The Persistence of Magic
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(Remarks prepared for the workshop
“Manipulating Magic: Sages, Sorcerers, and Scholars,”
Yale University, April 16-17, 2005)

At a conference of yogis sponsored by the Ramakrishna Mission Society in 1963, Sunlun Shin Vinaya, a disciple of the famous Burmese master Sunlun Gu-Kyaung Sayadaw, gave a paper on vipassana meditation. In his description of the kasina practices he noted the difficulties faced by modern yogis seeking the supernormal benefits of kasina practice:

One of the benefits acquired through the ardent practice of the earth kasina is that a man, acquiring supernormal power (abhinna), is able to walk on water just as on earth. If he gains supernormal power through the practice of the water kasina, he can bring down rain or cause water to gush from his body. If he gains supernormal power through the practice of the fire kasina, he is able to produce smoke and flame. But somehow it is not easily possible to acquire these powers in our day. Sunlun Gu-Kyaung Sayadaw once said that the times were no more opportune. One might be able to gain attainment concentration (appanā-samādhi) through the practice of the kasina, but the supernormal benefits of the practice can hardly be acquired. Let us say that one practises the earth kasina exercise. He gains mastery of the signs, the nimitta. Let us say he goes to a pond and seating himself near it he arouses in himself the elements of the earth kasina. Then looking upon the water of the pond he endeavors to turn them into earth so that he may walk upon them. He will find at the most that the water thickens to a slushy earth which cannot uphold his feet when he attempts to walk upon it. Perhaps yogis in other countries have done better, but it may be taken as a general rule that the acquisition of the total benefits of the kasina exercise is difficult to achieve in our time.\(^1\)
A few years back, an American Shingon priest Eijun Bill Eidson, contacted me after reading a chapter I had written on Shingon *mandalas.* Eijun was pleased to discover that my research appeared to confirm a disparity between the iconography described in Shingon scriptures, and the iconography found in the extant *mandala* tradition. Eijun had ordained in both the Chuin-ryū of Kōyasan and the Shingon Ritsu lineage at Saidaiji, and he had done extensive *mikkyō* training in Japan and in America. He had also made use of biofeedback technologies in the evaluation of visualization and mantra practices—both EEG monitors and the Omura bi-digital o-ring test (which he believes is equally if not more effective than EEG monitors). Eijun was able to determine that the living tradition had become corrupted, and monitoring his neuro- and physiological responses to particular visualizations and utterances he was able to determine the correct colors of the deities and correct the pronunciation of the mantras and *dbārāṇīs.*

For those of you unfamiliar with the Omura bi-digital o-ring test, it was developed by Dr. Omura Yoshiaki, and works as follows:

The patient being tested makes a ring with forefinger and thumb, the therapist tries to pull the digits apart while the patient tries to resist. If the patient has an organic disease, he should place his other forefinger on the skin of a region affected by the disease. He will then have little power of resistance in the test. Dr. Omura will then

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1 Sunlun Shin Vinaya, “The Yogi and Vipassana,” paper delivered at the Ramakrisna Mission Society, September 18, 1963. It is not clear from the mimeograph copy of the paper if the meeting was held in Calcutta or Rangoon, the two main centers of the Ramakrishna Mission Society at that time. The paper is now available online at http://www.sunlun.com/samavipa.html.

2 Eidson has been ordained in two Shingon lineages: the Chuin ryū of Koyasan and the Shingon Ritsu sect at Saidaiji. In 1995, Eidson founded the Shingon Buddhist International Institute, together with Seicho Asahi and Shoken Harada. They have also established Tenchiji 天地寺 temple in Fresno, California, an affiliate of Koyasan, to promote Shingon training in North America.

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retest the patient while the patient holds a sample of medication. If the medication is correct, he will then have the power to resist. The signal affects the power of grip, stimulating the so-called nervous system to cause the reflex.4

The o-ring test is now used extensively in alternative medicine and is considered particularly effective in identifying the location of acupuncture points.

We could all, I am sure, give countless examples of such phenomena—phenomena in which there seems to be an odd marriage of modern “scientific thinking” with more traditional “systems of belief.” One particularly striking image is that of the Aum Shinrikyō followers wearing helmets wired to receive Asahara’s brainwaves.

We might approach such phenomena as resulting from what logicians call a “category mistake” or what sociologists call a confusion of “epistemic registers”—a confusion between the registers of fiction and fact, for example, or between the imaginative and the instrumental (Schneider 1993, 10). Such a “confusion,” if that is what it should be called, is characteristic of new age religious movements and it is often discussed under the Weberian rubric of “reenchantment”—a response to the instrumental rationality and spiritual sterility of the modern world.

So for my remarks today I thought I would reflect briefly on the category “magic,” its connection to religion, and the reasons that it continues to enchant both followers of the new age as well as theorists in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and religious studies. The first step would be to get a grip on what the term “magic” refers to.

What I quickly found is a consensus in certain quarters of the academy that “magic” refers to nothing at all; that it is inextricably enmeshed in polemical and ideological agendas that rob it of any analytical purchase.

In other words, all too often magic plays a role in contemporary discourse on religion akin to that played by “idolatry” in monotheistic theology. As Halbertal and

Margalit have shown, the early Hebrews were unclear, if not confused, as to the nature of their unique and singular god, a confusion evident in the evolving and often conflicting descriptions of Yaweh in the Bible. The notion of idolatry was critical, as it allowed them to construe monotheistic orthodoxy and orthopraxy in dialectical or negative terms—the true god is the antithesis of the false gods or “idols” of the pagans. In similar fashion, modern writers articulate the nature of “authentic religion” in contradistinction to its antithesis, i.e. “magic.” Whereas religion is universal, transcendent, ethical, and transformative, magic is localized, worldly, amoral if not immoral, and benighted. Once religion is properly distinguished from magic, religion is found to be compatible with rational, empirical, and scientific thought.

Recently scholars have taken to task the neat bifurcation of religion and magic. They argue that historically there has never been a clear distinction between magic, religion, demonology, rationality, and science. Newton’s theory of gravity, to pick one of countless examples, was criticized as being occult when it was first proposed (Styers 2004, 49), and the same is true today of string theory. Historians have shown that even with the rise of rational, empirical, and scientific epistemologies following the reformation, witches remained very much a problem. The issue was not whether they existed or not—clearly they did—but how to properly identify them using empirical criteria. (Note also that many of the arguments first advanced in favor of natural law—by Leibniz and Spinoza, for example—were predicated on theological assumptions: the belief that god, demons, or sundry spirits could intervene in natural processes compromised the perfection of creation; see Styers 2004.)

This is all very articulately presented in Randall Styers recent book Making Magic. Styers critiques the ideological trappings of the category “magic,” showing that “traditional efforts to distinguish magic from religion in the social sciences and religious studies have been thoroughly informed by post-Reformation views concerning the proper bounds of human agency and the proper position of religion within the social order” (Styers 2004,

While Styers works within the contemporary discipline of religious studies, his arguments are paralleled by a number of sociologists and anthropologists, who demonstrate the rhetorical role played by “magic” in normative discourse on modernity. In other words, “modernity” is characterized by rationality, instrumentality, free agency, and transparency, i.e., the notion that the mechanisms of political and social institutions are available for investigation. Magic, on the other hand, is characterized by secrecy, concealment, and the belief that the connection between means and ends—between action and result—are opaque and unavailable for scrutiny. In his introduction to the excellent collection of essays entitled *Magic and Modernity*, Peter Pels shows how “modernity constitutes magic as its counterpoint.” Magic and modernity are wedded to one another, such that modernity “produces its own forms of magic” (Pels 2003, 3). “If modern discourse reconstructs magic in terms that distinguish it from the modern, this at the same time creates the correspondences and nostalgias by which magic can come to haunt modernity” (Pels 2003, 4-5). According to Pels, at the end of the day “no present-day speculation about magic can escape the modern discursive boundary between the ideal, modern subject that makes true perceptions and practices a rational discipline and a magical subject that is set up in contrast as backward, immature, or dysfunctional” (Pels 2003, 31).

In so far as the category “magic” is allied with normative Protestant, theological, or modernist agendas, as Styers, Pels, and others have argued, then it might appear prudent to abandon the use of the term as an etic category or analytic tool—the distinction between “authentic religion” and “localized magic” would appear to be a modern Western conceit. The problem, however, is my hunch, likely shared by many of you, that long before the Reformation, members of the Buddhist clerical elite were doing much the same thing. In other words, they were defining Buddhist orthodoxy and orthopraxy in contradistinction to the worldly displays of supernatural power, witchcraft, and thaumaturgy of their local rivals. Not that the Buddhists themselves eschewed such phenomena, just that they were careful to distinguish between what is essential and necessary to the path, from what is accidental,
dispensable, and potentially deceptive. And often the distinction they make bears an uncanny resemblance to our distinction between religion and magic.

A few examples should suffice, although I am sure that the papers in this conference will provide us with many more. First there is the seminal distinction between vipaśyanā and śamatha, wherein everything essential is included in vipaśyanā, and the really strange stuff, including all sort of acknowledged holdovers from non-Buddhist śramaṇic or yogic traditions, are relegated to śamatha. Śamatha is thus associated with the higher samāpatti, āddhi, abbijñā, and so on, which, according to at least some interpretations, are fun to have but not requisite for enlightenment. Such scholastic schemes functioned, in other words, to appropriate and at the same time subordinate elements from rival traditions, claiming for such practices a certain utilitarian or instrumental function but no ultimate soteriological value.

Similarly, Yixing 行 (683-727) explicitly uses this strategy in his discussion of Indian boma rites that had made their way into Mahāyāna ritual. In the Goma chapter of his commentary on the Mahāvairocana sūtra, Yixing claims that the Buddha borrowed the fire ritual from the Vedas in order to convert adherents of the Vedas to Buddhism. But while the Buddhist Goma may resemble the Vedic one, Yixing insists that only the Buddhist version leads to real knowledge and salvation—only the Buddhists know the inner Goma (nei humo 内護摩), which transforms the practitioner’s mind. The Vedas teach the outer Goma alone (wai humo 外護摩), a mere manifest physical performance of the rite which has no soteriological value (T.1796: 39.662b7-13). Again, this bears a structural similarity to our contemporary distinction between religion and magic.

Finally I will mention the Shingon distinction between zōmitsu and junmitsu—mixed versus pure esoteric ritual—a distinction predicated on a distinction between worldly versus unworldly ends. Here too Shingon exegetes claim that pure Shingon ritual, i.e., junmitsu, is unique in serving both transcendent and mundane ends, whereas the siddhi acquired through zōmitsu are purely worldly and instrumental.

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All this is reminiscent of what Styers and company believe to be a distinctively European and Protestant polemical distinction between true religion and benighted magic. Styers is wrong, I believe, in discounting the universal scope of the category “magic.” I believe that an argument for a cross-cultural and comparative analytic use of the category magic can be made in terms of common sociological and institutional configurations. Both Christian and Buddhist clerical elites had an interest in appropriating and subordinating the practices of their local rivals. Unlike the locals, the elites actively participated in a social network of considerable geographic spread, united by a common cultural, linguistic, and literary heritage. Through travel and literary exchange they were able to keep abreast of developments at a distance, and had access to information simply unavailable to local plebs. As a result, they were liable to be less credulous concerning local tales of the occult. Alan Schneider puts it this way:

The products of inquiry in general—reports about the world—are always too many and too mutually contradictory to allow a stable and coherent picture of that world to develop. Without the organizational capacity to manage the glut and distinguish warranted from unwarranted reports, the systematic exploitation of referential ecologies so as to explain their constitutive phenomena would be severely handicapped. Yet communities vary in the extent to which they are organized for this purpose and thus in their ability to discriminate on the basis of relative warrant. Think of peasant communities, in which reports of prodigies and monstrosities are common, and presumably serve as a form of cultural capital. Of course in peasant societies (as today) prodigies rarely occur in one’s own community; rather, they usually are found beyond a radius marking the limits of customary travel. Nothing happens here, but much to marvel at goes on in the next-village-but-one. This phenomenon, locally plausible but impossible as a generality, is easily understood in terms of the geographical limits of social control over information. Assuming that peasants are individually no more credulous than we are and have just as much to gain from discrediting hyperbole, they are nevertheless often prevented from doing so by the narrow spatial scope of their experience. Consequently, unusual events can
easily suffer inflation as they travel (or be manufactured out of whole cloth), since the
capacity of eyewitnesses to monitor retellings decreases with distance. The profusion
of prodigies in peasant societies is thus partly a function of structural limits to their
systems of communication: it is not so much that inflationary pressures are built
in—this is true universally—as that brakes upon them are lacking. (Schneider 1993,
8-9).7
Unfortunately I don’t have time to develop this approach here, but I think it may provide a
more fruitful basis for our understanding of the rhetorics of “magic” in both a Buddhist and
a comparative context.

In closing I’d like to quote Bruno Latour, as cited in the epigraph to Styers book:
“Do not trust those who analyze magic. They are usually magicians in search of revenge.” I
take this to heart, for I take seriously the notion that it is impossible to parse rationality and
magic. Consider the following:

In an essay entitled “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic”8
Michael Taussig takes up the peculiar situation of the African shaman who has been
initiated into a secret, namely, the deceptions of his craft. He has learned, through arduous
apprenticeship, the conjuring tricks and sleight of hand of the shaman’s trade—how to
extract the evil substance from the patient’s body and display the bloody evidence for all to
see. Yet knowledge of such tricks only seems to magnify his fear of the powers of other
shamans. Even more perplexing, the shaman’s response to his anxiety is to seek to unmask,
in public, his competitors as frauds. Skepticism and credulity, revelation and concealment,
would appear to go hand in hand.

The African shaman finds a counterpart in the Chinese Chan master, who may have
experienced similar anxieties with regard to his own authority and legitimacy. Certainly, an
inordinate amount of time was spent in taking their rivals to task, denouncing them as
frauds and charlatans. Indeed, the Chan institution had its roots in Shenhui’s attack on the

8 In Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment, edited by Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels,
Deferral also lies here in the power of the 'stranger effect,' meaning that truth lies
a never attainable beyond and that cheating is merely the continuous and expected
prelude to the mere possibility of authenticity, for behind this cheat stands the
authenticity lies just beyond the horizon. As Taussig says in reference to his shamans,
knowledge that we are impostures, are coupled with the deepest faith that truth and
And how do we do this in good conscience. It is because our anxieties, our
Again, one would think that the game would result in publicly legitimizing the entire
hand and intellectual deceptions unavoidable in the scholarly trade. Anxieties are rife—we
we are painfully aware of how little we know, we fear we are impostures, always on the verge of
being unmasked, exposed as frauds. And how do we respond? By exposing others as frauds.

Does this sound familiar? Scholars too attain their status through long periods of
apprenticeship, during which they learn the tricks of the trade: the rhetorical sleights
of charisma or "magic" depended on a continual repudiation of others. Exposure is the favored
means of concealment.

credentials and spiritual capacity of his rivals, the disciples of Shennu. In the Song it
became de rigueur for any Chan master worth his salt to denounce his rivals as frauds and
impostures. One might be tempted to dismiss such polemics as mere posturing, but in the
Ming such denunciations took the form of lawsuits in which the eminent masters of the day
petitioned the court to punish their rivals for falsifying lineage documents.

This is curious, like the shamans, one would expect that it was in everyone's interest
to keep the tricks of the trade—the transmission rituals and documents—safely out of the
public eye; to keep their anxieties hidden. Yet they did precisely the opposite—their own

Bibliography


