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personal explorations of consciousness, reality and magick

JUNE 9, 2014 BY DUNCAN

My Jungian Shadow Exposed by a Shamanistic Theravadan Monk

I recently attended a workshop in a local church entitled 'You and Your Shadow', presented by [Amaranatho](/web/20150318175420/http://www.playfulmonk.net/) (/web/20150318175420/http://www.playfulmonk.net/), a Theravadan monk. The promise of some Jungian experiential work, combined with a dose of dharma in a friendly Anglican setting was too much to resist.

Amaranatho trained in the Thai forest tradition, and spent ten years at [Amaravarti Monastery](/web/20150318175420/http://www.amaravati.org/) (/web/20150318175420/http://www.amaravati.org/) near Hemel Hempstead. This is an organisation that has aimed to import traditions directly from Thai Buddhist culture into the UK. Its monks and nuns wear traditional robes, do not carry money, practise celibacy, and subsist entirely on donations.

He no longer resides at Amaravarti, but Amaranatho has continued to practise in this tradition by living as an alms mendicant. He does not charge a fee for his teaching, but accepts donations of money and food. (Never mind the cash, I felt absurdly chuffed when he accepted the food.)

After his arrival at the venue, we had lunch from the shared food we had brought. 11:30am is a bit early for me, but Amaranatho observes the traditional rules of eating only breakfast and a main meal before noon. I once followed this same timetable, during a [Goenka vipassana retreat](/web/20150318175420/http://www.dipa.dhamma.org/) (/web/20150318175420/http://www.dipa.dhamma.org/). I found it possible to adapt pretty quickly, but I imagine that combining it with a daily western lifestyle is a pain in the arse.

The cultural gap felt a little awkward at first. Firstly, there was the absurdly early lunch; secondly,



(/web/20150318175420/http://www.playfulmonk.net/)

Amaranatho had to explain that we were obliged to stand back whilst he helped himself to the buffet first. For sure, we received a Pali blessing from him in return, but the western secular mindset does not take easily to the prospect of granting clerics priority access to the pies.

In Thai culture, monks might still be regarded as warriors on the front-line against human suffering; here, 'scrounging parasites' seems a more likely epithet, if anyone were impolite enough to voice it. But at least Amaranatho's restricted dietary regime ensured there were plenty of Jaffa cakes left.

Yet, as the day wore on, the stuff that really mattered came to the fore.

What struck me about Amaranatho was his persona. He's known as 'the playful monk', and indeed seems prone to erupt into deep, genuine laughter at moments of insight. Despite the robes, his mannerisms and vocalisations are western. He is gentle and sensitive in his personal interactions. But there is an underlying edginess about him, an anger, a ferocity, that I particularly warmed to.

Some stuff kicked off in the workshop, and although it felt as if he were gauging very sensitively where people were at, and where they might be ready to go, he was nevertheless quite tough in pushing us towards a sense of our limits, at least. I learnt enough from the workshop to realise that what I'm picking out here says at least as much about me as it does about him, but what I found fascinating was how I felt quite safe and supported in the presence of someone who – just below the surface – also seemed quite ferocious.

It was particularly interesting to see him reacting to the surroundings of the workshop: a chapel inside the church, with all the paraphernalia of altar, icons, crucifix, bibles and stained glass. *These things are a technology*, Amaranatho explained. (I'm paraphrasing.) *And their function is to amplify exactly the stuff we're working with.*

I had never thought of it that way before, but it was suddenly quite obvious. The trappings of religious traditions are indeed tools for relative expression of the absolute. A crucifix, for example, 'steps down', decreases the uncontainable voltage of the Christ, which is itself the realisation of the undying in a human form, the human destroyed yet resurrected through its identity with the undying.

Who would have thought a crucifix *does* that? But it really does. And more, because by being manifested as an artefact, it then attracts our personal projections, drawing them out from the psyche like iron filings to a magnet.

This is Jungian territory, of course. What the workshop offered was a chance to taste this directly: the sense in which psychical reality is made of our own projections, reflected back at us from external symbols.

The day built to a climax whereby we had, through several careful phases, each produced a drawing of a creature than embodied some of our projections. Amaranatho led us through an exercise in which we identified, swapped, tried on, or wore for a while some of these creatures. It was electrifying, and I could have played like this all day!

When one of the drawings was taken away and given to someone else, or when we were asked to justify our ownership by embodying the creature, the intensity of my emotional reactions seemed a sure sign we were dealing with something beyond the literal situation. I was playing with and questioning the meaning of myself.

Our guide, the monk, seemed incredibly sure in this territory. It was a delight to watch him feeling his way deftly into the participants, judging the type of challenges to deal them from the pack of projections at his disposal.

In a western occult context, I would probably have approached the creatures as 'spirits'. Indeed, I felt a little concerned at the end that these hyper-charged entities were just left lying around, or would be carried home and unceremoniously binned, rather than banished or honoured in some way. But, hey. Another day, another paradigm.

The synthesis of psychology, spiritual exploration and magical practice that Amaranatho embodied for me in the workshop I found highly inspiring. It was like working with a shaman; someone with genuine spiritual experience, but also someone deliberately in the overlap between traditions, positioned between them as a gifted translator.



A creature. A projection from my shadow.

This entry was posted in [Astral](#), [Meditation](#) and tagged [Amaranatho](#), [Amaravati](#), [Carl Jung](#), [projection](#), [psychology](#), [shadow](#), [Thai forest tradition](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

4 thoughts on “*My Jungian Shadow Exposed by a Shamanistic Theravadan Monk*”

[Monica Cassani](#) | [June 9, 2014 at 11:09 am](#)

wonderful! I really enjoyed that, thank you.

[Reply](#)

[Monkey Mind](#) | [June 12, 2014 at 9:52 am](#)

The... halo of your shadow creature does look a little like a Jaffa Cake.

Really good article! Good to hear from you.

Cheers,
Florian

[Reply](#)

[Amaranatho - The Playfulmonk](#) | [June 23, 2014 at 2:47 pm](#)

Thanks so much for your article I so enjoyed the day working in the church, with you and the group. I'll put a link on my website to this.

Blessings
Amaranatho

[Reply](#)

[Mohamed](#) | [September 25, 2014 at 7:29 pm](#)

I'm hesitant to make gerloaeizatinnns regarding connections to lineages. (It's not difficult to convince one's self one has a deep connection to a spiritual lineage for personal or social reasons.) In my own experience, I've found no corollary between feeling an affinity for a teacher and spiritual community and actually cutting through karmic conditioning through their practices, nor have I found any corollary between perceived affinity or belief in a path and having powerful spiritual experiences with it, nor one between having such experiences on a path and becoming less neurotic through it. Others will disagree.

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