

Commentary

ACIM® Manual for Teachers

Are “Psychic” Powers Desirable?

Explanation of underlining, italics and footnote formats can be found at the end of the commentary. See also the note there on the effects of switching from the FIP edition to the Complete and Annotated Edition. Please note that the FIP and CE versions may differ in where paragraph breaks occur.

Overview

What are “psychic powers”? Wikipedia has a long list of psychic abilities, including energy healing, communicating with the dead, prophecy or the ability to foretell future events, clairvoyance, and telepathy. Those are just the familiar ones; there are many more. The Manual brings them up at this point because, as maturing teachers of God, we may be surprised to find one or more such “powers” developing in us. Perhaps you’ll have a sudden “unexplained” intuition about what’s happening with someone you are helping. Maybe you’ll realize you “know” what they are thinking. Or you will discover that you can bring healing to people by laying on your hands. What are we to do with such things when they occur?

The overall answer is much the same as the one given in the previous chapter about reincarnation (1:1). Psychic powers are neither beneficial nor harmful in themselves. It’s how you use them that determines whether they become a help or a hindrance on your journey and your ministry.

Another interesting comparison is the list of “spiritual gifts” given by the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 12:8–13 (NIV):

“To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.”

Wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, prophecy, speaking in various languages, and understanding foreign languages...these are all psychic powers. All are gifts of the Spirit of God; valid powers. But Paul goes on to say,

“Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

And yet I will show you the most excellent way.”

The more excellent way is love, the famous love chapter of I Corinthians 13. The thought is the same: The gifts are wonderful, useful, but what is most important is how we use them. With love.

Paragraph 1

The answer to this question is much like the preceding one.¹ ²There are, of course, no “unnatural” powers, and it is obviously merely an appeal to magic to make up a power that does not exist. ³It is equally obvious, however, that each individual has many abilities of which he is unaware. ⁴As his awareness increases, he may well develop abilities that seem quite startling to him. ⁵Yet nothing he can do can compare even in the slightest with the glorious surprise of remembering Who he is. ⁶Let all his learning and all his effort be directed toward this one great final surprise, and he will not be content to be delayed by the little ones that may come to him on the way.

All true powers are natural. Making up powers that don't exist is the province of charlatans — people who appeal to “magic” (1:2). There are things in that list in Wikipedia that are probably made-up powers people have used to manipulate and rob their patients. On the other hand, we should not underestimate what we humans are capable of as God's creations. Most people tend to pooh-pooh things like telepathy, but some people have had indisputable experiences that show telepathy does occur. Think of things like twins who immediately know when their twin is in trouble, even when separated by thousands of miles. We see other miraculous powers in people who, in a moment of extreme need when another is trapped underneath a car, somehow “impossibly” manage to lift the car off them. We all, Jesus says, have “many abilities of which [we] are unaware” (1:3).

As we grow spiritually, becoming more and more aware of our divine nature, we may develop abilities that will startle us (1:4). You may discover that you can levitate like some Buddhist monks or, like Helen Schucman, hear an inner voice giving you amazing teachings. The essential advice of this chapter is: “Don't let such things distract you from your main purpose in this world, which is remembering Who you are.” No special power, nothing you can do, no matter how amazing it is, can compare with the “glorious surprise” of that memory (1:5). Seeking and finding the memory of your Identity in Christ is where you need to focus “all [your] learning and all [your] effort” (1:6). If you do that, none of these “little” surprises of unsuspected abilities will be able to distract you.

Twice in this paragraph, Jesus refers to remembering Who we are as a surprise: a “glorious surprise” or the “great final surprise” (1:5,6). Imagine how surprising it might be to discover you have the power of telepathy or healing touch. Then, imagine how enormous remembering the truth of your Identity must be that none of these psychic

¹ Both sections stress that the key element is what the thing in question (belief in reincarnation or “psychic” ability) is used for.

powers “can compare *even in the slightest*” (my emphasis) to that memory (1:5)! I’ve pointed out before how the mystics who have experienced such a memory are left speechless, unable to find anything that remotely compares to it. These experiences are the peace of God, which the Manual spoke about in Chapter 20: “in every way it is totally unlike all previous experiences” (M-20.2:1). C. S. Lewis probably experienced it. Why else would he have titled his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*?

Given that understanding of what awaits us all, why would we even consider being side-tracked by some unsuspected psychic power? They do not deserve our seeking them. We should devote all our energy to recovering the memory of our Self (1:6). If gifts come, let them come. If not, continue to “seek first the reign of God.”

Paragraph 2

2 Certainly there are many “psychic” powers that are clearly in line with this course. ²Communication is not limited to the small range of channels the world recognizes. ³If it were, there would be little point in trying to teach salvation.² ⁴It would be impossible to do so. ⁵The limits the world places on communication are the chief barrier to direct experience of the Holy Spirit, Whose presence is always there and Whose voice is available but for the hearing. ⁶These limits are placed out of fear, for without them the walls that surround all the separate places of the world would fall at the holy sound of His voice.³ ⁷Who transcends these limits in any way is merely becoming more natural. ⁸He is doing nothing special, and there is no magic in his accomplishments.

True, there are “psychic” powers “that are clearly in line with this course” (2:1). We’ve read frequently in this Course that true communication is mind-to-mind (telepathy), yet few of us are in tune with our divine nature enough to experience it. This world seems to limit communication to words and sights, which is “a small range of channels” in the view of the Course (2:2). If those were the full extent of communication, “there would be little point in trying to reach salvation. It would be impossible to do so” (2:3–4).

That tells you immediately that reading books, listening to talks, or watching videos will never bring salvation. Mind-to-mind communication is required to effect salvation, and the Holy Spirit provides such communication. That is why there is such an emphasis

². As the paragraph goes on to imply, the reason that salvation would be impossible without the presence of communication channels beyond our physical senses (“the small range of channels the world recognizes”) is that we would be cut off from the Holy Spirit. Without His work in our minds, the process of salvation would not be able to take place.

³. Joshua 6:20 (RSV): “So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city.” The fall of the walls of Jericho has taken on metaphorical meaning in our culture, representing any instance where “the walls came tumbling down.” In keeping with that metaphorical application, the above passage speaks of the fall of “the walls that surround all the separate places of the world” at the sound of the Holy Spirit’s voice.

in the Course on the need to listen to the Voice for God, to “hear” that Voice speaking within our minds.

We do not typically experience such mental communication. Most of us think it is spontaneous, out of our control entirely, if we even believe it is possible. Our fixed belief that physical senses, such as verbal or visual means, are the only alternatives for communication is what blocks “the direct experience of the Holy Spirit” (2:5). The presence of the Holy Spirit is constant; His voice is always available to all of us if we are willing to hear it (2:5). Due to our fear of a sudden on-rush of unity (2:6), we have chosen, in a choice pushed out of our conscious awareness, *not* to hear. We fear that “...the walls that surround all the separate places of the world would fall at the holy sound of His voice” (2:6). We fear that we would be “abruptly lifted up and hurled into reality,” in the words of T-16.VI.8:1). That passage tells us explicitly *not* to fear such an evaporation of our beloved walls, but rather to choose to use time to move toward that reality, trusting the Holy Spirit to lead us *gently* in our transition from separateness to unity.

Moving past the limits we have set out of fear and manifesting some psychic power isn't weird or strange! We are “merely becoming more natural” (2:7). It is being cut off, separated, and unable to communicate freely, which is unnatural. It's “nothing special” and “there is no magic” in it (2:8).

Paragraph 3

3 The seemingly new abilities that many gather on the way can be very helpful. ²Given to the Holy Spirit and used under His direction, they are very valuable teaching aids. ³To this, the question of how they arise is irrelevant. ⁴The only important consideration is how they are used. ⁵Taken as ends in themselves, ⁴ no matter how this is done, will delay progress. ⁶Nor does their value lie in proving anything: achievements from the past, unusual attunement with the “unseen,” or special favors from God. ⁵ God gives no special favors, and no one has any powers that are not available to everyone. ⁸Only by tricks of magic are special powers “demonstrated.”⁶

Various psychic powers may appear to us, or others, as we advance spiritually, allowing the façade of our belief in separation to begin to crumble or become transparent. They can be beneficial teaching aids (3:1) if we give them to the Holy Spirit and use them under His direction (3:2). God has not singled us out for “special” blessing; we're only becoming more natural as we make our transition from separateness to unity. An increasing ability to hear inner direction or to give and receive love and support without

⁴. Taking “psychic” powers “as ends in themselves” means that, in your view, what is important is not how you *use* them, but the simple fact that you *have* them.

⁵. Their value, in other words, does not lie in their ability to “prove” that you had spiritually exalted past lives (“achievements from the past”), that you have an uncommon ability to contact spirits from other realms (“unusual attunement with the ‘unseen’”), or that God has bestowed on you a “special favor” in granting you these abilities. It is what they are *used for* that matters, not what they seem to prove about you.

⁶. “Magic” in this section, as in Sections 16-18, refers to a false power, a power that you seem to possess but that cannot *really* do what it purports to do. In this case, an actual “psychic” power becomes a magical power when you see it as something that you possess but that others lack.

words or even overt action can greatly advance the reign of God in our lives and those of others.

We need to stop trying to figure out how to make them happen or how to acquire them. All that matters is how we use them if they show up (3:3–4). Making a goal out of obtaining the power to heal others or to receive divine messages (what the Bible calls prophecy), no matter how you do it, will only delay your progress (3:5).

Possessing some psychic power doesn't prove anything about a person. We do not receive these powers because of "achievements from the past, unusual attunement with the "unseen," or special favors from God "(3:6). That description hints at people who claim special status based on past lives, mediums who claim a unique ability to commune with the dead, or people who claim they, above others, have been chosen by God.

I think Jesus meant this as advice to each of *us* as God's teachers, but it can serve us well in the way we view other people who demonstrate spiritual gifts. They are nobody special, and if they seem to think they are, stay away from them! If someone "demonstrates" some power they claim is special to them, they are indulging in tricks of magic (3:8). No one can demonstrate a power that others do not have because no such power exists. People can use real psychic powers in a way that attempts to make themselves special. That is an attempt to deceive others, and we shall see in the following paragraph that this is what magic does.

God does not grant special favor to anyone. All spiritual powers are available to everyone—even you! We need to recall that often. Tell yourself, "No one has any powers that are not available to everyone. No one has any powers that are not available to me."

Paragraph 4

4 Nothing that is genuine is used to deceive.⁷ ²The Holy Spirit is incapable of deception, and He can use only genuine abilities. ³What is used for magic is useless to Him, but what He uses cannot be used for magic. ⁴There is, however, a particular appeal in unusual abilities which can be curiously tempting. ⁵Here are strengths which the Holy Spirit wants and needs. ⁶Yet the ego sees in these same strengths an opportunity to glorify itself. ⁷Strengths turned to weakness are tragedies indeed. ⁸Yet what is not given to the Holy Spirit must be given to weakness, for what is withheld from love is given to fear and will be fearful in consequence.

To utilize a genuine psychic power as proof of your specialness, you have made it into a false ability because psychic abilities are not special. Your genuine spiritual gift has become bogus when used to deceive. Nothing of God does that (4:1). This may explain why spiritual healers who are promoting themselves as special begin to lose their ability to heal, to "fail" at healing. Trying to hold on to their specialness, they fake the healings. The Holy Spirit cannot use abilities we debase like this (4:2). True abilities used by the

⁷ This seems to mean that a genuine power—a "psychic" ability seen as a natural ability that everyone inherently has—is not used to deceive people *into thinking that the psychic is special*. This is also what it probably means for the power to be "used for magic" (see 4:3). See also T-7.IV.4:4: "Magic always sees something special in the healer, which he believes he can offer as a gift to someone who does not have it."

Holy Spirit cannot be used as magic to deceive people (4:3). I sum it up like this: If it's special, it isn't useful; if it's useful, it isn't special.

The problem with psychic powers is that psychic powers are extremely unusual due to the near-universal fear of unity and the pursuit of specialness. Showing an extraordinary power to the ego is like waving a bone in front of a dog. It immediately wants it. The ego loves things that make it seem special (4:4–5). Some people seek specialness by enhancing their physical beauty. Some exploit a beautiful singing voice. Some try to set new records in some sport. The more unusual, the better, and what is more unusual than mind-reading, healing touch, or channeling an ethereal spirit of some kind? Suppose our ego gets hold of a power like that. In that case, it can produce tragic results (4:7). We need to be aware of the seductive danger of such powers and monitor ourselves to be sure we are giving the power to the Holy Spirit and not using it to glorify our egos (4:6–8).

When you fail to give psychic power to the Holy Spirit, you give it to weakness. What could be a strength in your ministry becomes a weakness because you withhold it from love, giving it to fear instead. The fear here is (probably) the ego's fear of loss of specialness. You are using the power to prop up your ego. The ego, by nature, believes in its weakness. The more you prop it up, the more it feels weak, trying to find strength in bluster and boasting.

Paragraph 5

5 Even those who no longer value the material things of the world may yet be deceived by “psychic” powers. ²As investment has been withdrawn from the world's material gifts, the ego has been seriously threatened. ³It may still be strong enough to rally under this new temptation to win back strength by guile. ⁴Many have not seen through the ego's defenses here, although they are not particularly subtle. ⁵Yet, given a remaining wish to be deceived, deception is made easy.⁸ ⁶Now the “power” is no longer a genuine ability and cannot be used dependably. ⁷It is almost inevitable that unless the individual changes his mind about its purpose, he will bolster its uncertainties with increasing deception.⁹

This paragraph presents an intriguing picture of how psychic powers can derail even a fairly advanced spiritual practitioner. As we follow the Course's advice to withdraw our investment in the things of this world (and most of us are probably still working on that issue), our detachment from the world seriously threatens our egos (5:1–2). At this point, spiritual powers may begin to show up, triggering our egos to strike back. We need to be forewarned of the ego's tactics and its attempt to subvert spiritual powers to its own use.

⁸ The picture here is that the teacher of God is advancing on the path and, as a result, he a) withdraws investment in material things and b) uncovers “psychic” abilities. The ego is weakened by the first and therefore uses the second to “win back strength by guile.” It beguiles the teacher into thinking that these unusual abilities make him superior to others.

⁹ To use the ability “for magic,” then, actually alters the ability itself, changing it from a genuine ability into an unreliable one that must frequently be bolstered by “deception” (in the conventional sense). (See T-1.4.1:3 for a related idea.) This calls to mind famous mediums and gurus who apparently had real powers yet were also caught cheating.

It can be quite sneaky (“guile” in **(5:3)**), although it isn’t particularly subtle **(5:4)**. Despite the obvious nature of the ego’s temptation, it may still be able to deceive us.¹⁰

What makes us vulnerable to its attacks is “a remaining wish to be deceived” **(5:5)**. That points us back to our unreasonable fear of losing our separateness **(2:6)**. We may want to be tricked into misuse of psychic powers because we unconsciously resist the loss of our egos. But if we give in to the temptation, “the ‘power’ is no longer a genuine ability” **(5:6)**. We cannot depend on it, and unless we change our minds at this point, we’ll end up faking the power to continue impressing people **(5:7)**.

These warnings may seem irrelevant to most of us because we haven’t exhibited any psychic powers yet. That’s why I used the word “forewarned” as I began my comments on this paragraph. The warning is not pointless. Some of us, probably all of us eventually (if we take reincarnation into consideration), *will* develop such powers. So take these warnings seriously. Let it play out in your mind. Imagine yourself able to heal people, read their minds, or see distant things beyond eyesight (clairvoyance¹¹). How would you use the power? Will you allow the Holy Spirit to control its use? What temptations might it bring?

¹⁰ When Jesus was “tempted by the devil” in the gospels, the temptation to misuse spiritual powers was blatant. He was tempted to turn stones into bread and to throw himself down from the temple roof, wowing the crowds as he floated down to the ground unharmed. (Matthew 4:1–10) He didn't bite! The Course says the devil symbolizes the ego (see 6:5).

¹¹ Clairvoyance even shows up in the Bible with Jesus. Jesus “sees” Nathanael at a distance, and when Nathanael becomes aware of Jesus' psychic power, he is ready to proclaim him as the Son of God. Jesus minimizes the power and says Nathanael will see 'greater things than these'. “Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you get to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’” (John 1:46–50 NRSV)

Paragraph 6

6 Any ability that anyone develops has the potentiality for good. ²To this there is no exception. ³And the more unusual and unexpected the power, the greater its potential usefulness.¹² ⁴Salvation has need of all abilities, for what the world would destroy the Holy Spirit would restore. ⁵“Psychic” abilities have been used to call upon the devil, which merely means to strengthen the ego. ⁶Yet here is also a great channel of hope and healing in the Holy Spirit’s service. ⁷Those who have developed “psychic” powers have merely let some of the limitations they had laid upon their minds be lifted. ⁸It can be but greater burdens they lay upon themselves if they utilize their increased freedom for further imprisonment. ⁹The Holy Spirit needs these gifts, and those who offer them to Him and Him alone go with Christ’s gratitude upon their hearts and His holy sight not far behind.

Whether or not an ability is psychic or extra-sensory does not affect its usefulness; all powers, without exception, can be used for good (6:1–2). The more unusual or unexpected it is, “the greater its potential usefulness” (6:3). We can apply everything we’ve been saying about psychic powers to *any* ability, including things such as having a great singing voice or other musical ability, a facility with computers, artistic ability, or high intelligence. The more rare the ability, the more useful it can be—and the more damaging if it is misused. Salvation needs *all* abilities. The Holy Spirit wants to restore all of them to all of us (6:4).

So-called “psychic” powers have often been associated with witchcraft and devil worship. All that means is that someone is using the abilities to strengthen the ego (6:5). But such abilities, ones that go beyond the powers of physical senses and bodies, can be valuable to the Holy Spirit; they offer “a great channel of hope and healing in the Holy Spirit’s service” (6:6). While we must not seek them as an end in themselves, neither should we fear or avoid them.

How are “psychic” powers developed? In simple terms, they show up as we let go of some of the limitations we have imposed on our minds (6:7). How tragic if, having done so, we misuse our increased freedom to imprison ourselves further (6:8)! “The Holy Spirit needs these gifts.” If anyone receiving such gifts offers them to the Holy Spirit and to Him alone, they walk “with Christ’s gratitude upon their hearts and His holy sight not far behind” (6:9). That latter phrase refers to our sight of Christ, the vision of Christ that lies at the end of our spiritual journey. It implies that people who develop and use spiritual gifts without *misusing* them are close to completing that journey.

¹² This is probably because “the more unusual and unexpected the power,” the more psychological impact it has on others, and the more impact it has on them, the greater is its potential for having a *healing* impact. This is probably why Jesus in the Text says “I make a point of avoiding redundancy” (T-2.XI.4:3)—to have the maximum impact on people, he needs to make use of the power of *novelty*.

Legend:

Light underscoring indicates emphasis that appears in the Urtext or shorthand notes.

The Text is taken from the Circle of Atonement's Complete and Annotated Edition (which I refer to as the "CE" for "Complete Edition" or "Circle Edition"). Please be aware that, even when the wording is identical to the FIP version, the division into paragraphs is often entirely different in the CE, which restores the paragraph breaks found in the original notes. This results in different reference numbering as well. I will indicate for each paragraph the corresponding sentences in the Foundation for Inner Peace (FIP) edition. You should be able to locate specific sentences in that edition if you need to, with a minimum of visual clutter in the commentary. References to quotations are from the CE unless another version is being quoted, in which case that version is indicated.

Footnotes by the commentary author are shown in this font and size. Other footnotes come from the Complete Edition itself.

Effects of Differing Editions of the Course

There were significant changes made in the CE, although for the most part there was no alteration in the meaning of the text, and the *Manual for Teachers* had far fewer changes. There are some changes in section and paragraph breaks and sentence structure that result in different numbering in references to the same text in the two editions. When there is a major difference I will indicate it with a footnote.

I have attempted for all references to add a separate FIP reference if it differs from the CE reference, but I may have missed some. If so, I apologize. Please let me know of any referencing problems you find.

I have also tried to edit my commentary so as to reflect any wording changes in the CE. For instance, the CE Text restored the plural use of "you" where the FIP had substituted the phrase "you and your brother." One such instance will illustrate the kind of change, significant in actual words but nearly identical in overall meaning:

FIP: Thus you and your brother but shared a qualified entente, in which a clause of separation was a point you both agreed to keep intact.

CE: You shared a qualified entente, in which a clause of separation was a point which you had both agreed to keep intact.