

Fun & Games

PSYCHIC POWERS IN THE WILDERNESS

When I first met my teacher, Ajaan Fuang, I had never heard of the Thai Forest Tradition, even though I had been living and working in Thailand for almost two years. This was in the early 70s, before knowledge of the tradition had penetrated the consciousness of the university circles in which I worked.

As a result, I had no idea what to expect. As the days passed during that first three-week period, I realized that I was in an entirely new reality. On the one hand, I was drawn to Ajaan Fuang's extraordinary wisdom and kindness, and especially his clear-sighted perspective on Thai society. It was as if I were meeting him on a direct human level, outside of the usual expectations of my encounters with Thai people, which were filtered through the the gap between Thai and Western values. I came to trust him more and more, until I was convinced that he was the teacher I had long been looking for.

On the other hand, I came to sense that he and some of his students, lay and ordained, had psychic powers. For one, he could obviously read my mind and anticipate future events, and although he never talked about his powers, his students would—and it seemed that some of them, at least, had powers of their own.

This was not a little disorienting. I had read the standard list of psychic powers in the Pali Canon, but for me it was just a string of words: things like astral travel, psychokinesis, clairaudience, clairvoyance, the ability to read minds, recollection of past lives—one's own and others'—the ability to contact beings on other levels of the cosmos, and knowledge of where others have been reborn and why. The list had no relevance to my own concerns, so I hadn't given it much thought.

Now I was living among people for whom the powers in the list, plus many others, were taken for granted as simple facts of life. With the passage of time, as I returned to study with Ajaan Fuang on a more permanent basis, I had a number of experiences with the powers exercised by people in the Forest Tradition, which finally convinced me that I had to accept that I was now living in a reality where these powers were real.

This, as I said, was disorienting at first. I felt somewhat exposed, living with people who had powers that I didn't, and I was fairly envious of the powers they had. The immediate effect, sensing that people could read my mind and keep track of my behavior at a distance, was that I became very careful about my thoughts and actions, which was all to the good.

And Ajaan Fuang made it clear that these powers were nothing to aspire to. If you had them, you had to use them wisely, because if you mishandled them, they could do you more harm than good. It's common knowledge that, if you're not fully awakened, supernormal powers have a way of engendering supernormal defilements. If you start trusting the knowledge you gain from

these powers, there's always the chance that your greed, aversion, or delusion could scramble the message, and you start believing things that simply aren't true. If you share your mistaken knowledge with others, you're misleading them as well. If you advertise your powers but then lose them—which can happen—you lose the trust of those who believed your original claims. The damage you do to their trust could also spread to make them look down on the Dhamma as a whole.

There's a widespread belief in some parts of Thailand—but not shared by the Forest Tradition—that if you want psychic powers, you should practice *kasina* meditation: a concentration practice where you stare at a candle flame or at a colored disc. But the people I met who had tried that method had either gone blind or had become seriously unhinged. It was probably for reasons like these that the Forest ajaans actively discourage their students from that method of practice.

Their general attitude is that if you have the past karma to develop any of the psychic powers, they'll come on their own as you practice concentration. If they come, learn how to use them wisely and with caution. If they don't come, no problem, as they're not necessary for awakening. At the same time, the fact that other people have such powers is no proof that they're awakened. In fact, unawakened people who have them are always in danger of letting their defilements slip in, so that their powers turn on them and ruin their meditation. I saw many cases of this. So, as Ajaan Fuang told me, there's no need to get excited about other people's wealth. Focus on developing wealth of your own.

As I stayed with him, I gained an increasing sense of the integrity with which he used his own powers. He never claimed to have special knowledge, so there was never any hint that he would use his powers to influence others for his own purposes. If he knew of what was going on in your meditation, he would bring up the topic as if it were a random issue—although as he knew that I knew he was reading my mind, there were occasional times when he would be more direct. One time, for instance, I had gotten into a strong, trance-like state while meditating in my dwelling up the hill from his. I thought that I must be on to something good. But when I came down that evening to help clean his hut, he immediately said to me, "Don't ever meditate that way again, okay?" Just enough to keep me on my toes.

Often, when a group of us would be meditating with him, if something came up in your meditation, he would immediately address the issue: "If this occurs in

your meditation, do this.” This happened so frequently and quickly that we took it for granted. But if you ever mentioned his special abilities to his face, he would glare at you, and that was the end of that conversation.

I learned from one of his students that when Ajaan Fuang had gone to study with Ajaan Mun in his early days as a monk, he had devoted some of his meditations to checking out the devas inhabiting the nearby hills, to see who might be there. He happened to mention what he saw to one of his fellow monks, and that night he had gotten a stern reprimand from Ajaan Mun: What you see in your meditation is your own business, and no one else’s. If you have any strange knowledge, you can talk it over with your teacher so that he can solve any problems you have in getting past it, but don’t go advertising it to others. What is the desire to tell others but a defilement? If you’re not careful, you may become proud over what’s actually a delusion.

Ajaan Fuang himself told me that one of the important lessons he learned from Ajaan Mun was how to interpret visions and other intuitive lessons that may come in the course of meditation. Say you have a vision of the Buddha coming to teach you Dhamma. The issue is not whether it’s really the Buddha or just your own imagination. The issue is whether the Dhamma is genuine or not. To decide, you first compare it with what you know of the basic principles of the Dhamma. If it doesn’t fit in with those principles, let it go—no matter how real or impressive the message or the Buddha may have seemed. If it *does* fit in with what you know of the Dhamma, put it to the test by practicing it. Only if it helps to improve your concentration or discernment in practice should you accept it as a worthwhile lesson. Even then, you have to realize that some lessons are right for some situations, and not for others. If it’s not the sort of teaching that can be put into practice, treat it as irrelevant to what you’re doing and put it aside. This was the principle that enabled Ajaan Mun and the other Forest ajaans to practice alone in the wilderness without going crazy.

So what are these powers good for? Ajaan Fuang *would* sometimes talk about the psychic powers exercised by his own primary teacher, Ajaan Lee, and the lessons that could be drawn from how he exercised them. As Ajaan Lee once said, knowledge of past lives can be dangerous if you get proud when seeing yourself in a position of power and influence, or depressed by seeing yourself born in the lower realms. The best use of this knowledge is to induce a sense of

the meaninglessness of continued rebirth. This helps to put the issues of this birth into perspective, and fosters a desire to go beyond rebirth entirely.

At the same time, people exercising these powers have proof—for themselves, at least—that the mind has a power superior to, and independent of, material realities. As the Buddha said in the first verses of the *Dhammapada*, the mind comes prior to all experience. It's not just a side effect of physical processes. Even on an ordinary, everyday level, the mind plays a major role in shaping its experience. Psychic powers simply take this principle to a higher level and make it graphically clear.

One thing I came to notice in Ajaan Fuang's stories of Ajaan Lee's powers was that although he held Ajaan Lee in the highest possible esteem, there was always an element of humor in the telling. The humor concerned either Ajaan Lee's witty uses of his powers, or the fact that his powers could occasionally backfire, even when used with the sincerest intentions to be helpful to others. This was in keeping with the humorous way in which stories of psychic powers and encounters with devas are treated in the Canon, and with Ajaan Fuang's own observation one evening: "The whole aim of our practice is purity of heart. Everything else is just fun and games."

But the fun and games can serve a serious purpose. One of my favorite stories about Ajaan Lee concerns a time when he was invited to teach meditation at a monastery in Bangkok. The abbot of the monastery had been a sworn opponent of the Forest Tradition for many years, creating many problems for Forest ajaans who had tried to practice in the part of Thailand over which he had ecclesiastical jurisdiction. But when he fell ill, Ajaan Lee went to visit him, and sat meditating in a corner of his room. Apparently the abbot felt a power emanating from Ajaan Lee and asked him, "What are you doing?" "Offering a gift of stillness," was Ajaan Lee's reply. "Well, whatever you're doing, keep it up. It feels good."

Over time, as the abbot began to recover, Ajaan Lee taught him to meditate, and the abbot ended up changing his opinion of the Forest Tradition. That was why he invited Ajaan Lee to teach the monks and lay supporters of the monastery as well.

Now, this was at a time when the ecclesiastical authorities in Bangkok had been teaching for many decades that the time for nibbana was over. The door was closed even on the practice of jhana. Monks should devote themselves to teaching in public schools and promoting social welfare projects instead.

Many of the monks in the monastery, following this line of thinking, criticized Ajaan Lee for deluding people into assuming that they could practice jhana. So what did Ajaan Lee do to change their opinion?

It so happened that there was an old woman whose job was to clean the bathrooms in the monastery. During her free time, she would go to meditate with Ajaan Lee, and as a result she developed the ability to read minds. The first minds she read were those of the monks in the monastery. Shocked at what she saw—monks thinking about things that monks shouldn't be thinking about—she went to complain to the abbot that this monk was thinking these thoughts, and that monk was thinking those. The abbot, knowing the monks in question, felt that she was probably right. So he called the monks together and warned them, "You all should be more careful. These people can read your innards."

That was the end of the criticisms, and the beginning of a more general trend by which the Forest ajaans and their teachings became increasingly accepted in mainstream Thai society. The path to jhana and nibbana was reopened to the public at large.

So if you have psychic powers, that's how you practice them: not publicly, and not for sake of fame or power. You practice them indirectly, with a sense of humor, keeping in mind the virtues of the Buddha: wisdom, compassion, and purity—wisdom in not letting the powers aggravate your defilements, compassion in using them for your own genuine good and that of others, and purity in keeping them under wraps and not using them for your own selfish ends. That's how you keep yourself, and the people around you, safe.

If you don't gain psychic powers in the practice, don't dismiss them, but at the same time, don't be overly impressed by those who do have them. Instead, focus on fostering within yourself the two qualities that the Buddha looked for in a student: your honesty and your powers of observation. These may seem very ordinary, but they can be developed to the point where they yield extraordinary results.

—*Thanissaro Bhikkhu*