

Jnana Yoga, Automatic Expression and Spiritism

by Salaroche

Does the practice of Automatic Writing, Automatic Drawing, Automatic Painting or any other “Automatic” form of expression have any value from the perspective of Jnana Yoga or any other transcendental discipline? Does any spiritist practice such as Channeling, Voodoo, Candomblé, Santeria, or any other similar “otherworldly” contact have any value from that perspective as well? Does either of those two groups of practices have any practical value from a perspective of plain reason?

Before I start elaborating on the answer to those questions, I would like to clarify a couple of points. First, I know that some artistic work can be conceived during mental states other than our common day-to-day state of consciousness and, second, I know that there are certain phenomena out there whose occurrence may defy any logical explanation.

In acknowledging the validity of those two points, however, I’m not professing that they have any value for any transcendental purposes. I’m just stating that I’m aware that such situations and events take place.

So let me start by defining a few relevant premises and concepts that will help us to elucidate an answer to the questions presented above. First, let me define Jnana Yoga.

Jnana Yoga

Jnana Yoga is one of the four main branches of Yoga. Jnana Yoga basically proposes that it’s only through the systematic discrimination between what’s real and what’s unreal that we can regain direct knowledge of the Eternal Source of our consciousness while alive. The main exponents of Jnana Yoga are Shankaracharya and Ramana Maharshi.

In this context, Real is anything that’s unchanging, permanent, absolute and eternal. Unreal is anything that’s changing, impermanent, relative and ephemeral.¹

Everything that we see, hear, do or say; everything that we touch or feel; everything that we think, imagine or dream and everything we perceive or express through our senses and organs, all of

¹ This is not to say that “Unreal” things don’t exist.

these things come to be known to us only through our minds. Whether those things are impressions perceived through our senses and sent to our minds, so that our consciousness may gain awareness of them, or whether they are images, thoughts and ideas emanating from our minds and sent to our means of expression, so that the external world may perceive them, their clear destination and their clear place of origin is always the mind.

Simply put, the mind is the screen on which all external and internal phenomena are projected.

But the mind is finite. It is impermanent, it is changing, it is relative and it is ephemeral, therefore it is “unreal.” It follows that everything that is projected on our minds is as unreal as the mind itself. For this reason, according to Jnana Yoga, the mind has to be discarded in order for the “real” to shine directly onto our consciousness.

But why would anybody want to discard their mind? The mind is arguably the most precious advantage all human beings enjoy over the rest of creation. Why would anybody want to get rid of their most precious asset? Because the mind is clearly not equipped to perceive in a direct manner the Eternal Source of its own consciousness.

From the perspective of Jnana Yoga, the finest function of the mind is to admit its inability to comprehend THAT which it is barely able to intuit during its most extreme moments of lucidity. In admitting its inability to fully comprehend such fleeting intuitions, the intellect is ready to accept that effacing itself is the only means for allowing the True Source of its consciousness to shine forth. In so doing, the intellect accomplishes the finest purpose for its being, which is to persuade the mind to step aside so that the light of our Real Self may shine through.

Automatic Expression and Spiritism

Regarding any “paranormal” forms of expression, the basic guiding premise applicable in these writings is that any experience of receiving “inspiration” or “messages” from any source other than our conscious has to be contemplated within either of the two main categories mentioned above: 1) Automatic Expression or, 2) Spiritism.

The automatic expression I’ll refer to here is the one whose origins can be traced back to the surrealist movement first suggested by Apollinaire in the late 1910s and then developed by André Breton, Louis Aragon, Philippe Soupault, et al, during the 1920s. The spiritism I’ll refer to here can be first traced back to its practice in Sub-Saharan Africa from times immemorial and second to the spiritualist and spiritist practices first documented in Sweden in the 18th century and later in other parts of Europe and the United States from the 19th century on.

Automatic Writing is to be understood as the freeing of the unconscious' ability to express itself in writing with as little as possible mediation from the part of the conscious. The DADA movement, from which splintered the surrealist movement and the practice of "Automatic Expression," endeavored to break away from the conformist social, artistic and political parameters of the time (circa 1914-1924). Since those parameters were supposed to be ingrained in our conscious, the surrealists struggled to find ways for expressing art, thoughts and ideas that involved sources of inspiration lying beyond the restrictive frame of the conscious.

Along those lines, the practice of Automatic Writing, Automatic Drawing, Automatic Painting and any other sort of "Automatic" expression, presupposed the ability of the human being to draw inspiration from sources of knowledge and creativity "dormant" in the unconscious or even in irrationality. Efforts to communicate with otherworldly entities were first embraced by Breton and the surrealist movement, but were eventually abandoned.² The technique of séances remained common to both practices, but their objectives were ultimately not the same. The creative processes the surrealists wanted to tap into were all within our minds, which means they were all in this world. Breton even slightly mocked spiritism in the Surrealist Manifesto.

Spiritism, on the other hand, has always presupposed two basic elements: 1) The existence of an otherworldly realm inhabited by beings capable and willing to communicate with humans and, 2) The ability of some humans to communicate with those otherworldly beings. The basic premise in spiritism, therefore, is that some human beings are able to serve as mouthpieces for the messages that some otherworldly entities want to convey to us.

However, regardless of how much validity the case of "Automatic" expression and the case of spiritism and otherworldly experiences may have in certain occasions, they seldom have a single speck of value when viewed from the perspective of Jnana Yoga or from the perspective of any discipline practiced with transcendental objectives in mind. Why would this be so?

Answering the Questions

To answer the question presented in the paragraph above, let's first look further into the subject of automatic expression. As we mentioned above, the surrealists' primary quest was to tap into sources of inspiration that lied dormant in the unconscious. Let's remember that the unconscious is an intrinsic part of the mind. The unconscious is basically a storage mechanism that conceals

² Among the surrealists, Robert Desnos was probably the most adept to spiritist practices, but he was also the one who had the most unpleasant experiences with them.

from our conscious some very basic impulses and some other information about the world as it relates to us, which cannot be accessed at will.

So, basically, as much as the surrealists may have struggled to break away from the existing parameters of perception and expression of their time, they were actually just delving deeper into the roots of those existing parameters. Regardless of how hidden or unconscious the surrealists' sources of inspiration may have been, the product of their inspiration would always have to be just another reflection of the reality around them, as the images, impulses and information stored in their unconscious would inevitably have been gathered from the same restrictive reality that they were trying to free their minds from.

Consequently, as much as they tried to break free from the rigid parameters of thought and expression that had generated the stiff social, political and artistic environment that had brought about World War I and that later produced World War II, the result of their endeavor was destined to be just another intellectual revolution as bound to fail in their grand scheme as that other significant revolution of their time, Communism, eventually did. But, again, why would this be so?

Because there are forces intrinsic in human nature that cannot be harnessed by will alone. Any unconscious creative drive has to be spontaneous, therefore unexpected. Any attempt to systematize such creative impulse would turn it into just another conscious effort to create, and once the conscious is brought into the creative process there's no longer much "Automatic" or unconscious quality to it. This is why so many of those so-called automatic writings that we all come across are just sheer regurgitation of whatever impressions may have been recorded in the writer's memory, or outright nonsense, platitudes, or mere paraphrasing of things we all have already seen, read or heard many times before.

Whatever the case, the results of any kind of "automatic" expression would still be the product of our minds, be it the conscious or the unconscious part of it, and as such, they would have very little value within the paradigm of Jnana Yoga precisely because such expression would emanate from the mind, which from the perspective of that discipline is just the biggest obstacle for regaining direct knowledge of the True Source of our consciousness. For transcendental purposes, the highest function of the intellect is to declare itself incapable of attaining direct knowledge of our Eternal Self, thereby accepting the need to "eliminate" the mind.

In saying this, however, I'm by no means implying that any artistic expression or idea generated under any unconscious or paranormal state of mind has no value at all. No. The song "Yesterday," for example, which was conceived by Paul McCartney during his sleep, is an excellent case in point to prove the value of such creative processes. What I'm primarily saying

here is that creative processes such as creative dreaming or automatic writing don't have any value whatsoever when it comes to ensuring a safe passage to the higher realms of the disembodied world when we die, which in the Jnana Yoga paradigm is all that matters; everything else is relative and ephemeral.

But even when contemplating the practice of "Unconscious" Expression by itself, any remarkable results that anyone may have obtained thus far through that practice are way too few and far between to consider such creative method as a reliable constant source of inspiration. Aside from "Yesterday" and very few other creative examples of that caliber, what other masterpieces are out there that have been created through the means of Automatic Expression? Clearly not enough of them to remember them.

No one can come around claiming that Dali or Picasso or Miró created the bulk of their work using paranormal means of inspiration. The work of those painters has a clearly deliberate touch to it, and although they may have sometimes drawn preliminary sketches of their work in a spontaneous manner, which could have easily been inspiration of the "normal" kind as well, afterwards they went ahead and very purposely applied their acquired technique to the work at hand. Reason, therefore, shows us that the use of "paranormal" states of mind as a means for generating art or ideas very seldom produces original results, which is why I don't consider them as viable alternatives to the "normal" kind of inspiration.

The case of spiritism as it pertains to Jnana Yoga, on the other hand, is a bit more blurry, as Jnana Yoga clearly has a lot to do with otherworldly matters too. Still, the defining differences between them are easily detectable, first in their objectives and then in their means to achieve those objectives.

The objective in the practice of Jnana Yoga is to regain knowledge of our Eternal Essence, and the means prescribed in that discipline to obtain that objective is the practice of the Atma Vichara (Who am I?) or the practice of "Neti-Neti" (not this, not that) Thus, the practitioners inquire constantly into their minds and beyond in an effort to rediscover the Eternal Source of their consciousness. The attitude of the Jnana Yoga practitioner, therefore, is an active one.

The objective of spiritism, on the other hand, is to allow an otherworldly entity to utilize a human body as vehicle for sending messages to this world, and the means prescribed in that practice to obtain that objective is to set the mind in a state of trance. The mediums don't have any direct personal quest in their practice; their purpose is simply to serve as mouthpieces for otherworldly entities. The attitude of the medium, therefore, is a passive one.

I will not talk here about the practice of Voodoo, which is still practiced in Louisiana, Haiti and other parts of the world,³ or about any trance-like, Dionysian states of mind such as those observed in the practice of Santeria and Candomblé, which are still practiced in Cuba and Brazil respectively (both Santeria and Candomblé allegedly involve the possession of the practitioners by some Orishas, or spirits) but I will talk about Channeling and mediumship.

Channeling is the latest version of mediumship; it came to the public eye in the last half of the 20th century. The major difference between the practice of Channeling and that of mediumship in general seems to be the type of otherworldly entity contacted by the medium. People practicing Channeling claim to establish contact exclusively with “enlightened” entities or “teachers” residing in the other world, whereas people involved in the practice of all other kinds of mediumship don’t usually claim to have exclusive contact with any specific kind of otherworldly entities.

Channeling mediums, therefore, are supposed to convey to us messages from the other world that are of a “higher” kind, that is, of the kind that is supposed to enlighten humanity and that are supposed to help us all to live in a more harmonious way with each other and with our planet as a whole.

But the act of channeling is just the act of lending your body to otherworldly entities, so that they can tell us whatever it is they want to tell us. The mediums themselves are not supposed to have any active role in that situation. They’re just the passive recipients of an inter-dimensional contact, just like our car radios are the passive recipients of any broadcast coming out of radio stations.

The mediums don’t gain anything from such séances other than recognition as mediums. But even such recognition is given to them by people in this world, so it is valid only in this world. Nothing in the act of channeling furthers the medium’s knowledge of any reality beyond this one, nor does it guarantee the mediums a safer passage into the Eternal Light once they die.

And what about the people who listen to, or read about those messages allegedly sent to us through the channeling means? Do they get some sort of enlightenment on how to live better lives or do they mainly get just a momentary emotional boost that makes them feel better or special? Has any channeled message you have read ever changed your point of view on anything in this world?

Many channeled writings that I’ve come across look suspiciously similar to many other writings I had read before. There are even some crass “messages” claiming to give people advice on how

³ Louisiana Voodoo is supposed to differ from Haitian Voodoo in a few ways.

to better invest their money. Can you imagine this? An otherworldly being who supposedly knows that the riches of this world don't count in the other, giving advice to someone in this world on how to make more money? Wouldn't that sound like sheer charlatany to you?

On top of that, a great number of those channeled messages look like drawn straight out of the bible, particularly from the Ecclesiastes or the Book of Revelations. How often have we heard people claiming to receive "messages" from beyond telling us that the end of the world is near? The world has been hearing apocalyptic messages for centuries, even before the bible was put together. Is there any credibility left in any such "messages"? I don't think so.

But even if such otherworldly type of communication were true, wouldn't it be utterly disappointing to find that the guys who inhabit the netherworld just keep repeating themselves and don't have much to say that we haven't heard before?

Sure, some of those channeled "messages" talk about lofty humanistic and environmentalist ideals that may lift our spirit or make us think deeper, but some good movies can do that too and many other writings and works of art published by people who simply have good knowledge of history, the human condition or environmental issues can do that as well. For example, did Al Gore need to channel any otherworldly entity to conceive the idea for his "An Inconvenient Truth" power point presentations, movies and writings? I very seriously doubt it.

In fact, in putting together that environmentalist body of work, Al Gore practically put to shame all those otherworldly entities who allegedly keep sending messages supposedly intended to help us save the world, for in all the wisdom that their otherworldly perspective is supposed to have given them, none of them has ever channeled down to us any environmentalist idea as effective as Al Gore's work has thus far proven to be.

From a perspective of reason, therefore, the practice of Channeling and all other kinds of mediumship practice don't really have much value. There's an undeniable sensationalistic significance to such "paranormal" practices, but such significance is minimized by the meager benefits they may have contributed to the advancement of humanity. And whatever benefit they might have contributed in the minds of their adepts, it pales when compared to the benefit that the work of some "normal" artists, writers and thinkers has contributed to the world.

The same goes from the point of view of Jnana Yoga. From this perspective, spiritist practices such as Channeling don't have much value for the simple reason that they generally don't provide anyone with any key to solve the mystery of reincarnation or how to break the karmic cycle that keeps us reincarnating. As long as channeled messages don't address with unequivocal clarity

the issue of everyone's transition to the disembodied world, channeling will hardly have any value from the perspective of any transcendental discipline.

Conclusion

So, in answer to the questions I posed in the first paragraph above, I don't believe that any kind of Automatic Expression or Spiritist practice has any value from the perspective of Jnana Yoga or from the perspective of any other transcendental discipline, just as I don't believe that either of those two groups of practices has much value from a perspective of sheer reason either.

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