

Speaking of Angels

Preface

There's a story only I can tell. If it were not so, I'd leave it to others to say. Trying to use other people's language doesn't quite work for me either. I find myself stuttering, and getting lost too easily.

By far most of what people write never makes it into print, or it is not seen by others - indeed, it is not *intended* for that - but is set down just for the sake of clarity for the one writing it.

Sometimes there is a part of ourselves that understands perfectly, while another part is in the dark. The writer stands between the two, making apparent what had been obscure, making tangible what had seemed remote, making practical what had been inaccessible before.

When I read others' accounts the spiritual life, I enter their world view, and I'm constantly aware of the need to translate what they say so that it makes sense to me. Another part of me flows on, understanding the inner world in my own way.

So much is not born because it receives no encouragement from others in this world. A very few truths make their way to the surface on account of some encouragement felt from within. There's freedom in this, since the work then is only partly my own, shaped as it is by these finer forces I've come to know and write about for my own understanding.

On World View

For me, telling these stories is an act of faith, more than for curiosity. Since a world view *is comprehensive*, it covers all we think and feel, and do, and aim to do. Starting anywhere, as with a circle, will soon bring the full sense of the view that is intended.

Having an experience of a different order from the common life, whoever we are, changes *everything* for a person. It can be denied - 'I must have been dreaming', or it can turn a person's world upside down. It can also fit, somehow, and then our world is made larger, more beautiful, and interesting, with more possibilities.

The knowledge of angels or shining ones is usually kept secret, because of how personal these experiences are for people. We naturally draw back from any disbelief, or doubt, or denigration from others. We organize our inner life around these truths as we've experienced them, and so, until our knowledge is firm, we protect the light that guides our lives.

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Angels I have known

I can tell of healing angels, guardian angels, and those who support my life in this world, 'money angels' I have called them.

As others have pointed out in their traditions, as with God, the angels, devas, and all those we can say are of a higher order of being are not bound by time and space, as most humans believe experience themselves to be. They can appear as a circumstance, illuminated with the same feeling of warmth and intelligence as when they appear to us clothed with divine form.

One thing their appearance very often has in common across traditions and folk's telling of angels is that they come when they are most needed.

They can permeate our dreams, or rise up as a feeling when we're just walking down the street one day; they can come as a voice, or as a righteous impulse, or a sense of direction when we're lost.

Their nature is love and wisdom and power, beyond our usual thoughts. They communicate spiritual truth, and help us wherever we are in our lives. As an order of spiritual being, they have this function everywhere they are found. This is most personal. If we're receptive, we can learn a lot from them.

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When the Buddha taught, it's often recounted that the light of devas filled the grove. Beings from other levels came to hear him teach the path to liberation and enlightenment. In subtle ways, they celebrated his teaching, with songs of praise and offerings of celestial flowers.

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There is a class of beings who respond to our spiritual efforts. At times we can feel how they rejoice even when we just have the thought to practice.

I remember once when I was on retreat in 2012 and I thought of studying an in depth introduction to the Pali Sutras, and sensing what felt like happiness and encouragement from the local spirits. I don't know the extent of their powers, only that they can facilitate learning in myriad ways.

I've heard one definition of blessing as 'removing obstacles'. There was a time in my early 30's when I felt like the road was cleared of obstructions to learning, and that whatever I turned to study came to me with very little effort on my part. We can say part of it was karmic affinity, but, truth be told, it felt like there was more to it than that. I felt like a part of it was help from the spirit world, surely.

Back before the days of the internet, I found out about the existence of *transcripts* by one of my beloved teachers, Lama Yeshe, and I sent letters out to centers all over the world, asking if they'd be willing to send me copies of whatever they had. Lo and behold, within a couple of months, from

every continent, photocopies of the books of these teachings appeared on my doorstep.

Now, you can say there was nothing exceptional happening, but the *inner feeling* was one of being helped.

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An experience at work

I worked for an unusual bookstore for about six years, and there was a period of time when I would do my prayers and meditations at the beginning of every work day there. This sometimes took up to three hours, and it often happened that I had not a single sale during that whole time, but that *within a minute* of completing my practice, someone would approach the counter with books they wanted to buy. This happened so regularly that I almost came to expect it - and this was during a recession, mind you. I knew it was unusual, and that I was being helped by unseen, benevolent forces, and yet, such is the life of a person who is on their contacts, as they say, in touch with the spiritual world, and divine helpers, the shining ones.

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When I was living in the South West, I heard a story from the father of my host. He was disabled, without the ability to walk without crutches, and he told me about the day his second son was born. He said he pulled into the hospital parking lot, and felt unable to move and be with his wife. He told me he felt so angry and and that he prayed powerfully, in a way that shook heaven and earth, and he felt a heat moving from the soles of his feet upwards, unlike anything he had ever felt before. Once this power entered his body, he was able to walk without difficulty to the maternity ward. He also said nothing like that happened again to him.

We keep stories like these in some hidden place, since they don't fit in with our culture's consensus reality. I imagine in another time and place and culture we'd openly discuss these things, and encourage our receptivity to the divine.

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How it feels at times

I recall staying at Tushita Retreat Center, in Dharmasala, India, in the late 1990's. By that time, I'd already had my fill of the theory of meditation, and the wisdom teachings, and I wanted to practice. Soon after arriving, I remember I made what felt like a half hearted prayer that, if there was anything I could learn while there about what is meant by Wisdom in that tradition, may it be so. Right away, I felt like a gentle breeze had blown open a door - that was the image that came to mind - and, sure enough, I was able to take another step in my study while I was there.

I'm reminded of a verse by Rumi where he says,

*Bring even your dry, hypocritical prayers
God, in his Mercy, accepts even bad coin....*

Why sometimes great effort is needed, and why at other times the slightest movement of thought can change the world is a mystery to me. All I know for sure is that there is this interchange between the worlds that people speak of, and that we can know and facilitate in our own lives. If it weren't for that, I'd not be writing these words.

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Our Guardian and Protector

The divine has these two sides to it. One is what we feel and see, and trust in; the life we share with others, and our family. The other side of this divine realm is far more personal than that. It is uniquely individual, and can only be talked about in terms of its being a feeling of Companionship, beyond this one life even; of a Guardian and Protector; like an older, wiser, loving guide. This connection is one we cherish, and can learn from our whole lives.

It comes to us as healing most often, because when we suffer and are stripped down to what is essential, this is what we spontaneously turn to. This is the one that reaches out to us, and that carries us through the most difficult times; that reminds us of our heritage, and of all the other times that a way was made out of no way;

If we have any capacity to care for others, it's a reflection of the grace and encouragement, the warmth and love we've received from our guardian and protector.

Some may say we're anthropomorphizing - giving a human form to experience, but it does feel true to say it this way.

There is an intimacy, and a trust that isn't being referenced if we're just calling it our true nature, though it is that too. These incredible gifts come to us, inspiring many to try to find language that begins to express the extraordinary.

What to make of these few hints? Well of course that our world is richer, more complex and benevolent than we commonly believe. There are intimations of a greater world, invisible to a gross worldly view - one that is truer, more hopeful than reductive materialism.

The way is open. Our world is filled with loving and intelligent, spiritual force, and if we trim our sails we can receive these blessings. The current of divine help can carry us to the shore of freedom, fulfillment, and peace.

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Deities and Their Retinues

What I have been calling 'The Shining Ones' are naturally existent phenomena. They are talked about in every time and culture. That being the case, there are some ways of thinking about them, and their Activities.

If we read about them, and approach them from the outside, they appear to us in one way, and if we relate to these truths from within, then it is a completely different experience.

We use art and poetry to communicate about things that don't come across when we only use ordinary language. An example of this can be found in the descriptions of Deities in Tibetan Buddhism - which are not creator gods, as in monotheism, but are *enlightened beings*, and aspects of our own nature. I remember something I wrote a number of years back called *The Power of Symbols*. In it, I said that what are called Archetypes are aspects of the universal soul we all share. They also exist outside of ourselves, or we could say in the realm where the inside and outside are one.

It's axiomatic across spiritual traditions that we don't fully know ourselves. Vajrayana practice can be a great help in that respect. Meditating on these divine forms brings out their qualities, helps us to awaken to who we are, and gives us the means of benefitting others.

It is often asked if that's all there is to these 'Yi-dams' - the names and forms used in meditation, and the question is an interesting one if we look into it carefully. It assumes we are here, our ordinary selves, in an ordinary world, with perhaps, we hope, some light in the sky we can use to help us

see and make our way through life. The Divine, as I understand it, has no such limits. We can't say it is there, but not here, or that it works in one way, but not in others.

How can we begin to speak of these things? And, what does this have to do with liberation and enlightenment?

If we take the Buddhist path as exclusive, in the sense of it being the one and only way to Universal Truth, and to living fulfilled lives here, helping each other as much as we can, then it would seem that Enlightened Beings as represented can be a help, but only somewhat. Another view is that the Buddha discovered and taught a universal path, with many ways to express liberating teachings, including though visionary forms that then get passed down as poetry and religious art.

Such is the case, I believe, when we come to the Tibetan Buddhist Deities. They are given names and forms, and they act to free us from confusion, and to benefit us in countless ways. How to speak of them more fully? Art does this with a *mandala*, with the main divine form in the center, surrounded by his or her *retinue*.

One way I heard to describe the retinue is that when a King travels, he has his Queen and Ministers, his doctors and Generals and soldiers with him at all times. Wherever we have one, we have the others.

Esotericists would say that the retinue of Divinities are elements that are 'enfolded' in their nature. Practicing any mantra and visualization will make all this clear as can be. These are qualities that are here for us to be revealed from within, and then they are fully self evident.

In the Vajrayana practices from Tibetan Buddhism, they take refuge in the Three Jewels, and they also have what they call Tantric Refuge, which is refuge in the Lama, the Yidam, and the Dharma Protectors (Devas). Here are lines used for this combined practice:

*I take refuge in all the Glorious, Holy Lamas;
 I take refuge in all the Yidams, the Deities gathered in the mandalas;
 I take refuge in all the Buddhas, those who have conquered and gone beyond;
 I take refuge in all the Supreme Dharma;
 I take refuge in all the Noble Sangha;
 I take refuge in all the Dakas, Dakinis, Protectors and Defenders of Dharma,
 who possess the Eye of Transcending Awareness*

In this practice, it's taught that the Lama is the Blessing Root, the Yidam is the Accomplishment Root, and the Dakini is *the Activity Root*. This is a way of talking about Divine Activity.

Dakinis are called 'Sky Goers', and the reference is clearly to their abiding in the space of the mind.

Without understanding the poetics of these practices, we'll take them all too literally, and they will become fixed in our perceptions and traditions, instead of liberating us, and moving throughout our lives, illuminating and healing, providing for our needs, and and those of our loved ones.

A couple of examples: in Medicine Buddha practice, both in its Sutra and Tantric forms, the main Medicine Buddha is accompanied by healers and what they call oath bound protectors, who are described as having the ability to help us with material resources;

The well known practice of the loving Bodhisattva Divinity Tara often makes use of prayer to Twenty One Taras, which are different expressions manifestations of Tara, that meet different needs. Experiencing these individually increases the sense of richness, and our understanding of the basic practice.

Tara is also known as 'the Queen of the Dakinis', since she is the Activity of all the Buddhas.

One verse of praise says:

*Homage to Tara, she swift and fearless,
whose eyes flash like lightening,
born from a lotus in an ocean of tears of Avalokiteshvara,
Lord of the Three Worlds...*

And one teaching has it that the Bodhisattva of Compassion, on seeing how much more needed to be done in samsara, felt great sorrow, and from his tears Green Tara and White Tara manifested, and told him, *We will help you!*

With love and compassion, and an understanding of Buddhist Wisdom, all this makes much more sense than reading about it as if it were something separate from the Mahayana in general.

In practice from the heart, all that is said in the mytho-poetics, about the mandala, the Buddha and retinue unfolds beautifully, and quite naturally.

Engaging in these practices from within, faithfully, and over time reveals everything we need to know about them, and accomplishes the purpose of both ourselves and others.

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Devas and the Arts

There are countless ways the divine can communicate with us, and remind us of our true nature, our heritage, that to be born here is to be in a sacred place at all times. We forget, remember briefly, and then forget again, and we struggle and suffer so, having lost our true identity, having misconceived who we are and who others are, and the nature of this our holy earth.

There is *no limit* to the arts, and often they are the nearest we come to remembering, to embodying this profound knowledge of the sacred. What *is* voice and instrument, color and movement, the inspired word, the unity and enrichment we experience through the arts? We know it as ancient and eternal, and we know ourselves and all others as worthy of reverence and celebration.

When I think of experiences of listening to Bach, or Mozart, for example, and being lifted out of the sense of this struggling, suffering world, it seems the angel of grace herself is with me then. I know it is this way for others also today, and every day, and I'm left wanting to clarify and enjoy just what has moved through this day and this form. It is light and subtle nourishment I wish for everyone, for all beings, at all times, this wonder and ease.

The arts will go on forever because these are eternal truths we are graced to be here with, and to enjoy. There is no end to the inspiration today, and it is something altogether outside of time, reaching into our experiences of name and form, and time. My joy will also go on forever because of this.

And oh how we need the grace of inspiration in our lives! We need this as we do air and food and water, and we need to share the gifts we have received every day, in as many ways as we can. This is all entirely natural, without effort.

Praise to the holy form, the sound of the divine, the loving heart of the world!

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Can we become angels?

In the Taiwanese Buddhist and Taoist Tradition, a person can ascend to the level of a God, through having lived an exemplary life. If we ask how can we become an angel, I have to admit my vision dims at this point. The most I can say is that it seems we'd be speaking not of lifetimes, or aeons of spiritual development to reach that level, but of evolutionary time.

What we can do is aim to go in that direction, of being more purely loving, more dedicated to the benefit of others, more gentle, and patient, and more generous. We can celebrate all the things the angels do, the right efforts people make, every small success, and every positive motivation, and every great action that benefits living beings. If we do these things, we feel we are in the company of the angels, holy beings, sharing in their work, being cared for and supported by them.

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Healing with angels

It's natural to ask whether we can use prayer and meditation to heal ourselves and to help others heal with the help and support of this Divine Activity. It seems to me there are Beings of Light that exist for exactly this purpose, that we can align ourselves with them, and their energy can flow through us. This quickly reaches the limits of language, but at least this much should be said. For those who disbelieve, it's almost but not completely impossible to offer convincing evidence. For anyone with receptivity, and a willingness to consider other possibilities far from the usual, some perception of this pure spiritual life can happen.

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The 'How-to', in part

For accessing angels and witnessing their extraordinary Activity, the first thing I think we would need is a world view that allow for such things. Even without that, at times, the working of the Divine makes itself known, but, we may also block out any awareness of such subtle and profound events.

We can be open to the thought that such beings exist, and that they communicate in many ways. This is a start, and it makes the rest, of contact, and understanding, and being in harmony with them easier, beyond anything that can be expressed in language.

In addition to this *receptivity*, we can *take care of our physical environment, and our ethics*. When we keep these clean, the spirits are happy, and we can feel their presence and support.

Angels can come through in times of despair and disarray, but then it's a more difficult revelation. We are loved, and for the divine, for holy ones, there is no barrier to that. When we *pray* for help in times of need, we can feel the presence of what can be called the angels of comfort. When we pray for others, if our inner vision is open, we can see and feel their blessings being shared.

Celebrating all the wonderful things in this life, in particular those of a spiritual nature, puts us in accord with the divine. When we praise and rejoice in activities of good people, and of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, we join the angelic host.

We can also practice *gratitude*, and *humility*, a part of which bis *deep listening* and attentiveness throughout our lives. Then we'll see more and more of what is happening in the spirit realm, woven throughout our own lives.

It may seem strange to add, but because it's so obvious we may miss it, and that is to say that if we want help in some area of our lives, *we should ask*. There is some spiritual help that comes to us in part because of our willingness. It's as if it's waiting eagerly for our assent, for our own openness, to change or to learn.

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More can and should be said on this subject, but for now, perhaps this is enough.

May all beings benefit.

May we all receive all the help we need in our lives

May the sick and injured be completely healed,

May the lonely find good friends all their lives,

*May those who need work and material resources receive all they need
in abundance,*

*and may this whole world be a manifest place of love and harmony,
peace and celebration!*