place and the epoch. (16)

Although supernatural faculties may appear strange or unbelievable to most people, in fact they are but one aspect of a higher stage of inner development and being. What seems to be a miracle to one person is commonplace to an individual possessing greater knowledge and perception. In reality, miracles happen all the time, but most people are unaware of them. Ramana Maharshi: "People see things which are far more miraculous than the so-called *siddhis* [spiritual powers], yet do not wonder at them simply because they occur every day."

A Mulla Nasrudin story, taken from the Sufi tradition, provides an analogy which illustrates how supposedly supernatural powers may be the reflections of natural, ordinary abilities:

A great many things are instantly obvious to the Sufi, which cannot be arrived at by the average man. An allegory is used to explain some of the amazing acts of Sufi initiates, based upon super-sensory powers. To the Sufi, these are no more miraculous than any of the ordinary senses are to the layman. Just how they work cannot be described, but a rough analogy can be drawn.

"Mankind is asleep," said Nasrudin, when he had been accused of falling asleep at court one day. "The sleep of the sage is powerful, and the 'wakefulness' of the average man is almost useless to anyone." The King was annoyed. The next day, after a heavy meal, Nasrudin fell asleep, and the King had him carried into an adjoining room. When the court was about to rise, Nasrudin, still slumbering, was brought back to the audience chamber. "You have been asleep again," said the King. "I have been as awake as I needed to be." "Very well, then, tell me what happened while you were out of the room." To everyone's astonishment, the Mulla repeated a long and involved story that the King had been reciting. "How did you do it, Nasrudin?" "Simple," said the Mulla; "I could tell by the expression on the face of the King that he was about to tell that old story again. That is why I went to sleep for its duration." (17)

The average person is unequipped to understand the spiritual principles lying behind the manifestation of 'supernatural' events and actions. The inter-relationship between different levels of reality is generally hidden:

There were miracles in continuous operation which humanity did not perceive through the senses, because they were undramatic. An example was a process whereby, against all probability, a man might gain or lose moral or material things in frequent succession. Sometimes these are called coincidences. All miracles were in fact coincidences – a series of things happening in a certain relationship to one another . . . All miracles have thus such a multifarious action on humanity that they cannot be performed except when needed, and generally develop as incidental happenings, and they cannot be diagnosed or defined because of the complexity of their nature. The nature of a miracle cannot be detached from its effect, because it would not be of any importance if a human being were not involved. (18)

Miraculous powers which interact with physical reality are derived from a higher plane in which they are coherent and meaningful. What appears to the uninitiated as supernatural happenings may be the result of actions taking place on a higher, invisible level of reality: "All paranormal capacities, not understood by observers, are normal. They are simply working in a sphere which is not understood by those observers. This is because you have to be in it to know it."

The manifestations of the laws of one cosmos in another cosmos constitutes what we call a *miracle*. There can be no other kind of miracle. A miracle is not a breaking of laws, nor is it a phenomenon outside laws. It is a phenomenon which takes place according to the laws of another cosmos. These laws are incomprehensible and unknown to us, and are therefore *miraculous*. (19)

## Functional and Instrumental Effects

Wonders and miracles have an active, developmental function that apply for a certain time and place, upon certain people. Different individuals will have different reactions to a supernatural event, ranging from excitement or confusion to calm acceptance and intuitive understanding:

What is important is the function of miracles. Miracles may be destined to supply a part of the food which is an extra food, and may act upon the mind and even the body in a certain way. When this happens, the experience of the miracle will perform its due and proper function on the mind. This made the miracle something which could not be explained satisfactorily, because of the many different trains of thought which it prompted, different in every mind, and the many chains of effect

it caused, different in everybody . . . Miracles have a function, and that function operates whether they are understood or not. They have a true (objective) function. Hence miracles will in some people produce confusion, in others scepticism, in others fear, in others excitement, and so on. It is the function of the miracle to provoke reactions and supply nutriment; nutriment in this case which varies with the personality acted upon. In all cases the miracle is an instrument of both influence and assessment of the people acted upon. (20)

The psychic powers which underlie the manifestation of supernatural phenomena are used with great care and only in certain circumstances by those who have attained Self-realization. Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj provides an informed perspective:

Q: We are told that various Yogic powers arise spontaneously in a man who has realized his own true being. What is your experience in these matters?

A: Man's fivefold body (physical, etc.) has potential powers beyond our wildest dreams. Not only is the entire universe reflected in man, but also the power to control the universe is waiting to be used by him. The wise man is not anxious to use such powers, except when the situation calls for them. He finds the abilities and skills of the human personality quite adequate for the business of daily living. Some of the powers can be developed by specialized training, but the man who flaunts such powers is still in bondage. The wise man counts nothing as his own. When at some time and place some miracle is attributed to some person, he will not establish any causal link between events and people, nor will he allow any conclusions to be drawn. All happened as it happened because it had to happen; everything happens as it does, because the universe is as it is. (21)

When spiritual powers are employed in a teaching situation they must be applied skilfully so as not to ensnare the student in secondary preoccupations and fixations:

Zen practice is not about cultivating magic or special powers. Zen means attaining everyday mind; it is not about cultivating special practices. Yet there are stories about Zen masters sometimes using this special energy to hit their students' minds and wake them up . . . Keen-eyed teachers seldom resort to this style of teaching unless they absolutely have to. And if they do use this kind of candy to open their student's mind, they quickly take the candy away once the teaching has had its effect. A true teacher never lets his students become attached to the candy. A true master seldom, if ever, resorts to displays of magic and special energy. Students become easily attached to these qualities. If you often deal with a realm of magic, you are only a magic man and not a true teacher. This is because true teaching is about showing people how to take away their karma and help other beings, and not confusing people with magic and miracles. (22)

A person's stage of spiritual development largely determines the instrumental effect and degree of 'nourishment' provided by a supernatural event or phenomenon:

Miracles make you feel conviction about a thing. Be sure that whatever they make you feel, this is not their actual effect, nor the end of their effect. This functional attitude towards miracles underlies, even for the outside observer, deeper possibilities of inexplicable happenings. If we start from the lowest level of miracles we can see that an action or happening which is familiar and explicable to us might be puzzling or conclusive "magical" evidence to a more ignorant person. Hence, a savage seeing fire made by chemical means might consider the happening miraculous. At his stage of development, this event might produce in him the degree of religious awe necessary to make him venerate the performer or obey his injunctions. In any case there would be a physical and mental effect on him. At the other end of the scale, happenings which cannot be explained by current physical science will influence even the most sophisticated modern . . . A miracle is therefore accepted calmly in the Sufi perspective as the workings of a mechanism which will influence a man or woman to the extent to which he or she is attuned with it . . . The evidential miracle as interpreted in conventional religion may be of multiple value, according to the Sufis. That is to say, it may convey one impression to a man at one stage of development, and a form of food to someone more advanced. (23)

Supernatural happenings play an important role in the spiritual development and evolution of both individuals and groups:

Miracles are now seen as a part of the developmental pattern of human life. This attitude removes them from the preoccupation of theologians, who seek to justify them on the lower level; and from the sceptic, who seeks to explain them in terms of scientific theory. They have a significant function on their own. In communities where the "age of miracles is past," the miracle phenomenon therefore continues to operate. One might say that, although the volcano is no longer a dragon belching fire, it is still in existence as a volcano . . . This approach to miracles means that, however attractive a recital of wonders performed by anyone may be, such a rehearsal will not have the same function as the actual event which is being reported. This is the explanation of the Sufi teaching, "Let the miracle act." The Sufis, however, do not lose sight of the attendant belief that, if the seeming miracle is of importance in the development of a group, it is more likely to occur in a progressing group, in order to make the progress of the group faster or more solid. "The miracle," says the Sufi Kamaluddin, "is the foretaste of the power of the group, which is developing organs capable of attaining miracles. Two things are developing simultaneously – the right attitude toward miracles and the harmonious yoking of the Seeker with the miracle factor." Again looking at the question in an evolutionary light, it might be said that the man who is lost in crude wonder at the marvels of a motorcar, a miracle of a thing, will be slow to step into his proper function, which is to use that car, or to be transported by it. (24)

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to describe supernatural experiences in terms of ordinary language and conventional terminology. Certain aspects of reality can only be understood by experiencing them. "We do not say anything about these things; when it is possible, we experience them. To ask about these things is simply to ask for something that has no answer in words. It is experienced. This is the only valid knowledge of certain things."

## By-product of Spiritual Development

Individuals who experience 'intuitive insights' or familiarity with certain extra-dimensional occurrences may be manifesting signs or indications of higher developmental potential: "They are encouragements that show that the recipient has a real chance of developing his 'gifts.' They are signs that the time has come for self-work."

Many extra-sensory abilities do not need to be developed in human beings because they exist already, although possibly in latent or embryonic form. Such abilities and experiences may be far more common than we suppose, forming a natural part of the human endowment:

I have had many experiences of sensing things at a distance, and of foreknowledge of things which actually did happen; so have people of my acquaintance. Unfortunately, spoiled as we are by education and upbringing, these experiences of the sixth sense commonly come in a very general way and we are usually unable to profit by them. It is often difficult, moreover, to distinguish between what is set going by the imagination and what is really sensed and felt. In any case, the real experiences have little or nothing to do with the mind: they come from the moving-instinctive and feeling centres. When Gurdjieff said, "We do not aim to construct something new, but to receive what is lost," it applies, from one aspect, to the vanishing sixth sense. Before I met him I regarded these experiences as accidents. A great many 'simple' people possess this extra sense – fishermen and farmers for instance. Officials, 'intellectuals,' and 'experts' are almost devoid of it, which is probably why they are almost always wrong. Human beings, besides being machines for transforming substances, are also instruments for receiving and transmitting vibrations. It is also possible for them to make use of the apparatus for their own benefit. (25)

There are also suggestions that the occurrence of supernatural powers and abilities may be an expression of an evolutionary impetus related to the future of the human race: "ESP phenomena, as we experience them now, are the first stirrings of a human organ in development; a burgeoning capacity of the human community, which is seen as an organism, a whole."

It is possible to develop paranormal abilities by certain practices and exercises, as well as through self-discipline and personal sacrifice. Traditionally, prayer and recitation of sacred words or phrases (*mantras* and *dhikrs*) have been employed as a gateway to spiritual power by

inducing a concentration of mind which enables supernatural phenomena of many types to be produced.

Certain supernatural powers involving the transcending of time and space boundaries can be developed through concentration, contemplation and meditation. "The dichotomy between 'us and them,' or 'you and me' is mainly caused by training and conditioning and is the bedrock of many human institutions. At the same time there is also a certain universal interest in the ideas of 'breaking down barriers,' and 'sharing experiences,' and so on."

Rumi and many others constantly speak of the value, the need even, for breaking down the barriers between people ("all humanity are essentially one") and even the barriers between "now" and "then," between life and death, between man and the beyond. The exercises which Sufis use for this purpose lead to the capacity to dissolve the distinctions between one and many, between past, present and future. Such experiences, involving the state of being concurrently at different places or in various times, even of being a whole and also parts of it, have been referred to by mystics and even magicians but seldom specifically. This condition of merging is brought about by "removing the veil" where even the distinction between the perceiver and the perceived disappears. That this can take place means that there is an objective reality which the Sufis call Truth where there are none of the distinctions into which our familiar senses split perception. By concentration, contemplation, meditation and so on, in planned and guided steps, the Sufi enters into that comprehensive Reality. The consequence of this is that he can enter the "future," because the future is in fact there all the time. He can even adjust happenings, because they are all part of a whole with which he is concerned, not parts, which could only be affected locally. (26)

Throughout history various systems of magic have worked with the emotional energy generated by certain magical procedures in order to produce supernatural phenomena. "Magic not only assumes that it is possible to cause certain effects by means of specific techniques; it also schools the individual in those techniques."

Magic is worked through the heightening of emotion. No magical phenomenon takes place in the cool atmosphere of the laboratory. When the emotion is heightened to a certain extent, a spark (as it were) jumps the gap, and what appears to be supernatural happenings are experienced . . . When the magician is trying, shall we say, to move a person or an object, or influence a mind in a certain direction, he has to go through a procedure (more or less complicated, more or less lengthy) to arouse and concentrate emotional force. Because certain emotions are more easily aroused than others, magic tends to center around personal power, love and hatred. It is these sensations, in the undeveloped individual, which provide the easiest fuel, emotion, "electricity" for the spark to jump the gap which will leap to join a more continuous current. When the present-day followers of the witchcraft tradition in Europe speak of their perambulation of a circle, seeking to raise a "cone of power," they are following this part of the magical tradition. (27)

Although methods of developing paranormal abilities such as telepathy are well known by schools of higher development, they should not be sought after outside the context of a comprehensive, holistic program of studies and exercises. They should only be acquired and learned (if indicated for an individual student) under the guidance and direction of a genuine teacher. "The teacher not only contributes knowledge, but also a specific energy without which the process cannot be powered."

The higher powers latent in human beings can be legitimately developed only in individuals who are sincere, responsible and purified of self-will and ambition. "The invariable rule in the exercise of this (higher) faculty undoubtedly is: never try to use it for personal gain or advantage. There must be a definite purpose in using it as indicated by the Design." From this follows an important injunction: *'Additional faculties and abilities produce added responsibilities.'* Thus the importance placed on right intention and the proper employment of paranormal powers for the benefit of humanity:

Sufis can read minds, although they are not omniscient. Such powers are used only for the part of worldly life in which the Sufi is involved. The means to develop this so-called 'power' is well understood and can be taught. If, however, it is learnt and exercised without the necessary other preparation, the ability turns against the practitioner, and the end result is that his or her life is made far more difficult than it ordinarily would be. All such efforts must be approached with the right attitude. (28)

Genuine supernatural abilities seem to be associated with individuals of very high moral and psychological character, reflecting qualities such as humility, sincerity and altruism:

Let us consider a sort of 'hypothetical hypothesis' along the following lines: "ESP can operate through those individuals characterized by their being in a 'selfless' condition." The selfless condition could be either of a permanent character, or perhaps of a temporary nature brought on by unusual or pressing circumstances. The word 'selfless' is used to indicate an *absence* of such traits as hypocrisy, dishonesty, untrustworthiness, or a pathological need to seek publicity, self-esteem, or to draw attention to oneself. More positively, it would likely be characterized by such qualities as love, generosity and humility. Such an individual would probably be a doer of good deeds in the community (but a good-doer, not a do-gooder). Such a person is *saintly*, not in the religious sense of canonization, but simply in the sense of being completely reliable, trustworthy and good. Such an individual would *not* cheat, would *not* be tempted to use ESP powers for personal gain or other improper purposes, and would exhibit an integrity of character. Most people would not fall into this selective category. Of course, there *are* such 'good' people, but they are probably few and far between, and perhaps not that much in the public eye. (29)

Supernatural powers are considered to be secondary, largely incidental by-products of spiritual development and the transcending of normal perceptual boundaries. They are best viewed



as concomitants, but not ways to, spiritual knowledge, and may have a function linked to the service of humanity. "People are interested in miracles, when they would do better to be interested in Truth. Miracles are by-products or else part of the special extra-dimensional activity in which certain people are involved. This involvement is because they acquire added functions with every addition of knowledge or capacity."

When properly understood from a spiritual perspective, supernatural powers are seen as secondary derivatives of inner development, not to be pursued or extolled for their own sake. "Psychic abilities in one degree or another are natural by-products of persistent zazen and an awakened mind; as such they are not regarded in Zen as exceptional or wonderful. Zen masters never make a vain display of psychic powers. They are in fact looked upon as *makyo* [delusion] – a subtle variety, but still *makyo* – which is to say, something other than enlightenment."

Zen never boasts about its achievements, nor does it extol supernatural powers to glorify its teachings. On the contrary, the tradition of Zen has shown unmistakably its scornful attitude toward miracle working. Zen does not court or care about miraculous powers of any sort. What it does care about is the understanding and realization of that *wonder of all wonders* – the indescribable *Dharmakaya* – which can be found in all places and at all times. This was clearly demonstrated in the words of Pang Wen when he said, "To fetch water and carry wood are both miraculous acts." (30)

Genuine spiritual teachings downplay the pursuit of extra-sensory powers and emphasize the real task of awakening:

The liberation proposed by Zen, realized by arriving at the source of mind, is not only liberation from unnecessary limitation and suffering, but liberation of a vast reserve of power inherent in reality . . . It is customary for Zen masters to refrain from discussing the higher powers latent in the human mind (although they are described at length in certain Buddhist texts), and to avoid making a display of such powers. This custom is observed to discourage people from seeking Zen for reasons of personal ambition. (31)

Authentic spiritual masters will seldom discuss or comment upon supernatural powers to the uninitiated. Adepts who perform wonders and miracles often have to conceal them from outsiders and the inquisitive to prevent people from craving the unusual or becoming emotionally attached to the teacher. "When miracles appear, no capital may be made of them. They happen in order to create a beneficial effect, not to act upon credulity."

Although the full and complete development of the human being may include the possession of extraordinary powers, including psychic and other supra-normal abilities, these are used exclusively in the service of humanity. "When completion takes place, the aspirant is known as an Enlightened One. He or she develops, almost as by-products, telepathic and intuitive powers

which enable him or her to discharge their mission: which is, firstly, to perfect themselves, and secondly, to benefit all mankind.”

Like all things of the world, spiritual powers are transient and dependent on the Reality from which they emerge. Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj: “There is no greater miracle than ‘I’ experiencing the world.”

There is no end to the miracles that can happen in the world, but they are still of the manifest. There have been many powerful minds and powerful beings, who, by their penance or strength of mind, have acquired powers and performed miracles. What has happened to them? The same thing that happens to everyone. If they have had the experience of their true Self, such people would not be trying to acquire powers. (32)

## References

- (1) Leonard Lewin *Science and the Paranormal* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: The Institute for Cultural Research, 1979), p. 12.
- (2) Idries Shah *The Commanding Self* (London: Octagon Press, 1994), p. 269.
- (3) C.S. Nott *Teachings of Gurdjieff: The Journal of a Pupil* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974), pp. 15-16.
- (4) Idries Shah *The Sufis* (London: Octagon Press, 1984), p. 337.
- (5) Idries Shah *The Sufis* (London: Octagon Press, 1984), p. 298.
- (6) Idries Shah *The Commanding Self* (London: Octagon Press, 1994), pp. 296-297.
- (7) Franz Heidelberger “Time Spent Among Sufis” in Idries Shah (ed.) *Sufi Thought and Action* (London: Octagon Press, 1990), p. 105.
- (8) Robert Ornstein *The Mind Field* (New York: Pocket Books, 1978), pp. 84-86.
- (9) Elizabeth Hall “A Conversation with Idries Shah” *Psychology Today* July, 1975, p. 57.
- (10) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 265-266.
- (11) Leonard Lewin *Science and the Paranormal* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: The Institute for Cultural Research, 1979), p. 14.
- (12) Idries Shah *The Sufis* (London: Octagon Press, 1984), pp. 331-332.
- (13) O.M. Burke *Among the Dervishes* (London: Octagon Press, 1984), pp. 145-146.
- (14) Leonard Lewin *Science and the Paranormal* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: The Institute for Cultural Research, 1979), p. 11.
- (15) Leonard Lewin *Science and the Paranormal* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: The Institute for Cultural Research, 1979), p. 14.
- (16) G.I Gurdjieff *Views From the Real World: Early Talks of Gurdjieff* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973), p. 210.
- (17) Idries Shah *The Sufis* (London: Octagon Press, 1984), pp. 84-85.
- (18) Idries Shah *The Sufis* (London: Octagon Press, 1984), p. 327.
- (19) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 207-208.

- (20) Idries Shah *The Sufis* (London: Octagon Press, 1984), pp. 326-327.
- (21) Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj *I Am That* (Durham, North Carolina: Acorn Press, 1982), pp. 269-270.
- (22) Seung Sahn *The Compass of Zen* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), pp. 296-297.
- (23) Idries Shah *The Sufis* (London: Octagon Press, 1984), pp. 329-330.
- (24) Idries Shah *The Sufis* (London: Octagon Press, 1984), pp. 332-333.
- (25) C.S. Nott *Teachings of Gurdjieff: The Journal of a Pupil* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974), pp. 73-74.
- (26) H.B.M. Dervish *Journeys with a Sufi Master* (London: Octagon Press, 1982), pp. 92-93.
- (27) Idries Shah *The Sufis* (London: Octagon Press, 1984), p. 337.
- (28) H.B.M. Dervish *Journeys with a Sufi Master* (London: Octagon Press, 1982), p. 24.
- (29) Leonard Lewin *Science and the Paranormal* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: The Institute for Cultural Research, 1979), p. 13.
- (30) Garma C.C. Chang *The Practice of Zen* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 58.
- (31) Thomas Cleary *Zen Essence* (Boston: Shambhala, 1989), p. 108.
- (32) Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj *Seeds of Consciousness* (New York: Grove Press, 1982), p. 174.